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The Official Journal of the
*North American
Schelling Society*

To Break All Finite Spheres: Bliss, the Absolute I, and the End of the World in Schelling's 1795 Metaphysics

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*Reality is messianic
apocalyptic
my soul is my terror*
Etel Adnan

“The ultimate end goal of the finite I and the not-I, i.e., the end goal of the *world*,” writes Schelling in *Of the I as Principle of Philosophy*, “is its *annihilation* as a world, i.e., as the exemplification of finitude” (SW I: 200-1).¹ In this paper, I will explicate this statement and its theoretical stakes in Schelling's 1795 writings: *Of the I* and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, written later in the same year. In these works, antagonism (*Widerstreit*), opposition (*Gegensatz*) and striving (*Streben*) are central characteristics of finitude. The finite world is here a world of negativity, alienation, separation. It is, as Schelling defines “the world” in the above quotation, a structure of subject opposed to object, “the finite I and the not-I” in their original division. Finding itself in the world, the I is faced with external reality as something other, yet to be known and appropriated—something over and against which the I asserts itself. What the I finds in this external world of incessant change (*Wandel*) and transition, is an endless chain (*Kette*) of things and causes. Attempt as one may to

¹ Translations from the SW are mine, although I have consulted the ones found in F.W.J. Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays*, trans. Fritz Marti (London: Associated University Presses, 1980). The references in this article to *Of the I as Principle of Philosophy* and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* are accordingly to the SW; however, this SW pagination is provided in-text in Marti's translation of both the aforementioned essays (published together in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*) for those readers who wish to consult the full English translations.



find one way's *out* by following this chain, one will never arrive at anything other than further things—always remaining within the sphere (*Sphäre*) of finite knowledge and existence (*Daseyn*).

The reason that, faced with external reality as what delimits it, the I seeks a way out of it—out of the I–not-I structure itself, a striving that defines the I's activity—is that it somehow recognizes or intuits its essence (*Wesen*) to *not* itself be of the world. Three lines of questioning arise here. First: what is this essence which makes the I strive to assert or, as Schelling puts it, “save” itself as it finds itself in the world? Second: why is the I, its essence not of the world, caught up *in* the world in the first place? More speculatively: why a world at all—this world of conflict, negativity, and thingness? And finally: what happens to the I in the world? What is the dynamic of their encounter?

As we will see, rather than merely a systematic presentation, the textual surface of *Of the I* conceals an overarching story, one that will resonate into *Philosophical Letters*, of how the I finds itself in the world, strives to break free from it towards absolute freedom or bliss—but ultimately ends up reproducing the world as it is, doing so, paradoxically, *through* the striving to break free. To reconstruct this story, let us consider the above three lines of questioning in order.

Ungrounding the Transcendental

Introducing the Absolute I

In keeping with the post-Kantian framework, in *Of the I* Schelling begins with what may be called the point of view of the I. All reality is “for the I,” i.e., insofar as the not-I is “posited” in the I. This structure may be called empirical-transcendental. There is the “original opposition” of the not-I to the I, due to which the I feels itself limited: the finite I as opposed by the not-I. This corresponds broadly to the empirical character of cognition in Kant, where sense-impressions come to the subject from a not-I that is, however, in itself uncognizable, only becoming (re)cognizable when posited in the I. Hence Schelling's calling the not-I a pure manifold (*Vielheit*) not yet endowed with reality (*Realität*). It is as posited in the I that the not-I first becomes object; and it is in this way that reality is for the I, possessing a certain a priori structure—that of the Kantian categories and forms of intuition—and defining the entire “sphere of our knowledge” (SW 1: 165) and “all that there is (*da ist*)” (SW I: 162), the finite world in which the subject exists.

Crucially, the subject is itself determined as part of the I–not-I opposition, or is always subject *in* the world. If we ask with Schelling, seeing as all reality is for the I, *what is the ground of reality of the finite I itself?*—then it might be tempting to look for it in the unity of self-consciousness, or the transcendental subject. Schelling, however, refuses this move. We can only speak of the subject as “that which is definable solely

in opposition to and yet *in relation* to an already posited object.” Subject and object are mutually “determined” or “conditioned” (SW I: 165-6). Accordingly, the I of *I think* is too fleeting to serve as the ground of reality. As Schelling observes, echoing Kant’s first *Critique* (B423):

The empirical I ... announces itself through “*I think*,” i.e., it is not through its mere being (*Seyn*), but through the fact that it thinks *something*—that it thinks *objects* The empirical I therefore ... disappears (*verschwindet*) if one cancels out (*aufhebt*) objects in general and the unity of their synthesis (SW I: 180).

What, however, if the ground of reality were to be discovered precisely *in* this disappearance of the transcendental? What if letting the subject-object structure—this world of division and condition—disappear would disclose an (absolute) reality that this structure used to obscure? Such is Schelling’s speculative gambit here, and it is this absolutely-Real in which the world disappears that he will call “the absolute I.”

How does Schelling arrive at this idea? First, in contrast to the structure of I and not-I as mutually conditioned, he theorizes “the unconditioned” as that which, in order not to fall within this structure, must be thought of *preceding* it. There must be no gap between the being of the unconditioned and its being-thought. “The principle of its being and the principle of its thinking”—or “cognition”—“must coincide,” must be *immediately* one. “Its affirmation (*Bejahen*) must be contained in its thinking” (SW I: 163). It should not be possible to inscribe it into the world of mediation and divisive relationality. Therefore, only that can be (the) unconditioned which “*can never become object at all*.” Defined in this way, it is without transition to the logic of thinghood; as immediately one, it contains no possibility of division or conditionality (hence Schelling’s “cannot *become*”). This is what Schelling calls “the absolute I,” at first defining it precisely as that which can never become object (SW I: 166-167).

If it is the immediate oneness of being and being-thought, why does Schelling call it the absolute *I*? This move, indexing *Of the I’s* “idealistic” residue that Schelling will later abandon, is only understandable within the transcendental framework, in which all reality is for the I. There are, as it were, two aspects to the finite I: it is finite (delimited by the not-I) *and* it is the principle of reality. Crudely put, there is, within the I, the source of all reality, the Real itself, obscured by its inscription into the structure of finitude. This Real is the essence (*Wesen*) of the I. The move here is to see the I’s essence as preceding and exceeding its character as finite and conditioned. One may approach this by focusing on the way the I immediately gives reality *to itself*. I cannot, says Schelling, think my being as conditional (“*if I am, then I am*”) without already thinking that I am—without “the conditioned determin[ing] the condition,” and so without the proposition “canceling itself out as conditioned and turning into



the unconditioned: *I am because I am.*” In this canceling-out, we can (intellectually) intuit the I’s essence as that which simply *is*, *at once* with its being-thought—or that which immediately “realizes (*realisirt*) itself.” I might as well, notes Schelling, simply say “*I am*” (SW I: 167). To focus on this “am” is to reveal a being free of otherness or division. It is to this standpoint that intellectual intuition transports us (SW I: 181).

