

Schelling's Doctrine of Abstraction

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‘Think abstractly? *Sauve qui peut!*’¹ If there’s one thing we have all learnt from the legacy of German Idealism – particularly its Hegelian ‘culmination’ – it is the poverty of the abstract. The ‘reproach of abstraction’² is one with which we are comfortable, for ‘the abstract universal... is an isolated, imperfect moment of the Notion and has no truth.’³ However, as always, orthodoxy here obscures diversity: while it does remain true that, in almost all of Hegel’s output and most of Schelling’s, ‘abstract’ functions perjoratively, this is not the whole story. A case in point is Hegel’s *Differenzschrift*, drafted in Spring 1801, where ‘abstract’ takes on an ambivalent position.⁴ On the one hand, there are anticipations of the mature Hegel in its critique of Spinozist identity as ‘originating in abstraction’ and of ‘abstract reasoning [in which] the intellect drifts without an anchor’⁵; however, on the other hand, Hegel takes up a positive idea of abstraction as key to accessing the ‘true identity of subject and object’ as the casting off what is ‘peculiar’ and ‘onesided’ in scientific forms.⁶ Abstraction generates truth through subtraction.

It is with this generative conception of abstraction that the following essay is concerned. I begin by sketching its origins in Fichte’s early works, before providing a concerted reading of its pivotal role in Schelling’s essay from January 1801, *On the True*

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, ‘Who Thinks Abstractly?’ in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 113.

² Peter Osborne, ‘The Reproach of Abstraction’ in *Radical Philosophy* 127 (2004), pp. 21-8.

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Prometheus, 1969), p. 604.

⁴ And it is no surprise that all evidence points to the fact that Hegel wrote the *Differenzschrift* with Schelling’s *On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature* open in front of him.

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY, 1977), pp. 97, 113. Of course, even in the mature Hegel ‘abstract’ sometimes takes on a similar ambivalence; see Osborne pp. 25-6.

⁶ Hegel, *Difference*, p. 160.

Concept of Philosophy of Nature. Although abstraction only makes this positive appearance in a couple of Schelling's works from a four month period during 1801⁷, it is here worked out in a way that crystallises what is innovative and distinctive about Schelling's philosophy at this moment.

1. The Characteristics of Generative Abstraction

To begin, it is necessary to sketch the origins of generative abstraction in Kant and Fichte. Abstraction lurks only in the background of Kant's epistemology. According to the *Jäsche Logic*, it is – along with comparison and reflection – an 'essential and universal condition for the generation of every concept whatsoever.'⁸ It is on this basis that Osborne has argued that Kant gives an 'unequivocally positive epistemological value to abstraction as constitutive of the object of knowledge': it is through abstraction that experience achieves objectivity.⁹ Nevertheless, throughout both the pre-critical and critical periods, the essentially 'negative' role of abstraction is constantly stressed by Kant, for, while constitutive, abstraction is never generative of knowledge; hence, the *Blomberg Logic*'s assertion, 'Through abstraction not the least cognition arises'¹⁰ which is repeated once more in the *Jäsche Logic*, 'No concept comes to be through abstraction.'¹¹

As so often with the Kantian legacy, it fell to Fichte to begin to challenge his refusal to countenance generative abstraction. Of all the German Idealists, Fichte employs abstraction positively in the most sustained fashion, and it comes to play a significant role not

⁷ Hence, by the 1804 *System*, abstract is being used widely in a pejorative sense once more. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Werke [SW]*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61), 6:6, 230, 254 (although c.f. 6:146-7).

⁸ Immanuel Kant, 'The Jäsche Logic' in *Lectures on Logic*, ed. and trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), §6.

⁹ Indeed, on occasion, Kant presents his own philosophical methodology as proceeding by abstraction, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A22/B36.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, 'The Blomberg Logic' in *Lectures on Logic*, §254.

¹¹ Kant, *Jäsche Logic*, §6.

just in his account of epistemology, but at the very heart of his methodology. Beginning in his very earliest sketches of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and culminating in the *First Introduction*, Fichte resorts again and again to abstraction to explain how philosophising is epistemically possible. There are, for my purposes, four key components to the Fichtean method of abstraction worth picking out.

1.1 Experiments in Transcendence

As for Hegel in the *Differenzschrift*, there is a form of abstraction that is generative: it makes appear to the philosopher aspects of reality not evident before. This is how Breazeale puts it,

We are no more conscious of our immediate ‘feelings’ than we are of the immediate unity of subject and object that is expressed in the *Tathandlung*... Both of these absolute poles of Fichte’s transcendental explanation of subjectivity and of experience become objects of thetic consciousness only within philosophical reflection, where they are of course abstracted from the full, rich context of lived experience.¹²

Only by subtracting from ‘lived experience’ in abstraction does properly philosophical content come to consciousness. Moreover, this generative result is, according to Fichte, due to the fact that abstraction *elevates* the philosopher above ordinary experience. Thus, in the *First Introduction*, Fichte writes,

A finite rational being possesses nothing whatsoever beyond experience. The entire contents of his thinking are comprised within experience. These same conditions necessarily apply to the philosopher, and thus it appears incomprehensible how he

¹² Daniel Breazeale, ‘Fichte’s Abstract Realism’ in Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Michael Baur (eds), *The Emergence of German Idealism* (Washington: CUA Press, 1999), p. 112.

could ever succeed in elevating himself above experience. The philosopher, however, is able to engage in abstraction. That is to say, by means of a free act of thinking he is able to separate things that are connected with each other within experience... and when he does so he has abstracted from experience and has thereby succeeded in elevating himself above experience. If he abstracts from the thing, then he is left with an intellect in itself as the explanatory ground of experience... [This] way of proceeding is called *idealism*.¹³

That is, through abstraction one can 'raise oneself to a consciousness of an intuition of the pure I'.¹⁴ The act of rising above ordinary consciousness, of suppressing all objects of consciousness, gives one access to an unadulterated intuition of the self-positing I, and from this point the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s construction can begin.