It is crucial that, for Schelling, the standpoint of this “am” is not subjective. It is only *within* the I–not-I opposition that the distinction between subjective and objective appears—an opposition absent at this standpoint, which reveals what simply *is* (absolute being), without the possibility of division or gap (absolute oneness), and what is solely “through itself” (absolute identity). “My I contains a being that *precedes* all thinking and all representing” (SW I: 167); that precedes the very possibility of the transcendental. Not only any *I think*, but all proper sense of the I vanishes with the disappearance of the I–not-I opposition, disclosing “immediately all truth and all reality” (SW I: 193), a being that is immanent only to itself. I may glimpse this being within my I, but it is nothing to call my own. As absolute identity, this being is neither subject nor object; what is revealed in *I am therefore I am* is the being of pure identity, the “=” itself.² As such, this being cannot contain any otherness. Within the finite world, this identity is separated into subject and object, and the absolute being is enclosed into a being-there (*Daseyn*); the absolute itself, however, is a zero-point that precedes and refuses this division.

Nonrelation, Preclusion, Annihilation

The central part of *Of the I* lays out what may be called a positive metaphysics of absolute immanence: the categories appropriate for describing the way the absolute I functions, as it were, within itself. “Absolute identity” is the first such category. The absolute “simply is what it is” (SW I: 177), “without relation to anything opposed, i.e., to a not-I” (SW I: 231). As without relation to the logic of the world, it is “without condition or limitation” (SW I: 202). This identity should not be conflated with finite identity, which presupposes otherness and relation. The absolute is nonrelational and radically “without.”

It is these aspects of the absolute—the negative (nonrelation) and the positive (being)—that Schelling terms “absolute freedom.” Viewed “positively,” it is the way the absolute “unconditionally posits all reality in itself through absolute selfpower (*Selbstmacht*),” the unmediated power of the Real. In this, it functions at the same time absolutely-negatively, without (relation to) any outside or otherness.

2 Cf. §6 of Schelling’s 1801 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, where the first that is revealed in any statement of identity, A=A, is but “*the being of identity itself*,” the pure “=.” Schelling, “Presentation of My System of Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800-1802)*, ed. and trans. Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 147. SW IV: 117.

Absolute freedom is infinite; as such, it has no place and no need for a world. “Defined *negatively*,” it functions “as complete independence from, indeed, even complete incompatibility with all not-I” (SW I: 179). This “complete independence” is precisely nonrelation: not an independence from something opposed, but the full *absence* of anything opposed. Schelling has another term for this nonrelation: *Ausschließung*, here best translated as “preclusion,” not “exclusion.” The absolute “precludes all object” (SW I: 169), cannot become object or be inscribed into the subject-object structure. *Ausschließung* is not an operation that would exclude something opposed in order to repress it. It signals the absolute as preceding and ruling out the world, as “prior to any not-I and precluding all not-I” (SW I: 170). *Ausschließung* is therefore different from *Entgegensetzung*; to “preclude” the not-I is not to oppose it—it is to function as prior and without relation to it. The original opposing of the not-I (the structure of finitude) is explicitly contrasted by Schelling with “the absolute I” that “simply *precludes*” all not-I (SW I: 189).

The absolute is absolutely annihilative of the world—an annihilation that transports us to the zero-point preceding and precluding the world’s possibility. The power of the absolute is that of the absolute *nihil*:

The highest idea ... is the idea of *absolute power*. Can one measure the pure with [an] empirical measure? ... This idea is so distant from anything empirical that it not only stands far above it but even *annihilates* (*vernichtet*) it (SW I: 195).³

No common measure applies to absolute being, so that, from the empirical point of view, the absolute “can be neither object nor not-object, i.e., cannot be anything at all [*gar nichts*]” (SW I: 177)—can only be a “nothing at all (= 0).”⁴ The absolutely-Real is foreclosed by the world, from within which it appears as no-thing and no-where. Conversely, since absolute being has no place for otherness, it is the world that is nothing at all, annihilated by the power of the absolute. Not only does the absolute I *not* disappear with the disappearance of the world, but it functions *as* the full absence of a world. Not that it would need any world. Absolute freedom does not lack or desire. It possesses “no will” (SW I: 196) and “is never [the] will”⁵ to anything. It is freedom from even the need for a world. It is the power not to dialecticize itself, not to fall prey to relationality and otherness. The world is a world of mediation and striving, but “the absolute can never be mediated” (SW I: 184) and there is “no *striving*” in it (SW I: 180).

3 In the historical-critical edition, this passage contains additionally the following sentence, omitted from SW: “The I ... completely annihilates (*zernichtet*), through absolute selfpower, all that strives towards opposition.” See F.W.J. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. I. 2, ed. Hartmut Buchner and Jörg Jantzen (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), 122.

4 Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. I. 2, 119. Cf. SW I: 193.

5 Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. I. 2, 123. Cf. SW I: 196.



There are further names for this, at once, absolute Yes and absolute No. In fact, in §§IX-XV, Schelling goes through the Kantian table of categories, *subverting* them one by one so as to re-configure them as expressions, not of the transcendental structure of finitude, but of the absolute. Schelling's move is twofold: first, it is to take the positive categories—oneness, reality, substance, and causality—and make them expressive of absolute identity and freedom; second, it is to refuse the modal categories altogether by thinking what is absolutely amodal. In this way, Schelling lays out “the attributes” of the absolute I (SW I: 182), all naming “the same unconditionality” and the same absence of a world.

The first of these is “*utter oneness (Einheit)*,” which is in no way compatible with “empirical oneness” and “indeterminable through number.” This oneness is nonconceptual (nonsynthetic), since concept is “what gathers multiplicity into oneness,” whereas the absolutely-one precedes all multiplicity. Finally, it cannot be a universal, either, “for the universal is *conditioned* through the particular” (SW I: 182-4). In terms of quality, absolute identity can only be defined as absolute reality (*Realität*). This reality cannot have any “border” or outside, or be inscribed into the relation of part and whole (SW I: 192) or any divisive relationality of the world. Next, the category of substance becomes Spinozistic: as “the unconditioned,” the absolute is “the *only* substance.” This substance is, again, no-thing, “nothing at all (= 0).” Accordingly, one may call a finite thing a substance only figuratively, in a “transferred” (*übertragen*) way. As substance, absolute identity is an “immanent cause” that “does not posit anything outside itself” (SW I: 192-5). The absolute is absolutely nonproductive of otherness.

Finally, Schelling contrasts this world of possibility, actuality and necessity, all characteristics of *conditioned* being (SW I: 209-10), and the absolute as what is “eternal” and “simply *is*.” It is eternal in the sense of being utterly atemporal: not a “being-there at all times,” but a being “without any duration [*Dauer*],” “in *no* time” (SW I: 202). There is, in absolute identity, no before or after. Accordingly, no process of actualization can take place in it, and the distinction of modal categories makes no sense with regards to it. “For the absolute I, there is no possibility, actuality or necessity” (SW I: 232). Another fundamental characteristic of the world is thereby refused. If the absolute is the “primal ground” (SW I: 162), the “absolute condition” (SW I: 170), or the unconditioned condition (SW I: 176), this ground and condition are of a very strange, nonproductive kind. Considered immanently, absolute identity does not condition anything other than itself—and the entire categorial logic of the world is, in this absolute ground, absolutely un-grounded.

Let It Go Down: Schelling against the World

This (Derivative) World—or, How To Think Finitude

“Absolute freedom” is “utterly immanent” and “has no need to go outside itself”; it is annihilative of any outside—and is generally without any need or care, any striving, any *Sollen* or *Handlung* (SW I: 233-5). This leads to a crucial issue. If the absolutely-first is without world—and non-productive of a world—then why must the world be there? And how is its being-there possible? There is *no transition* from the absolute to the world; to think the absolute immanently is to remain within absolute identity and freedom, without the possibility or need to proceed to anything else.

It is, however, clear that, to think finitude, we need to think otherness. The world is, after all, identity *and* difference. *Daseyn* “is determined not *solely* through its identity, but [also] through something other than [*ausser*] itself” (SW I: 178). This is where the “original opposition” of the not-I to the I comes in—which makes possible the structure of the empirical. From the empirical point of view, the not-I is to be thought as prior to the I and providing it with the material of sensation—as the empirical limit faced by the finite I. *Vis-à-vis* the absolute as preceding even the possibility of otherness, however, the not-I can only be thought of as *secondary*. To think the principle or “form” (SW I: 189) of otherness, is to think what is completely outside (*ausser*) the absolute I (SW I: 192).

Resulting from this is a twoness that *cannot* be derived from oneness: “No not-I can originate [*hervorgehen*] from the absolute I” (SW I: 187). This twoness is divisive: the “form of opposition” (SW I: 180, 187), “the form of the not-I,” as opposed to the I. To be opposed to the absolute I is to be opposed to all reality: an “absolute negation,” “absolute not-I” (SW I: 188-9). The category of negation is employed here in a pre-transcendental sense; hence the adjective “absolute.” The absolute not-I is not an object; “nothing can be spoken of the absolute not-I other than its pure opposition to all reality.” This is not a lack *of* some-thing. It is the “absolute *nothing* (*Nichts*)” or “absolute nonbeing” (SW I: 188-9, 214)—but also, as the negation of absolute oneness, pure multiplicity (SW I: 194). This multiplicity, too, is not a multiplicity *of* something. It is multiplicity as such, mere difference-in-itself.

Finally, from this binary, Schelling proceeds to *synthesize* the two. The world is synthetic: a mixture of being and non-being (a binary that itself only appears with the I–not-I opposition). A finite thing is (insofar as it is identity) and is not (insofar as it is not through itself). In fact, as soon as we think the absolute not-I, we cannot but think synthesis because, without synthesis, the concept of the absolute not-I leads to contradiction. All positing can, after all, only be done by the I, and so the original opposition must be posited by it, too; but to think the positing of what is absolutely opposed to the I, is to “cancel out” the I.⁶ The I thus cancels out or suspends the not-I,

⁶ Already here one may discern the logic that will be foundational for Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*. I am



and the not-I suspends the I. The original opposition turns out to be an “antagonism between the I and the not-I”; to assert one is to undo the other. In positing the not-I, the I cannot but “transfer” its form (identity) onto the not-I (multiplicity) (SW I: 189-90). Therefore, in thinking this opposition, we are led to think the synthesis of multiplicity *into* unity, as a synthesis of form and as the activity of the I.

“It is from this transferred form of the I, the original form of the not-I, and their synthesis that all the *categories* emerge” (SW I: 190)—all the categories or forms of finitude that we saw subverted in the absolute. It is in synthesis that limitation and condition appear. “For all synthesis,” says Schelling, “proceeds in such a way that what is posited *utterly* in the thesis and the antithesis, gets in the synthesis posited with limitation, i.e., in a *conditioned* manner” (SW I: 214). The contradiction of absolute nonbeing and absolute being is thereby resolved, and we get empirical categories as reciprocally conditioned (e.g., empirical oneness as determined in relation to empirical multiplicity). In this way, we have come back to the divisive relationality of the world, its logic of separation and mediation (through synthesis). The form of identity in synthesis is “derived” (*abgeleitet*) and figurative. That is why Schelling calls the empirical category of substance a derived category: not in the sense that it is derived from absolute identity itself (which annihilates all finitude)—but as derived through synthesis once the I–not-I opposition is given. The world, as a result, never expresses identity except in a negative, relational way.

Interlude: Paradise Lost

We now approach the third of our three lines of questioning: what happens to the I within the world? As opposed by the not-I, the I is now finite. “The empirical I is determined only through the original *opposition*, and is nothing outside it” (SW I: 180). The empirical or finite I is the I to which the not-I is always already opposed. In this consists its difference from the absolute I (which, we recall, precludes the not-I). It is as conscious of its limitation through the not-I that the I becomes aware *of itself*—a reflective doubling at the origin of self-consciousness:

Self-consciousness harbors the danger of losing the I. It is not a *free* act of the immutable but an imposed striving of the mutable I which, conditioned through the not-I, strives to save [*retten*] its identity and to grab hold of itself again in the sweeping stream of change But this striving of the empirical I, and the consciousness that proceeds from it, would not themselves be possible without the freedom of the absolute I ... Your *empirical* I would never strive to save its identity if the *absolute* I had not originally been posited *through itself* as pure identity (SW I: 180-181).

The I is finite, and yet its essence remains absolute identity and freedom—an essence that *precedes* but is *foreclosed* by the world, and so appears to the I from within the world as something that it is in danger of losing, or that has already been lost and needs to be saved (“grab hold of itself *again*” suggests that it *has* been lost, if momentarily). This creates a striving that is simultaneously nostalgic and future-oriented: a longing for the lost essence and for a future salvation from the world. From within the world, the atemporal essence appears to the I at once as the idealized past and the wished-for future. The finite I always exists in-between, in transition. It is in this in-betweenness that the two main logics of the I’s activity of striving emerge: *synthesis* and *morality*—both aimed at the state of *bliss* as, precisely, at once the nostalgic past and the desired future.

Falling away from the Absolute

Far from replacing the Kantian duality of sensibility and the understanding with simply one principle, Schelling thus carefully preserves the structure of the empirical as the I–not-I opposition. He does so precisely because this opposition is *undervivable*, and yet *required* to think the world as empirical and finite, and the very possibility of the world, which cannot be thought from the standpoint of absolute identity. “To the critical philosopher,” observes Schelling in *Philosophical Letters*, “the absolute in us [i.e., the absolute I] is more comprehensible than everything else; it is, however, incomprehensible how we exit the absolute, so as to oppose something.” The latter is, to the philosopher, “the most mysterious” (SW I: 310).

“The main business of all philosophy consists,” accordingly, “in resolving the problem of the being-there of the world” (SW I: 313). The world is a mystery because, as we recall, “no not-I can originate from the absolute I.” We cannot think otherness from within absolute identity; to think otherness is to already find ourselves *at* the standpoint of otherness. If, says Schelling, we were only to intuit the one absolute reality, we would all be “at one” (*einig*) and there would be no possibility of difference. Therefore, “the problem ... of all philosophy” is the question, “How does it even happen that I go out of the absolute and towards an opposition?”—the question of “the stepping out from the absolute” (*Heraustreten aus dem Absoluten*; SW I: 294). If we were simply to intuit absolute identity, this question would not arise.