This initial act of abstraction is always 'an experimental enterprise'¹⁵, a performance that one must undertake for oneself. Such an emphasis on the performativity of philosophising is of course a theme running through the whole of Fichte's works: one cannot be given the results of abstraction by another; philosophical thinking must continually begin anew with acts of abstraction until this becomes 'a new habit'¹⁶. What is more, for Fichte it is the thoroughness and rigour of such an enterprise that provides one of the key criteria for philosophical success. As Breazeale puts it, Fichte 'believed that the purity of the philosopher's inner intuitions and hence the universality of his descriptions is, so to speak,

¹³ J.G. Fichte, 'An Attempt at a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*' in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 10-1.

¹⁴ J.G. Fichte, 'Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy' in *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 204.

¹⁵ Daniel Breazeale, 'Doing Philosophy: Fichte vs. Kant on Transcendental Method' in Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds), *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 51. Fichte himself speaks of abstraction as an 'experiment' in 'A Comparison between Prof. Schmid's System and the *Wissenschaftslehre*' in *Early Philosophical Writings*, p. 331.

¹⁶ Fichte, 'The Spirit and the Letter', p. 206.

guaranteed by the *completeness* of the initial act of free abstraction which precedes his series of self-observations.¹⁷ Thoroughgoing abstraction provides the warrant for good philosophy.

1.2 Like a Shot from a Pistol

Therefore, abstraction is the very starting point for philosophy. For example, Part One of the *Grundlage* begins, ‘Our task is to *discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge... This makes it necessary to... *abstract* from everything that does not really belong to it.’¹⁸ Or, as Fichte programmatically puts it elsewhere,

There is certainly no one among you who does not know that under the name *Wissenschaftslehre* I have labored upon a rigorously scientific transcendental philosophy, and that this philosophy is erected upon what remains after one has abstracted from everything possible – that is, upon the I. A science of this type can furnish no rule except the following: One should continue to abstract from everything possible, until something remains from which it is totally impossible to abstract.¹⁹

Both Fichte and the Schelling of 1801 agree that philosophical method begins in abstraction and then proceeds to self-construction. For Fichte, this is a case of abstracting from ordinary consciousness to attain the pure self-positing I, before watching it reconstruct reality before our eyes: philosophy ‘retraces the path of abstraction, or rather, it permits the I to retrace this

¹⁷ Breazeale, ‘Doing Philosophy’, p. 51. See Martial Gu eroult’s thorough discussion of this point in *L’evolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science chez Fichte* (Paris: Belles-lettres, 1930), pp. 200-4, as well as Fichte’s own presentation in ‘Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ in *Early Philosophical Writings*, pp. 127-8.

¹⁸ J.G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton, 1970), p. 93.

¹⁹ Fichte, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, p. 204.

path, while it observes this process.’²⁰ The proper philosophical method is: abstract first, then construct.²¹

Abstraction then is, in fact, a *pre-philosophical* practice (or one that takes place on the cusp of philosophising) necessary to bring about the immediate intuition of the I with which philosophy begins. It is a form of mediation that makes immediacy possible.²² Abstraction thus provides part of an answer to the Hegelian critique of beginning philosophy with immediate intuition like a shot from a pistol.²³ Philosophy may indeed begin like a shot from a pistol for both Fichte and the Schelling of 1801, but just as firing such a pistol presupposes loading the gun, manufacturing its parts and most significantly learning to shoot, so too intellectual intuition is brought about through prior practices, like abstraction.²⁴

1.3 The Refusal of Negation

Abstraction is not negation. One does not actively cancel that from which one abstracts, one becomes indifferent to it. ‘The concept... is here not thought of at all – either positively or negatively.’²⁵ The abstracted element is not posited in any form. Such a procedure is analogous to the phenomenological *epochē*, as has often been noted²⁶: one brackets the natural attitude of ordinary consciousness, so as to attend to and then describe the structures of pure self-consciousness.

²⁰ Fichte, ‘Schmid’s System, p. 330.

²¹ A detailed discussion of construction lies outside the remit of this paper; see the analysis of Schellingian construction, as well as the literature cited, in Daniel Whistler, *Schelling’s Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 6.

²² On such mediating practices that bring about immediacy, see Daniel Whistler, ‘Silvering, or the Role of Mysticism in German Idealism’ in *Glossator 7* (2013), pp. 151-85.

²³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §27.

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Schellingian abstraction in relation to this criticism of Hegel’s, see Whistler, *Schelling’s Theory of Symbolic Language*, pp. 135-7.

²⁵ Fichte, ‘New Presentation’, p. 39.

²⁶ See, for example, Nectoria Limnatis, ‘Fichte and the Problem of Logic: Positioning the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the Development of German Idealism’ in Breazeale and Rockmore (eds), *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, p. 25.

The importance of this characteristic needs emphasising: since abstraction is not negation, a philosophy premised on it possesses (at least) one non-dialectical moment. Abstraction cannot be subsumed into a dialectical play of negation and negation of negation, for it obeys a different logic. The early philosophies of Fichte and Schelling, premised as they are on this initial act of abstraction, offer therefore something different to the hegemony of dialectic, concreteness and immanence bequeathed by Hegelian thought – an alternative within early German Idealism resistant to the pull of the concrete universal.

1.4 Abstracting from the Objective

Finally, and it is here that the stakes of Schelling's divergence from Fichte are most obviously to be located, Fichte proposes that one begin philosophising by abstracting from the *object* of intuition to isolate the intuiting activity itself. The philosopher must 'tear himself away from what it given'.²⁷ In other words, for Fichte the abstracting I is a limit, what remains after the most thoroughgoing procedure of abstraction has removed every object of consciousness. To quote once more, 'One should continue to abstract from everything possible, until something remains from which it is totally impossible to abstract. What remains is the pure I.'²⁸ To appropriate the language of the *nova method*, while one's thought of a wall can easily be bracketed, not so the thought of thinking²⁹, and this is because the identity of intuiting subject and intuited object, which both Fichte and Schelling agree is the presupposition of philosophical knowledge, is for Fichte only made possible by abstracting from the object of thought (e.g. the wall) and retaining the pure I.

²⁷ Fichte, 'Schmid's System', p. 335.

²⁸ Fichte, 'The Spirit and the Letter', p. 204.

²⁹ J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy nova methodo*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 110-1.

With this Fichtean context in mind, I now turn to Schelling's 1801 *On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature*, the most sustained reflection on generative abstraction in German Idealism.

2. *On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature: Context and Content*

In the Winter of 1800/01 – between the publication of the two great culminating statements of Schelling's 1790s work, the *Introduction to the First Outline of a System of Philosophy of Nature* and the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and the dawning of the *Identitätssystem* in May 1801 – Schelling produced a 37-page 'Zugabe' on *Naturphilosophie*. The *Appendix to Eschenmayer's Essay concerning the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature and the Correct Way of Solving its Problems* is a Janus-faced essay that both completes Schelling's search for a distinctive *naturphilosophische* approach and also announces the possibility of a philosophy for which 'absolute identity is the universe itself'.³⁰ It indeed forms, as Grant has it, 'as clear a manifesto of naturephilosophy as could be wished for'.³¹

The text was published in January 1801 as a supplement to the first issue of the second volume of Schelling's own journal, *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*, and it directly responds to Eschenmayer's critique of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* which opens that issue, *Spontaneity = World Soul or the Supreme Principle of Philosophy of Nature*. Eschenmayer is troubled by the direction in which Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* has developed since the first edition of the *Ideas* in 1797, and this is for two reasons.

First, prior to the *First Outline*, Schelling had basically endorsed Eschenmayer's own construction of matter, particularly with respect to the role of quantitative proportions in the

³⁰ F.W.J. Schelling, *SW* 4:129; *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, trans. Michael Vater, in *Philosophical Forum* 32.4 (2001), p. 350.

³¹ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 185.

determination of qualities.³² However, in the *First Outline*, Schelling breaks with this Eschenmayerian account, positing instead qualitatively distinct monads or actants as an explanation for the genesis of quality.³³ In *Spontaneity*, Eschenmayer vigorously attacks this view, and the second half of *On the True Concept* provides Schelling's response, in which he (implicitly) acknowledges the problems with his own theory in the *First Outline*³⁴ at the same time as continuing its critique of Eschenmayer's quantitative solution.

The second motivation for Eschenmayer's attack is what concerns me in the rest of this essay, for it is at this point that methodological issues come to the fore. In *Spontaneity*, Eschenmayer takes up a broadly Fichtean attitude towards *Naturphilosophie*³⁵: the fundamental principle of nature is the spontaneity of the subject; nature is derivative of this freedom, and thus *Naturphilosophie* consists in a mere application of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to one local ontic domain.³⁶ What alarms Eschenmayer is that the *First Outline* seems to mark a departure from such Fichtean orthodoxy. Hence, his critique is intended as a gentle rebuke to a young scholar to bring him back into the Fichtean fold.

And Schelling responds by openly declaring his break with Fichte. *Naturphilosophie*, he proclaims, is independent of and prior to the *Wissenschaftslehre*: 'There is an idealism of nature and an idealism of the I. For me, the former is original, *the latter* is derived.' (*OTC* 88)³⁷ This position had first been developed in the closing pages of the *Universal Deduction of the Dynamic Process*³⁸, and Schelling's correspondence with Fichte at this time also played a decisive role. In November 1800, they exchanged letters on the question of

³² See, for example, F.W.J. Schelling, *SW* 2:241-52; *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 193-201.

³³ F.W.J. Schelling, *SW* 3:20-43; *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: SUNY, 2004), pp. 19-34.

³⁴ See F.W.J. Schelling, *On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature [OTC]*, trans. Daniel Whistler in the present issue, p. 86.

³⁵ On Eschenmayer's Fichteanism, see Grant pp. 106-8, 185.

³⁶ Grant dubs this 'the ethical process' at work in so many crypto-Fichtean interpretations of nature. Iain Hamilton Grant, 'Being and Slime: The Mathematics of Protoplasm in Lorenz Oken's "Physio-Philosophy"', *Collapse* IV (2008), pp. 288-9.

³⁷ See further *OTC* 95-6.