However, that is not what we do. Instead, we are already *in the world*—and therein lies the problem:

If man succeeded at some point in leaving this realm [of finitude], in which he found himself through the stepping out from the absolute, that would spell the end of all philosophy and even of that realm itself. For it arises only through the antagonism, and has reality only as long as the antagonism continues (SW I: 293).



The possibility of the world as the “realm of experience” can only be thought under the assumption of the world:

I ask anew: why is there even a realm of experience at all? Any answer that I provide to this question, itself already assumes the being-there of a world of experience. In order to be able to answer this question, then, we need already to have left the realm of experience; if we were at some point to leave this realm, however, then the question itself would cease to apply (SW I: 310).

There is thus no answer to the question *Why must the world be?* To think the possibility of the world, we need to think the original opposition—and yet there is *no reason* for this opposition; the absolute I cannot transition to otherness or go outside itself.

Already in *Of the I*, Schelling insists that the mystery of the origin of the world—the mystery of the original opposition—cannot be solved: “For *the fact that (Daß)* the I opposes to itself a not-I, one cannot provide any further reason, any more than for the fact that it simply posits itself” (SW I: 187n). The *Daß* of the world is simply there, underivable from absolute identity, just as absolute identity is itself “groundless” (*grundlos*; SW I: 308). In the later Schelling, this will be conceived as the free act of creation—and we discover the term “creation” here, too, defined as the “exhibition (*Darstellung*) of the infinite reality of the I within the limits of the finite” (SW I: 215), which takes place in synthesis. The absolute opposing of the not-I is the beginning of creation—coinciding with the beginning of the activity of synthesis. The I is constantly “creating” the world: at every moment, the world is re-produced.

To find oneself outside the absolute, one’s essence lost, is to *fall away* from the absolute. The beginning of creation is grasped in *Philosophical Letters* in terms of the Fall (*Sündenfall*)—a term introduced here through a reference to Condillac:

A French philosopher says: since the Fall, we have stopped intuiting *things in themselves* [W]e must suppose this philosopher to have been thinking of the Fall in the Platonic sense, as the stepping out from the absolute state. But in this case he should have said, conversely, that it is since we stopped intuiting the things in themselves that we have been fallen beings. For if the word *thing in itself* is to have any meaning, it can only mean ... a something that is for us no longer an *object*, no longer offers any resistance to our activity. It is, after all, precisely our intuiting of the objective world that tears us out of intellectual self-intuition—out of the state of bliss (*Seligkeit*) (SW I: 325-326).

The I is fallen, and so strives to save its essence. The negativity of the world is evident already in *Of the I*—but the term *Sündenfall* adds a *theodical* dimension to it. As

fallen, the I strives to break free from this world of negativity and suffering (this striving is, we may recall, “imposed,” forced upon the I by the world)—towards an absolute freedom from any negativity or need. This freedom coincides with what the I sees as its essentially-original state, “the state of bliss.”

The world is determined as the negation of bliss; as long as there is bliss, there is no world, and vice versa. We may observe the ambivalent temporality of bliss in these passages—mapping onto the temporality of salvation in the I’s striving to save its identity. It indexes, on the one hand, the absolute past preceding the Fall; on the other, Schelling speaks of intellectual intuition as that which is consequent upon the world and cancels it out—a future state in which we intuit something that is “*no longer* an object for us,” “*no longer* poses any resistance” (SW I: 325-326). Bliss is thus introduced to designate the absolute oneness from which the I is torn away and towards which it strives. If so, however—if the structure of finitude is constitutively negative and unblissful—then really, must this world even be? The question is intensified.

Enacting Absolute Identity (in Synthesis)

The I’s essence is absolute identity, and so, when confronted with the not-I, it is forced to continuously assert its identity vis-à-vis multiplicity. This is where Schelling’s reconfiguration of synthesis as the I’s striving for salvation comes in: the I finds itself in a world of antagonism, and strives to save its identity by imposing the form of identity *upon* the not-I. In this way, the (synthetic) subject of self-assertion in its relation to the (synthetic) object is born—but also the *temporality* and *spatiality* of the world:

In order to save the immutable identity of your I, you must necessarily *elevate* the not-I, whose primal form is multiplicity, to identity—and so, as it were, assimilate it to the I. In order for it not to coincide with your I *as* the not-I, i.e. as multiplicity, your imagination posits it in *space*. In order, however, for your I not to become completely dispersed as it receives multiplicity for the purpose of accomplishing synthesis, you posit this multiplicity as change or [temporal] succession—and for every point of this succession, you posit again the same subject, determined by an identical striving. In this way, through the mediation of synthesis itself, and through the forms of space and time (produced simultaneously with the synthesis), you get an object that persists in space and time despite all change (SW I: 193-194).

Space and time are synthetic forms, the I’s way to cope with multiplicity without losing its identity. The temporality of finitude is thus the temporality of synthesis⁷—

⁷ “*Time* is the condition of all synthesis,” but is also “produced by the imagination in and through synthesis.” The logic of possibility and actualization, too, arises in relation to the temporality of synthesis



and of the continuous self-assertion to which the presence of the not-I forces the I. To this corresponds the general idea of time as a continuum in which objects persist: the temporality of duration, “only thinkable in relation to objects.” The absolute simply *is*, whereas the finite I, and the finite world, temporally endure (*dauern*) (SW I: 202-3).

Through the logic of synthesis, we have now come to think the world as a world of change, distance, and temporal succession. All synthesis is nothing but the I’s striving to “save” its essence—nothing but the operativity of identity *in or upon* multiplicity in the givenness of multiplicity. As *Philosophical Letters* reiterate, once there is the original opposition, there is synthesis: “*Synthesis* in general ... arises only through the antagonism of multiplicity with the original oneness. For no synthesis is necessary in the absence of antagonism” (SW I: 294). Oneness and twoness are *both* conditions of synthesis, as the operativity of oneness upon twoness. “The complete system” must therefore proceed from absolute identity (SW I: 297)—but since it must also think multiplicity, this leads to thinking the bringing of multiplicity into oneness, so that oneness becomes *telos*. In this way, again, absolute oneness becomes, in the givenness of multiplicity, at once what the I proceeds from and the *telos* towards which its striving is directed:

Firstly, synthesis [must] be *preceded* by an *absolute* oneness, which only first becomes *empirical* unity in the synthesis itself, i.e., in the givenness of something antagonistic, a multiplicity....

Secondly, no synthesis is thinkable except under the assumption that it itself *end* (*endige*) in an absolute *thesis*. *The goal of all synthesis is thesis* (SW I: 296-7).

Note the dynamic of oneness and twoness at work here: to think the possibility of the world vis-à-vis the absolutely-first, we need to think at once oneness and twoness, where oneness *suspends* twoness (there is no twoness at the standpoint of absolute oneness) and is operative *in* it (as bringing it into unity). Considered immanently, absolute identity does not ground—but completely “precludes”—the world; it only becomes the transcendental ground within the structure of opposition or twoness. Note also how what is, considered immanently, absolutely-first without transition to otherness, becomes second or *telos* from the perspective of finitude. This is how teleology emerges. As soon as multiplicity is given, oneness starts to function as empirical synthesis whose goal is, however, its self-termination in and as absolute identity.