³⁸ Schelling, *SW* 4:75-8

Naturphilosophie's relation to the *Wissenschaftslehre*: the violence of Fichte's refusal to countenance any independence for *naturphilosophische* investigations crystallised for Schelling the distance between them.³⁹ The result is *On the True Concept*.⁴⁰

From the very beginning of the essay, Schelling is clear that a Fichtean interpretation of *Naturphilosophie* is false:

Many people misled by the term 'philosophy of nature' expect transcendental deductions of natural phenomena... For me, however, philosophy of nature is a self-sufficient whole and is a science fully differentiated from transcendental philosophy.
(*OTC* 85-6)

The radicality of Schelling's contention here should not go unremarked. It is often thought that what unifies the German Idealist tradition, if nothing else, is fidelity to the project of transcendental philosophy and an idealist metaphysics. However, Schelling denies that his practice of *Naturphilosophie* can be situated in that tradition; it marks out an alternative, one based on rejection of this Kantian heritage. As Grant has put it, 'Schelling's post-Kantian confrontation with nature itself begins with the overthrow of the Copernican revolution... [Schelling precipitated] the fast overthrow of the entire transcendental structure Kant bequeathed his philosophical successors.'⁴¹ *Naturphilosophie* is not only liberated from the

³⁹ Hence, on 15/11/1800, Fichte belatedly responds to the *System of Transcendental Idealism* as follows, 'I do not agree with your opposition between transcendental philosophy and philosophy of nature', to which Schelling replies on 19/11/1800, 'The opposition between transcendental philosophy and philosophy of nature is the crucial point.' J.G. Fichte and F.W.J. Schelling, 'Correspondence' in Jochen Schulte-Sasse (ed), *Theory as Practice: An Anthology of German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 73, 75.

⁴⁰ This narrative of Schelling's increasing prioritisation of *Naturphilosophie* over transcendental idealism is problematized considerably by the Preface to the 1801 *Presentation* in which Schelling returns to his more traditional 'two parallel sciences' approach (*SW* 4:107-8; *Presentation*, pp. 343-4). For an attempt to discern even here the priority of *Naturphilosophie*, see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 552-7.

⁴¹ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature*, p. 143.

dead-hand of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but from the terms of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself, in the name of a distinctive experiment in German Idealism.

3. The Methodology of *Naturphilosophie*

So, if philosophy of nature is no longer strictly speaking a form of transcendental idealism, what exactly is it? Schelling realises that his alternative is so distinct from orthodox forms of German Idealism that it becomes almost incomprehensible to those accustomed to them: ‘The reason that those who have grasped idealism well have not understood philosophy of nature is because it is difficult or impossible for them to detach themselves from [the methodology of transcendental idealism].’ (*OTC* 92) The question is therefore to determine the nature of this break between the two sciences, and Schelling goes on to specify it as methodological. An early passage in *On the True Concept* sets up this problematic as follows,

If it were just a matter of an idealist type of explanation, or rather construction, then this is not to be found in philosophy of nature as I have established it... Why then should it not be idealist? And is there in general another type of philosophising than the idealist? (*OTC* 88)

At stake, then, is the nature of this other ‘type of construction’, and, in order to determine this methodological difference more precisely, we need to know what exactly is wrong with idealist construction. For Schelling in *On the True Concept*, transcendental idealism remains bound by the concerns and structures of the self; it can never transcend these to intuit the workings of the natural world (or, more precisely, nature as it does *not* appear to the self). He writes, ‘If I [try] to find out what philosophising itself is, then I see myself merely as something known in myself – and during this entire investigation I never get out of myself.’

(*OTC* 89) The transcendental idealist remains trapped in ‘the circle of consciousness’ which is ‘inescapable’ (*OTC* 90). The philosopher is both the subject and object of her philosophical interest: she is the one philosophising and she is also the one being philosophised about. The identity of subject and object in the subject is the genius of Fichtean thought, but also for Schelling its inherent limitation: it cannot account for a reality outside of or prior to the subject.

Evidently, the presupposition that there is such a reality is one that Fichte and, indeed, all robust idealists would deny. Schelling has a number of arguments for it. First, it is not obvious that the initial self-positing from which reality is to be constructed should be identified with the subject, and certainly not a finite or conscious I. Schelling is not denying that nature is dependent on – or indeed, identical with – an original self-positing subject-object; he is merely asserting its independence of – and partial obscurity to – the finite I. Within *On the True Concept*, Schelling expresses the above line of thought as follows,

The following objection [has been] frequently made to me: I *presuppose nature* without asking the critical question of how we thus come to suppose a nature... I presuppose nothing for the construction but what the transcendental philosopher likewise presupposes. For what I call *nature* [is] the pure subject-object, what the transcendental philosopher posits as = I. (*OTC* 94)

He continues,

I have therefore not presupposed what *you* think of as nature, but rather derived it... In general, I have presupposed nothing but what can immediately be taken from the conditions of knowing itself as a first principle, something originally and simultaneously subjective and objective. (*OTC* 95)

What Fichte had labelled ‘the I’, the primordial subject-object which posits itself and from which reality as such derives is for Schelling better named ‘nature’. It is the same fundamental postulate.

The above is nevertheless a position not particularly distinctive to Schelling (it is shared by many of the more absolute idealists). Instead, the methodological innovations behind Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* emerge when one reframes the above epistemologically, in terms of intellectual intuition. What is known must be identical with what knows (the identity of subject and object); this premise, shared by Schelling and transcendental idealists alike, is the ground of the idea of intellectual intuition. However, on first blush, nature (insofar as it remains unperceived or is hidden from consciousness) is *non-identical* with the conscious I. How, then, is knowledge of nature, intellectual intuition of nature and so the philosophy of nature possible?

In *On the True Concept*, Schelling explores two solutions, the Fichtean and his own. The Fichtean solution consists in altering (or potentiating) the object (i.e. nature) until it becomes identical to the subject: to raise nature into the mind and make it into a sensation or perception. Yet, this is in fact not a solution at all, since that which is not raised to the potency of consciousness still remains hidden from the philosopher, and for Schelling an aspect of reality must necessarily always remain so hidden. That is, reality exists at non-conscious as well as conscious potencies. Here is how Schelling puts it, ‘[For the Fichtean] I can behold nothing objective other than in the moment of its entry into consciousness... and no longer in its *original* coming-into-being at the moment of its *first* emergence (in *non-conscious* activity).’ (*OTC* 89) The ontology of productive force that Schelling had initially developed in the *First Outline* clarifies this point: nature is productivity-becoming-product, and different products are produced at different potencies of productivity; for example,

consciousness, sensation and thought are products of a particular high potency. Schelling's argument is not therefore so much that there are some entities in nature which elude conscious perception, but rather that reality itself exists at a multiple of other potencies than merely the potency of consciousness. To limit philosophical method merely to the raising of reality into consciousness is therefore to foreclose on the study and description of the non-conscious potencies. Schelling thus writes, through this idealist method, 'I assume *myself* already in the highest potency, and therefore the question is also only answered for this potency.' (OTC 89)

The Schellingian solution to this epistemological problem is to proceed in the opposite direction: to alter consciousness so that it becomes identical to (and can therefore know) non-conscious reality. That is, instead of altering nature and bringing it into identity with consciousness, what requires changing is consciousness in order to bring it into equality with nature. The philosopher must reduce her intuiting down to the lower potencies, so as to become one with the unperceived, hidden natural world: she must become like nature, to philosophise from the point of view of nature.⁴² So, for Schelling the question of the possibility of *Naturphilosophie* in fact runs: what need the philosopher do to herself in order to become nature and so put into practice genuine *Naturphilosophie*? And the answer is found in *abstraction*. In *On the True Concept*, abstraction is the practice that makes *Naturphilosophie* possible:

To see the objective in its first coming-into-being is only possible by *depotentiating* the *object* of all philosophising, which in the highest potency is = I, and then constructing, from the beginning, with this object reduced to the first potency. This is only possible through abstraction. (OTC 89)

⁴² This underlines the inadequacy of understanding 'philosophy of nature' merely according to an objective genitive (philosophy *about* nature); it is also – primarily, even – a subjective genitive: philosophy *by* nature, from the point of view of nature.

Nature at *all* of its levels of productivity, not merely the conscious, only becomes visible through a process of abstractive depotentialization by which philosophy shifts away from the high potencies in which the *Wissenschaftslehre* had been done and scours the low potencies for how nature comes to be. This form of abstraction is that which differentiates *Naturphilosophie* from *Wissenschaftslehre*: ‘With this abstraction one moves from the realm of the *Wissenschaftslehre* into *pure-theoretical* philosophy.’ (OTC 89)⁴³

According to Schelling, this means that, in opposition to Fichte, *Naturphilosophie* begins with abstraction from the subjective (rather than the objective)⁴⁴, i.e. from the consciousness of the philosophising subject, so as to access nature as it does not appear to consciousness. According to the true concept of *Naturphilosophie*, philosophy must be taken to the potency 0, to its very depths, before gradually reconstructing reality through all its potencies, mimicking the productive force of nature. For Schelling as for Fichte, the philosopher must abstract and then construct; however, such abstraction will take her in each case in a very different direction.

4. Förster’s Critique of Schellingian Abstraction

Schelling’s appeal to abstraction has, however, been recently criticised. In *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, Eckhart Förster argues from Schelling’s appropriation of the Fichtean methodology of ‘abstract first, then construct’ to the ultimate incoherence of *Naturphilosophie* as a distinctive philosophical project. Indeed, Förster goes so far as to base

⁴³ Schelling even considers this process of abstraction as consisting in an ‘abstracting from the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ itself (OTC 93). The *Wissenschaftslehre* thus acts in *On the True Concept* as something like a *partial* abstraction from which the *Naturphilosoph* must keep abstracting. See further Dalia Nassar, ‘Intellectual Intuition and the Philosophy of Nature: An Examination of the Problem’ in Johannes Haag and Markus Wild (eds), *Übergänge – diskursiv oder intuitive? Essays zu Eckhart Försters ‘Die 25 Jahre der Philosophie’* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2013), pp. 251-2.

⁴⁴ Although, as we shall see, Schelling qualifies this assertion considerably.

his entire critique of Schellingian philosophy on the doctrine of abstraction proposed in *On the True Concept*. Förster's basic thesis throughout the book is that there are two forms of immediate cognition at play in German Idealism that scholarship has forever failed to distinguish, both originating in the *Critique of Judgment*: Fichtean intellectual intuition and Goethean (or more properly perhaps, Spinozist) intuitive understanding.⁴⁵ And Schelling's philosophy fails, according to Förster, because it employs Fichtean intellectual intuition (based on a prior process of abstraction) in *Naturphilosophie* when only Goethean intuitive understanding will do.

Therefore, Förster establishes his critique in terms of the Fichtean claim we have already encountered above: philosophy – or, what is the same thing, intellectual intuition – is premised on the identity of subject and object; but, in knowing nature as something unavailable to consciousness, the two are not identical; therefore, there can be no philosophy of nature. Here is how Förster puts it,

As Schelling himself writes in the System of Transcendental Idealism—“one always remains both the intuited and the one who is intuiting”. This is *obviously* not so in the case of nature: here that which is intuited and the one doing the intuiting are not identical. The intellectual intuition adapted from the *Wissenschaftslehre* is of no use in *Naturphilosophie*.⁴⁶

For Förster, it is with the doctrine of abstraction from *On the True Concept* that this methodological problem becomes most acute for Schelling's philosophy:

⁴⁵ For helpful summaries of the overall argument, see Eckhart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 145, 152. Nassar, ‘Intellectual Intuition and Philosophy of Nature’, makes the compelling argument that Goethe and Schelling are not as methodologically distinct as Förster insists.

⁴⁶ Förster p. 239; my emphasis.