In this way, the status of finite reality is complicated. Synthesis is what produces the world. And yet, synthesis becomes, on this account, the direct operativity of absolute identity upon multiplicity, whose goal is not the synthetic product (the

world) as such, but the dissolution of multiplicity in identity, and thus of all synthesis in absolute thesis. Faced with the not-I, the I proceeds to posit it under the form of identity, whereby the world gets produced. The I could not, however, care less about the process of synthesis—and it only cares about the synthetic *product* (the world) to the extent that it represents identity. The I has no interest in the finite *as* finite. All it does is re-assert identity in the striving to save itself—simply because identity is what it is, and so it must remain what it is amidst multiplicity. The world is only getting in the way, and is only produced as the by-product of the I's simply *doing* what it *is* when confronted with multiplicity. Synthetic reality has, in this, the core of the immanent enactment of absolute identity. Absolute identity remains, as such, without relation to the world—and yet, from within the world (in the givenness of multiplicity), it gets re-mediated through a process in which identity becomes the goal. The world re-mediate identity *as telos*.

Gathering the Dispersed—or Annihilating It

Synthesis “ultimately aims for absolute oneness” (SW I: 297), because this oneness is where it proceeds from. Synthesis is thus a way in which the absolute manifests or “reveals” itself in the world: all activity of the I “reveals an original freedom of the absolute I” (SW I: 205). Let us observe the double-sided character of synthesis, corresponding to the I–not-I structure of the empirical. On the one hand, synthesis brings the not-I to the form of identity, “assimilating” it to the I: the objective side. On the other, the I insists on *its own* identity, its essential oneness with the absolute. Considered from either side, the goal of this process is the same: absolute identity. And yet the logic is different, corresponding to the Kantian division between theoretical and practical. As Schelling says, “reason aims in its theoretical as well as in its practical use at nothing other than ... the statement $I = I$ ” (SW I: 229). To reach this *telos* of identity would be to abolish the world as the structure of opposition. The theoretical and the practical constitute the I's two paths towards this goal.

The theoretical logic is synthesis considered from the point of view of multiplicity. There is multiplicity, and so it needs to be synthesized; the more it is gathered into unity, the closer is the end goal of “absolute thesis.” This leads to the progressive “identification of the not-I with the I” as the “ultimate end goal” (SW I: 197; cf. 223). In this manner, synthesis progresses towards the goal of unifying *all* multiplicity. It is through synthesis that limitation emerges; however, synthesis aims to overcome all limitation. Theoretical philosophy seeks to unite all “finite spheres” into “one infinite sphere,” coinciding with “all reality” as fully “encompassed” by the I (SW I: 215). At the conclusion “of all *theoretical* philosophy” stands “the highest synthesis.” In this way, the I seeks, as “theoretical reason,” to “resolve the antagonism between the I and the not-I” by uniting them into “one ultimate exemplification of all reality” (SW I: 190).



“In its theoretical use,” reason “strives to elevate the not-I to the highest unity with the I.” And yet—a Kantian motif—in doing so, it falls into contradiction with itself as the I. In the statement $I = I$, the I is “posited [simply] *because* it is posited.” In the highest synthesis, the I strives to posit all not-I under the same form: “to posit the not-I [simply] because it is posited, that is, elevate it to unconditionedness” (SW I: 229). To elevate the *not-I* to unconditionality is, however, to let it swallow the I. “The ultimate exemplification of all reality” becomes thereby “the $I = \text{not-I}$,” “cancel[ing] out the absolute I” (SW I: 190). “The highest possible synthesis ($I = \text{not-I}$) expresses” again only “the antagonism between the I and the not-I” (SW I: 191), and not the cessation of this antagonism. In its synthesizing activity, the I creates the world but cannot find its way out of it—and so ends up *reproducing* the antagonism that constitutes the world.

The practical logic is different: it is the immanent insistence of the I on its essence. It emerges out of the contradiction, not directly between the I and the not-I, but *within* the finite I—between itself as empirical and as absolute, between its conditionedness and its essential (absolute) freedom. It is in this contradiction that Schelling locates morality, so that the categorical imperative coincides with the imperative $I = I$:

The absolute I *demands* utterly that the finite I become equal to *the absolute*, i.e., that it utterly annihilate [*zernichte*] within itself all multiplicity and all change. What for the *finite* I, i.e., the I delimited by a not-I, is *moral law*, is for the infinite I the *law of nature* [*Naturgesetz*], i.e., one given together with, and in, its *mere being* (SW I: 198).

Here, the I annihilates all multiplicity within itself, instead of gathering it into an all-encompassing objective identity. Whereas synthesis is the operativity, within the world, of the absolute as absolute *identity*, morality is its operativity as absolute *freedom*—i.e., as the annihilation of finitude.

Importantly, it is the same insistence on the I’s essence as in synthesis, except considered from the side of the I. “The theoretical I strives to posit the I and the not-I as equal, and thus to elevate the not-I *itself* to the form of the I”—the mediation of multiplicity into unity. “The practical I,” however, “strives towards pure oneness, to the *preclusion* of all not-I” (SW I: 176-7). *Within* the world, the I insists on its immanent nonrelation to the world. These are but two sides of the one process of striving (towards $I = I$). In the absolute, there is no division between the two; it only appears from the point of view of the world or the I–not-I opposition. It is the task of “the complete science,” therefore, to insist on “the perfect oneness of the I, which is the same in all manifestations of its activity,” serving to express “but one activity of the same, identical I” (SW I: 238-9). Schelling’s ambition here is to unify (post-Kantian) philosophy by means of the essential oneness of the I’s striving, even though

this striving may appear as divided within the divisive relationality of the world.

Breaking the Spheres, Cutting the Knot (of the World)

Morality is in Schelling tied to finitude, emerging because the I, *within* the confines of finitude, insists on its absoluteness. “The moral law only holds in relation to finitude.” Only a finite being can be, or is called upon by its essence to be, moral. Absolute freedom is neither moral or amoral—it is the sheer power of the absolutely-Real: “The infinite I knows no moral law whatsoever, determined as it is in its causality only as absolute *power*, equal to itself.” It follows solely the “law of identity,” “law of nature,” or “law of being” (SW I: 198-199), not the moral law.

Accordingly, in a familiar teleology, the moral law defines “the end goal of all striving” as its own “transformation into the I’s mere *law of nature*.” Since the absolute simply is what it is, the moral law demands that the I be absolutely equal to itself: “The highest law for the finite being is: *be absolutely identical with yourself*” (SW I: 199). Such is the “pure” formulation of the moral law. And yet, already in this formulation, the pure moral law’s character as a *demand* betrays its finite, synthetic character: what the absolute simply *is*, is here represented “as demanded.” With finitude, normativity appears, absent in absolute immanence. The moral law is merely “a schema” of the law of identity, its representation from within finitude (SW I: 198-199). No *imperative* could even arise in the absolutely-Real (SW I: 234).