If intellectual intuition is to be retained as the method of our intuition of nature, that is only possible on the basis of a depotentiation (a suppression or neutralization) of the intuiting subject. The question however remains whether an intellectual intuition in which one abstracts from the intuiting subject can really amount to more than word-play... What exactly would such an intuition be, assuming it possible? [Schelling's] methodology, however, is wholly insufficient. And he is fundamentally mistaken when he infers that the method of cognition must be the same for both nature and the I, namely intellectual intuition, for he has clearly failed to learn the lesson of what I referred to above as Fichte's central insight: that "I am" and "it is" express two wholly distinct modes of being.⁴⁷

Thus, according to Förster, Schelling's method of abstraction is wholly erroneous, an attempt to redeploy Fichtean intellectual intuition within an illegitimate domain. He concludes, 'Schelling's attempt to base the method of his *Naturphilosophie* on Fichte's intellectual intuition inevitably leads to the dissolution of intellectual intuition.'⁴⁸

Förster's resolutely Fichtean critique of Schelling is, therefore, ultimately threefold. First, when it comes to *Naturphilosophie*, intellectual intuition is impossible, since in this domain subject and object are non-identical. Second, Fichtean intellectual intuition is made possible by abstraction from what is objective; therefore, Schelling's claim that philosophy should abstracting from 'the intuiting subject' is incoherent ('mere word-play') at best, impossible at worst. Third, abstraction is 'insufficient' in the domain of nature, for this method is only valid – as Fichte demonstrated – in relation to the I.⁴⁹ In what follows, I am going to use each of Förster's criticisms as jumping-off points to try to understand Schelling's conception of abstraction more substantially.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 248-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 375.

⁴⁹ On this third criticism, see Nassar pp. 235-8.

5. Förster's First Criticism: The Identity of Subject and Object

I have already shown at length that – programmatically at least – Schelling is committed to the identity of subject and object in *Naturphilosophie*; he is thus committed to the idea that abstraction not only does not violate this key epistemic principle, it even makes it possible. There are two places in particular we have already encountered this claim. First, in the idea that the ‘pure’ subject-object that Fichte labels ‘I’ is in fact nature, and thus *Naturphilosophie*, as nature’s self-construction before the eyes of the philosopher, remains subject-object throughout. ‘With nature-philosophy I never emerge from that identity of the ideal-real,’ Schelling insists (*OTC* 92). Second, I have argued that the Schellingian solution to the possibility of an intellectual intuition of nature involves the knowing subject altering herself so as to become identical with the object of knowledge. Hence, Schelling is clear that the tenet that ‘one always remains both the intuited and the one who is intuiting’ so dear to the *System of Transcendental Idealism* remains equally true in *Naturphilosophie*, *pace* Förster.

However, the question of *how* it is true is still to be determined: I have yet to adduce any evidence that it is possible, for example, for the philosopher to alter herself in a way that makes her one with nature. It is this task to which I now turn. However, on the face of it, Förster has a point, and this is because Schelling describes the process of abstraction in a way that makes it seem as if there can be no identity of subject and object through abstraction. That is, if what occurs is, as Schelling sometimes describes it, abstraction from the subject, then the subjective element of the subject-object seems to have been removed from the remit of *Naturphilosophie*. For example, Schelling writes, ‘If I now abstract from what is first posited in the philosopher’s object by this free act, there remains something *purely objective*’

(*OTC* 90) or ‘I demand... an abstraction which leaves behind for me the purely objective [element] of this [intuiting] act.’ (*OTC* 92) On this reading, the identity of subject and object is not preserved by Schellingian abstraction.

However, we need to be careful here; for example, here is this second quotation in a fuller form, ‘I demand... an abstraction which leaves behind for me the purely objective [element] of this [intuiting] act, which in itself is merely subject-object, but in no way = I.’ (*OTC* 92) That is, there seem to be two notions of subjectivity at stake here: one which is removed in the act of abstraction and one which remains part of the subject-object that is left behind after abstraction has taken place. In other words, Schelling wants to claim that the identity of subject and object in *Naturphilosophie* is not affected by the abstraction from the subjective from which it begins.

It is no surprise, then, that Schelling explicitly draws attention to this double meaning of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’:

Many philosophical writers... appear to have taken this *objective* [element], from which philosophy of nature should proceed, I don’t quite know for what, but certainly for something objective in itself. So, it is no wonder if the confusion in their representations proliferates substantially on the back of this... *For me...* the objective is itself *simultaneously the real and the ideal*; the two are never separate, but exist together originally (even in nature). (*OTC* 91)

There are, then, two senses to the term ‘objective’ at play in *On the True Concept*, and hence two senses of ‘subjective’ as well: what is subjective (or objective) in itself and what is commonly called subjective, i.e. what is subjective *for consciousness*. Schelling here insists that these two senses must be kept separate, for while the *Naturphilosoph* can be said to abstract from what is subjective for consciousness, this is no abstraction from what is

subjective in itself. The argument for the above can be reconstructed as follows. Common consciousness has nature for its object, or put more technically: the subject-object at a conscious potency stands as subject opposed to the subject-object at non-conscious potencies (its object): ‘From the standpoint of consciousness, nature appears to me as objective and the I as subjective.’ (*OTC* 91) Indeed, the very process by which the subject-object attains a higher potency is bound up with this process of self-objectification, ‘the becoming objective of the pure subject-object’ as Schelling himself puts it (*OTC* 91). Hence, to abstract (or depotentiate) is to undo this process of self-objectification so as to attain that potency of the subject-object at which no subject stands opposed to an object. One reaches a point ‘where the opposition between I and nature, which is made in common consciousness, completely disappears, so that nature = I and I = nature.’ (*OTC* 96) This is achieved when the philosopher manages to depotentiate to potency 0: at this level, subject and object no longer stand opposed, for there is no consciousness to take a stand as subject over against an object. It is this aspect of subjectivity (subjectivity for consciousness) that is abstracted in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, not the subjective in itself.