The finite I cannot, however, simply “be absolutely identical with [itself],” as this stands in contradiction with its being caught up in multiplicity. It is here that the contradiction *within* the I appears, between itself as empirical or “a moral *subject*, i.e., conditioned through change and multiplicity”—and its essence of identity: an antagonism between what it is and what it ought to be. Schelling solves this contradiction, again, via *synthesis*: “a new schema, namely that of *production in time*, so that the moral law, aimed as it is at the demand of *being*, now turns into a demand of *becoming*.” Adapted thus to the finite subject, the moral law now demands, not *Be (immediately) identical!*, but “*become* identical, *elevate* (in time) the *subjective* forms of your being to the form of the absolute” (SW I: 199).

Mediated in synthesis as becoming, the annihilation of finitude becomes progressive. Everything that is finite about the I, is now imagined as being gradually done away with, with moral purity, or absolute freedom, as the end goal. In this way, the I may be imagined to *expand* towards $I=I$. “Expansion” (*Erweiterung*) is what Schelling calls the moral demand as mediated by the world—an image expressing, as it were, the shrinking of the not-I and of its power over the I. “The final aim of the finite I is therefore expansion to the point of identity with the infinite” (SW I: 200; cf. 191, 240-241). Note how this logic is opposed to progressive synthesis, where it is the *not-I* (as gathered into unity by the I) that expands. And yet, in synthesis and morality, the end goal is one: absolute identity. This is the goal of the I’s entire striving, and



the ultimate goal of the world; and yet, in this goal, the world *ceases* to be just that, a world—a point at which we return to the statement that opened this paper: “The ultimate end goal of the finite I and the not-I, i.e., the end goal of the *world*, is its *annihilation* as a world, i.e., as the exemplification of finitude” (SW I: 200-201).

The annihilation of finitude that, at the standpoint of the absolute, was what the absolute *immediately* did—prior to the very possibility of finitude—becomes now, from within finitude, the end goal. “In order to resolve the antagonism between I and not-I,” which theoretical reason cannot do, “nothing else remains except complete *destruction* [*Zerstörung*] of the finite sphere”—“(practical reason),” adds Schelling in parentheses (SW I: 191). What theoretical reason futilely tries to synthesize by combining all finite spheres—by “forming” (*bilden*) finite spheres in the hope they may contain the infinite, or putting infinity together piece by piece until the not-I equals I (whereby, however, the I is lost)—practical reason achieves by way of the *breaking* of the spheres, an all-out destruction of finitude. It is only if “we pierce through [*durchbrechen*] these spheres”—as demanded by “practical philosophy”—“that we find ourselves in the sphere of absolute being, in the supersensible world, where everything is *I*, nothing is outside the I, and this I is but One [*Eines*],” absolute identity and freedom *become* absolute (SW I: 215-6). Practically, philosophy equals the annihilation of the world.

Thus, to envision the resolution of the question “why is there even a world at all?,” is to conceive of it not as a theoretical answer—for, as we recall, “any answer that I provide to this question itself already assumes the existence of a world.” It is to resolve the question practically by *dissolving* it (the two senses of *auflösen*)—to dissolve the logic of finitude indexed by the question:

As a result, this question cannot be resolved except the way Alexander the Great resolved the Gordian knot, i.e., through the canceling-out of the question itself Such a resolution of this question, however, can no longer be theoretical, but necessarily *practical*. For, in order to be able to answer it, I must myself leave the realm of experience, i.e., suspend for myself the limits of the world of experience, or cease to be a finite being (SW I: 310-311; cf. 176).

There can be no justification of the world except by tracing the way it *undoes* itself. If “the main business of all philosophy consists in resolving the problem of the being-there of the world,” then this resolution can only consist in the complete dissolution of the world. It is in the breaking of all finite spheres—the tearing down of all idols, all representations, all finite vessels, so as to break through to absolute oneness—that the only solution to the mystery of the world consists, and the only way to “restore” absolute identity and freedom (SW I: 202). “Practical reason enters, not in order to untie the knot, but to cut it into pieces [*zerhauen*] by means of absolute demands”

(SW I: 176). The practical solution is to cut the knot of the world without hesitation.

To the question, *How is the world possible?*, the answer was: *on the assumption of the world*—i.e., by thinking the structure of the original opposition. To the question *Why must the world be?*, the answer is: *the world must not be*. Since Schelling configures the world as constituted by the operativity of absolute identity and freedom *within* the structure of opposition, the world is, paradoxically, only thinkable as demanding its own dissolution. Precisely because, as such, the absolute functions in and as the absence of the world, its operativity *in* the world becomes that of collapsing or annihilating the world.

The absolute becomes, as a result, a very odd kind of ground: it may ground all identity and all of the I's activity vis-à-vis the world, but thereby it ungrounds the world itself (*as* world). Similarly, absolute identity, considered immanently, does not condition anything other than itself. It only becomes the condition of finitude or synthesis—the transcendental condition—under the assumption of multiplicity, conditioning identity as the *goal* of finitude, which consists in finitude's dissolution. "Condition" is here identity configured as *telos*. The logic of condition and ground is driven by one striving: to become, as absolute identity, *grundlos*.

The Joy of Annihilation: Pure Happiness—Bliss—Nonbeing

The world must not be is the imperative of all striving. To reach this goal—to annihilate the world, to be free from striving and one with the absolute—would be, for the I, pure bliss. The term "bliss" first appears in *Philosophical Letters*, but "pure happiness" is what Schelling calls it already in *Of the I*. Generally, happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) is the "agreement of objects with our I," of "the not-I with the I" (SW I, 197). I am happy when objects please me, or there is no conflict between them and myself. This happiness is, however, "empirical" insofar as I continue to depend on the not-I for my happiness. There is a strong element of chance to it—of dependence on external circumstances. This is why Schelling calls it "contingent" (*zufällig*). As such, it presupposes the gap between I and not-I.

As empirical, happiness cannot belong "to the (ultimate) end goal" (SW I, 197). It does, however, asymptotically imply an idea aligned with the end goal—the idea of the *full absence of any gap* between the not-I and the I, and in that sense their perfect harmony. This idea arises from theoretical philosophy, and yet, if the *practical* demand is to be realized—amounting to the "complete annihilation of the not-I"—this would lead to a state in which there is necessarily no gap between the not-I and the I, but now in such a way that the element of externality and chance is precluded. Morality, therefore, leads to *pure* happiness, precisely *as* the oneness with the absolute that the moral law demands. Such is the only "practical significance" of happiness, in which "it is also fully *identical* with the ultimate end goal" (SW I: 197).



Seeing as pure happiness indexes absolute oneness, at the standpoint of pure happiness the distinction between theoretical and practical disappears. After all, neither synthesis nor morality is itself the end goal; absolute identity ($I = I$) is. “Pure happiness” is a name we can give to this identity, to the extent that all resistance on the part of the not-I is here absent. In this, however, the term “happiness”—initially defined through the empirical—becomes, with the addition of “pure,” self-subverting. “Pure happiness consists precisely in elevation above empirical happiness; the pure necessarily precludes the empirical” (SW I: 197). In this, however, the very *need* to be happy vanishes:

[T]he ultimate aim of all striving is not empirical happiness, but complete elevation above its sphere, so that we must strive towards the infinite, not in order to *become* happy, but in order to never have need of happiness, indeed, to become completely *incapable* of it (SW I: 198).