When Schelling writes, for example, ‘[Through] abstraction, I reach the concept of the pure subject-object (= nature) from which I then rise to the subject-object of consciousness (= I)’ (*OTC* 90), one can clearly see that the task is not to abstract from something subjective to reach what is purely objective. Both consciousness (what is abstracted from) and nature (what is attained) are *subject*-objects at different potencies; abstraction reduces the potencies, it does not divest subjectivity as such. The point being, to return to Förster’s argument, that there remains an identity of subject and object even in non-conscious nature (and so Schelling’s claim in the Preface to the *System of Transcendental Idealism* holds good in this domain); it is only the opposition between them which is bracketed.

Moreover, the above also problematises Förster's third criticism, which runs: abstraction is insufficient to function in the domain of nature, since nature is a realm of the 'it is', whereas Fichte had already shown that abstraction, and indeed the whole apparatus of intellectual intuition, applies merely to the realm of the 'I am'. As Schelling makes clear above, the very idea that the 'nature' of *Naturphilosophie* is something merely objective, distinct from and opposed to the subjectivity of consciousness, is false. The beginning of *Naturphilosophie* consists of the abstraction of the higher (or conscious) potencies of the subject-object to isolate a depotentiated subject-object (a non-conscious subject-object). So, to equate Schellingian nature with something that exists merely as an 'it is' of the objective world, rather than an 'I am' of the subjective self, is an error.⁵⁰ Nature is subject-object all the way down.

6. Abstraction and Indifference

My above account of Schellingian abstraction makes clear something not yet explicitly acknowledged by Schelling in *On the True Concept* – that is, insofar as one abstracts from what is subjective for consciousness, one abstracts from what is objective for consciousness too. This is for the simple reason that one is abstracting from consciousness as such, and so from the structural opposition of subjectivity and objectivity that it establishes. It is not the case that Fichtean abstraction can merely remove what is objective, while Schellingian abstraction neutralises the subjective; rather, Schelling shows that the true process of abstraction – and the only one that is coherent – is one which is shown to neutralise both the subjective and the objective insofar as they are qualitatively distinct, so as to bring about a 'pure' subject-object.

⁵⁰ Förster's use of 'obviously' (emphasised in the quotation above from p. 239) is particularly inappropriate.

While this reading of abstraction remains merely implicit in *On the True Concept* itself, four months later in the next issue of the *Zeitschrift für spekulative Physik* Schelling returns to the idea of abstraction, and here finds his mature philosophy on an initial methodological moment of abstraction from *both* what is subjective *and* what is objective. The opening proposition of the *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* reads,

I call *reason* absolute reason or reason as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and the objective... 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. For the one who performs this abstraction reason immediately ceases to be something subjective.... [Reason] can of course no longer be conceived as something objective either, since an objective something... only becomes possible in contrast to a thinking something, from which there is complete abstraction here.⁵¹

Just as in *On the True Concept*, so too here, abstraction is that method with which the philosopher begins. Indeed, this is highly significant: the opening move in that work which for the rest of his life Schelling took to be his most fundamental metaphysical statement⁵² consists in a process of abstraction that neutralises both the subjective and the objective too.

Hence, abstraction is to be articulated as an act of depotentiation, where both the subject and the object are neutralised so as to isolate what Schelling here calls 'the total indifference of the subjective and the objective'. And it is here we can begin to discern the fate of abstraction in Schelling's post-1801 philosophy: whenever indifference manifests itself, whenever nature catastrophically depotentiates back into its abysses and grounds, a process that correlates to abstraction is occurring. It is at this moment of depotentiation that

⁵¹ Schelling, *SW* 4:114-5; *Presentation*, p. 349.

⁵² See the comments in the Preface to the 1809 edition of Schelling's *Philosophischen Schriften* (*SW* 7:333-4).

the work of philosophy always begins, reconstructing nature from its depths. Throughout Schelling writings there exists a dialectical oscillation between sporadic yet catastrophic moments of ‘abstraction’, followed by a process of continual and gradual potentiation. Abstraction in *On the True Concept* and the 1801 *Presentation* is the methodological repetition of the *turba gentium* of the *Freiheitsschrift*, the flood that engulfed Samothrace or the unprethinkable crisis of the philosophy of mythology.

7. Förster’s Second Criticism: On the Possibility of Schellingian Abstraction

Just as the transcendental idealist raises himself above the adulterated ‘I’ of ordinary experience through an act of abstraction, so too in a mirror image or subversion of the idealist, the *Naturphilosoph* transcends ‘beneath’ the limits of consciousness into the depths of nature. Schellingian abstraction performs a kind of transformational enactment of the origins of natural becoming.⁵³ The methodological opposition that emerges here correlates roughly to that which is notoriously described by Deleuze in the Eighteenth Series of *The Logic of Sense*, in which the Fichteo-Platonic philosopher, who is ‘a being of ascents’ acts as ‘the one who leaves the cave and rises up’⁵⁴, or as Fichte himself puts it, ‘Just as we were ushered by birth into this material world, so philosophy seeks – by means of a total rebirth – to usher us into a new and higher world.’⁵⁵ On the other hand, the Schellingio-Nietzschean philosopher ‘placed thought inside the caverns and life in the deep... [and so recognised] the absolute depth dug out in bodies and in thought.’⁵⁶

And yet this is a simplification: Schelling does not quite present abstraction in *On the True Concept* as twofold, consisting in either a practical abstraction that ascends or a

⁵³ I owe this phrase to Kirill Chepurin.

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Continuum, 1990), p. 145.

⁵⁵ Fichte, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, p. 203.