The point of pure happiness is not to be happy (or unhappy), but to occupy the standpoint at which this binary, as empirical, does not apply. The separation between nature and freedom, “natural causality” and “the causality through freedom”—another Kantian divide—disappears at this standpoint, too, together with the divisions between theoretical and practical, mechanism and teleology, or possibility and actuality (SW I: 239-242). Pure happiness collapses all binaries and relations that define the world, spelling a “complete canceling-out” of finitude (SW I: 240). It is on this note—the end of the world in pure happiness—that *Of the I* itself ends.

It is, perhaps, due to the self-undoing inherent in “pure happiness” that, in *Philosophical Letters*, Schelling adopts the term “bliss” instead. Bliss (*Seligkeit*) and happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) relate here the same way that pure and empirical happiness did in *Of the I*—with the added conceptual benefit provided by the words themselves. *Glückseligkeit*, observes Schelling, contains the component of *Glück*, “luck,” as that which happens *to us*. “We owe our happiness ... not to ourselves, but to *lucky chance*.” “Happiness is a state of passivity; the happier we are, the more passive our relationship to the objective world.” Happiness is empirical—so that, the “purer” we imagine it to be, “the closer it comes to morality and the more it ceases to be *happiness*” (SW I: 322): an obvious nod to *Of the I*. Hence the need for a different term. *Seligkeit*, as delinked from chance—and as connected to *Seele* and (in its meaning as “salvation”) to the end goal of striving—answers this need perfectly.

“Morality,” reiterate *Philosophical Letters*, “cannot itself be the highest,” consisting only in the “striving towards absolute freedom” (SW I: 322). It is in the state of absolute freedom that bliss consists. “Where *there is absolute freedom, there is absolute bliss*, and vice versa” (SW I: 324). Bliss is oneness with the absolute—a state of pure identity, absolute nonrelation and intransitivity, to which we are transported by “intuiting the eternal in us under the form of unchangeability.” In this way, we

have direct access—via the essence of our soul—to the end (goal) of the world; or, rather, immediately are at this standpoint. In intellectual intuition bliss does not, in other words, appear *as* goal; it is where the soul simply *is* in its essence—“our self [as] stripped of [*entkleidetes Selbst*] everything that came from the outside” (SW I: 318).

In bliss, we are taken out of time and space, and are the one immanence, without temporal succession or otherness. It is only from the perspective of the world that we are transported *to* or *out of* this state, so that there is a before and after, past and future, inside-the-world and outside-the-world. In bliss, the world is completely dissolved—the knot of finitude is immediately resolved—for, as we recall, in order to resolve it, “I must myself ... cease to be a finite being” (SW I, 311).

Schelling connects this cessation of the world in bliss to Spinozan *beatitudo*, quoting “the statement with which [Spinoza] concluded the whole of his *Ethics*, ‘*Bliss is not the reward of virtue, it is virtue itself!*’” (SW I: 321-322). Bliss cannot be a reward, since the logic of reward is transcendent, premised on the gap between what I am and what I receive as reward. With reward, we are thinking of something that pleases us. As such, it is tied to *happiness*, not bliss (SW I: 323). “Insofar as we still believe in a happiness that rewards us, we are assuming happiness and morality ... as antagonistic principles.” “This antagonism,” however, “ought to utterly cease.” The closer we are to virtue, the less value (*Werth*) rewards have for us (SW I: 322). One simply *is* one with the absolute; in this, blessedness consists—and not in any kind of reward or possession:

Should we, asks an ancient writer [i.e. Seneca], deem the immortal gods unhappy because they possess no capitals, no gardens, no estates, no slaves? Should we not rather praise them as the only blissful ones precisely because they alone, thanks to the sublimity of their nature, are already deprived [*beraubt*] of all those goods [*Güter*]? (SW I: 323)

The logic of reward entails the conceptual nexus of possession, value (capital), domination (even slavery), and justification. What the image of the Stoic-Epicurean gods signals, is bliss’s refusal of this nexus, as well as of the logic of the world as a whole. Note also the immanent inhabitation of nothingness by the gods, “deprived” of everything—just as, in the earlier description of intellectual intuition, the self was *entkleidet*, bare. Bliss indexes an immanent dispossession, an absolute, divine poverty. (In his later novella *Clara*, Schelling will explicitly connect bliss to monasticism.)

Not just all external possession—the *self*, as self-possession, is in bliss annihilated, too. On the one hand, intellectual intuition is an intuiting of “the eternal *in us*,” our “bare *self*.” On the other, as we have already observed in *Of the I*, what I thereby intuit is nothing to call my own. “*My* reality disappears in the infinite reality” (SW I: 327). The “bare” in “bare *self*” undoes the selfhood. The self as dispossessed, as *bare self*, is not a self, but absolutely-nothing. Blissful self-destitution must be



thought as *preceding* subjectivity and possession; it is only from within the world that it appears as goal—the full dissolution of consciousness and personality:

With *absolute* freedom, no consciousness is thinkable anymore. An activity for which there is no *object* and to which there is no resistance anymore, never returns into itself. It is only through return to itself that *consciousness* emerges ... I cannot cancel out the object without at once canceling out the subject *as* such, i.e., all personality (SW I: 324, 327).

Consciousness has the structure of reflection and binary, absent in bliss. In fact, all binaries are refused or collapsed here. Bliss is “infinite activity” and, as absolutely non-empirical, “the cessation of *all* passivity”—yet it is also absolute passivity, since it does not strive towards anything and possesses “no will” (SW I: 331). “Here, at the moment of absolute being, highest passivity is at one with the most unlimited activity. Unlimited activity is absolute repose, perfect Epicureanism” (SW I: 323-325). It is absolute freedom, or “unconditioned selfpower,” but also absolute necessity, as only following “the laws of its being” (SW I: 331).

In collapsing *all* binaries, absolute bliss is apocalyptic. It spells the end of the world—and of the I in the world. “The highest moment of being is for us transition to nonbeing, the moment of *annihilation*” (SW I: 324). The “for us” is important here. It marks the finite perspective, as does “transition,” which implies succession. “For us” in our finitude, entering bliss can only appear as a “transition to nonbeing” or a (transitive) “moment of annihilation”; from the standpoint of the absolute, however, there is no transition, and no world, but only (what appears from within the world as) pure nonbeing, where the soul simply *is*. At this standpoint, it is the world that is *not*—exposed as a secondary, imposed reality—so that bliss equals freedom from the world, the joy of world-annihilation.

From the point of view of this life, bliss, as the annihilation of striving, is only comparable to *death*. “We awaken,” says Schelling, “from intellectual intuition as from the state of death. We awaken through *reflection*, i.e., through a forced return to ourselves” (SW I: 325). Bliss is, however, not physical death, itself a part of the life-cycle and the life-death binary. It is a state in which all distinction between life and death disappears, and “absolute repose” coincides with “unlimited activity.” However, since our I is finite, we are “forced” to exit this state: forced to go back to the existence of opposition and striving. We are, as it were, forced to live. “Were I to maintain intellectual intuition [indefinitely], I would cease to live” (SW I: 325)—and yet I have to return into the world. This forcedness to live corresponds metaphysically to the fact of the *Heraustreten aus dem Absoluten*.