⁵⁶ Deleuze, pp. 146-7.

theoretical one which descends. In fact, he argues that the theoretical abstraction of the *Naturphilosoph* is the only possible form of abstraction. This has become clear in the preceding: to abstract is to neutralise forms of consciousness; abstraction is therefore subtractive or, in Schellingian terminology, it depotentiates. Thus, to rise to the highest potency of pure self-consciousness through abstraction, as Fichte wishes to, is to misunderstand the nature of the abstracting process as such, which takes one down the ladder of the potencies away from consciousness.⁵⁷ Fichtean abstraction is impossible for this reason, and therefore *naturphilosophische* abstraction is the *only genuine form*. This is the Schellingian rebuttal to Förster's second criticism.⁵⁸

Of course, this does not blunt the full force of Förster's second criticism entirely; there are still ways to present Schellingian abstraction that quickly draw attention to its seeming impossibility. For example, according to Schelling, it is through losing consciousness that one gains knowledge of the natural world: to philosophise, Schelling writes, I had 'to posit [the I] as *non-conscious*... not = I.' (OTC 92) As one deintensifies or depotentiates one's conscious attention, one intensifies one's knowledge. More is known through less – less freedom, less personality, less thinking. Such a presentation of Schellingian abstraction seemingly confirms Förster's second criticism, for how can one know without consciousness? How can one philosophise thoughtlessly? That is, how is Schellingian abstraction possible?

There are a number of ways to frame this objection to Schelling's doctrine more determinately, and I will consider one that particularly worried Schelling below; to begin,

⁵⁷ Hence, the need to abstract from the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself (see n. 51). To put it another way, to abstract is to create a space for philosophising indifferent to positing, indifferent to self-consciousness, indeed indifferent to any thinking whatsoever. Abstraction performs absolute indifference.

⁵⁸ Likewise, a further component of Schelling's critique of Fichte in *On the True Concept* revolves around the extensity of the *construction* consequent on this initial act of abstraction. Once one has abstracted upwards to the highest potency, one can only remain constructing within such high potencies; however, if one abstracts 'downwards' out of consciousness and into natural becoming, then one can construct all of reality. In other words, according to Schelling, Fichte is ignorant of the fact the construction potentiates; it never depotentiates.

however, it is worth constructing it in Fichtean form (especially since Förster's critique is broadly Fichtean in inspiration). For Fichte, one can abstract from everything in experience except the act of abstracting itself. Fichte writes,

All that remains after the abstraction has been completed (i.e. after we have abstracted from everything we can) is the *abstracting subject* itself, that is, the I. The I is what remains, and it is this *for itself*.⁵⁹

The activity of the abstracting self forms a limit for abstraction – a limit that Schelling's doctrine entirely transgresses. What is more, Fichte's implicit argument for such a limit seems to be a version of the *cogito*: just as one cannot doubt that which is doing the doubting, so too one can never abstract from what is doing the abstracting.

However, the Schellingian response is simple: Schelling is in no sense *denying* this abstracting activity. Abstraction does not have the same limits as doubt, for it is in no way a form of rejection, denial or doubt; *it is not a modality of negation*. I earlier pointed to this crucial characteristic of abstraction as elucidated *in Fichte's own writings*. Abstraction neutralises; it does not negate. To abstract from the positing of the I is not to deny that it occurs, it is merely to become theoretically indifferent to it. Therefore, it is perfectly possible to abstract from what is self-evidently necessary, like the activity of abstracting itself. There is no latent contradiction here, and therefore no limit: to abstract from the subjective is, *pace* Fichte (and also Förster), possible, and it forms the basis of Schelling's methodology.

Even granting the above, however, there still remain more problems for the possibility of Schellingian abstraction; chief among them: how can one be said to know or be doing philosophy while abstracting from consciousness? To think while abstracted from thought sounds a fairly tricky, if not downright ridiculous endeavour.

⁵⁹ Fichte, 'Schmid's System', p. 328.

This was a problem to which Schelling returned again and again: the possibility of non-conscious philosophy.⁶⁰ And his solution was always to search for models or exemplars for this kind of activity. One line of thought leads in this vein from *On the True Concept* to Schelling's interest in mysticism, particularly Swedenborg and Böhme. Böhme, for instance, is constantly plagued, according to Schelling, by an inability to communicate or articulate that which is known selflessly. Böhme is thus a 'philosopher of not-knowing'⁶¹ and his mystic visions comprise 'the *hatred* of clear knowledge.'⁶² Swedenborg, on the other hand, is more successful: he manages to philosophise even while extinguishing the self.⁶³ Likewise, Schelling's fascination with occult practices can be read along this trajectory: in *Clara* particularly, Schelling explores the idea of a moment of 'waking sleep'⁶⁴ brought about by hypnosis through which genuine philosophical insight is possible: 'Only he who could do while awake what he has to do while asleep would be the perfect philosopher.'⁶⁵ Again, the self is temporarily suppressed in the name of knowing the great outdoors; philosophy is pursued by means of a loss of consciousness.⁶⁶

All such experiments are to be understood as means to self-abstract from consciousness, and so to philosophise as a not-I. They are specific practices intended to induce something like the theoretical abstraction described in *On the True Concept*; through them *Naturphilosophie* becomes possible. Schelling, then, meets all three of Förster's criticisms, in part at least. In *On the True Concept*, he provides a model for abstraction that remains resolutely anti-Fichteian and yet coherent.

⁶⁰ Note, however, that it is not the *elimination* or negation of consciousness that is called for but only its suspension – a kind of *naturphilosophische epochē*.

⁶¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *SW* 10:184; *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 179.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 10:192; p. 185.

⁶³ F.W.J. Schelling, *SW* 9:77; *Clara or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), pp. 55-6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9:80; p. 73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ For a more detailed exposition of the claims made in this paragraph, see Whistler, 'Silvering'.