The world must not be, and yet it is there. The joy of the world’s annihilation, the bliss of nonbeing is the highest moral demand. And yet the finite I can only experience the state of absolute oneness briefly in intellectual intuition, as the world is

not only itself unblissful, but prevents the soul's bliss—since to allow the soul to reach it would spell the world's annihilation. Bliss thus appears, from within the world, at once as the ante-original past, the desired future, and finitude's striving *for* bliss—which it, however, cannot reach without undoing itself.

To Reproduce the World—or, Apocalypse Re-Mediated

Moral Progress and the (Impossible) End of the World

As we have seen, the moral demand leads to the necessity of moral *becoming*. The schema of becoming not only makes the moral law applicable to the finite subject, but also leads to the (synthetic) temporality of moral progress:

It is through this schematism of the moral law that the idea of moral *progress* becomes possible, as progress into infinity. The absolute I is the one eternal—which means that the finite I, in its striving to become identical with the absolute, must also strive for pure eternity. It must therefore ... posit in itself eternity as *becoming*, i.e. as empirical, or as *infinite duration* (SW I: 200).

The I strives for eternity, but eternity can only be imagined, from within finitude, as infinite duration—so that moral becoming itself becomes infinite. This re-mediation of morality by the temporality of finitude is the “moral” or “practical synthesis” (SW I: 232-233). From the pure “is,” we thereby get to *Sollen*, the Ought, which Schelling identifies not with the pure moral law (“be identical!”), but with the I's striving to *become* identical (SW I: 232). The I cannot, after all, strive for anything without representing it as the determination of its will, so that synthesis is required in order for that which cannot be represented in finitude (i.e. absolute identity) to become representable—to become *possible* as goal.

The moral law becomes the law of possibility, and morality really becomes practical (and not impractical). Through the moral synthesis, “practical possibility, actuality and necessity” arise (SW I: 232). To borrow a Kantian term, the pure moral law demands an immediate moral revolution (*be* identical with the absolute!)—an impossible demand. The finite I cannot even represent it other than as a demand for (possible) change and becoming. In order to determine the will, the moral law must be re-mediated as *Sollen*. “Only for the finite being,” insists Schelling, “is there an Ought, i.e. practical possibility” (SW I: 232). This leads to the structure of a not-yet in which morality appears as an “incremental *approximation* to the end goal.” “Pure happiness,” too, since it practically coincides with morality, can only be represented as “an infinite task for the I ... realizable only through infinite progress” (SW I: 197).

It is in this striving—in moral progress—that empirical freedom consists, identified by Schelling with “transcendental freedom.” Like all things transcendental,



this freedom is for Schelling finite. It is “the freedom of an empirical I in its being-conditioned by objects” or “freedom that is actual only *in relation* to objects” (SW I: 235): freedom in the world. “*Absolute* freedom ... becomes *transcendental*, i.e., the freedom of an empirical I,” when placed within the “limits” of finitude (SW I: 237). In this freedom, the absolute “only *ought to be produced*”; however, “to *produce* an *absolute* reality is an empirically-infinite task” (SW I: 235). Freedom continues, within the empirical limits, to function as the annihilation of the not-I, and yet this annihilation is, in the continuous givenness of opposition, constitutively incomplete or not-yet.

As long as we remain within the structure of finitude, the not-yet of moral progress is self-perpetuating. Endless becoming cannot reach its absolute goal insofar as, in order to *become* a goal, it must be represented *as* empirically-infinite. We must think the *end* of the world in order to think identity and freedom *in* the world; and yet, insofar as we think them in the world, we can never get *out* of the world. As finite, we can only think the end of the world from within the world. Thereby, however, the world paradoxically reproduces itself as the endless not-yet precisely through our thinking of its annihilation. The paradox is that the demand of annihilation must be applicable to that which it wants to fully annihilate, i.e. the empirical. To be applicable to the empirical, however, it must be represented in terms of the empirical. “The finite being can ... progressively expand the limits of its finitude”—a progress into infinity, “because, if this expansion were ever to cease at some point, this would amount to the infinite itself having limits” (SW I: 241). Since, in other words, absolute identity becomes the goal *of* and *from within* the world, the world can never actually coincide with absolute oneness. The moral law is represented as *possible* in the world, and is thereby constitutively deferred—so that morality serves, ultimately, to reproduce the world. As a result, the world endlessly defers its own annihilation via teleology, possibility, and the moral not-yet.

Knowledge and morality signal the finite I’s inability to get out of the world, even as its essence demands it—so that, re-mediated by the world, this demand becomes the infinite not-yet through which the I is tied to this world (of striving) even further. As a finite being in the world, the I can only *believe* in the end goal, without expecting to reach it. “Since you are tied to objects,” says Schelling, “your intellectual intuition is dimmed,” even your immanent essence “becomes for you at the *end* of your knowledge only an object of *faith*: as it were, something which is different from yourself, and which you infinitely strive to exhibit in yourself, and yet never find as actual inside you” (SW I: 216). Where knowledge ends, morality *as* faith begins—because the end goal is theoretically represented (as the highest synthesis) and infinitely deferred (in moral striving), becoming “different from” one’s essence, transcendent and unreachable. In faith, the absolute essence is re-mediated by the world and alienated from the I. Moral faith becomes here, in effect, faith *in* the end goal *as* unreachable. It is precisely because one cannot reach the goal that one is called

upon to have faith. This move is theodical, too: by having faith, by not despairing and infinitely striving forward, you accept the world's infinite not-yet and justify it. Your faith in the *telos* of the world justifies the striving to reach it—the striving that *is* the world itself, in its infinite not-yet. The world “destroys” our (immanent) bliss, and all that is left for us is (transcendent) faith.

The Freedom Not To Be Blissful: Idealism as the Katechon

In *Philosophical Letters*, Schelling says that, if we were simply to intuit absolute identity, there would be no antagonism or disagreement. What is novel here compared to *Of the I* is the idea that, thereby, not only the antagonistic character of the world would cease—but also the conflict between philosophical systems. If everyone were to remain one with the absolute, without stepping out of it, “there could never be any quarrel (*Streit*) between different systems” (SW I: 293), i.e., between criticism and dogmatism. Criticism asserts the absolute self, and dogmatism the absolute object as the first principle, but in both cases this principle, considered immanently, is but an absolute affirmation or absolute identity: the first unconditioned principle can only be “an absolute *asserting*,” without negation or otherness (SW I: 312). This holds for criticism and dogmatism alike.

It is over the world that the battle rages. One could say that the world *is* the battle. It is only in the realm of finitude that it can even begin (seeing as “no quarrel is possible over the absolute itself” [SW I: 308]). This is why Schelling can claim, as we recall, that the *Dasein der Welt* is the main problem of *all* philosophy. Dogmatism and criticism can only be differentiated *within* finitude, in terms of the world's relation to the absolute (since the absolute itself is pure oneness). Since finitude has the structure of the I–not-I opposition, we can either take the side of the subject (criticism) or the side of the object (dogmatism), making one or the other into the first. But when it comes to the problem of how this opposition originates, seeing as absolute identity is absolutely-intransitive, the finite world remains a mystery for both systems: “No system can *accomplish* the transition from the infinite to the finite No system can *fill* the gap that is entrenched between the two” (SW I: 314).

Both systems want to mediate between the world and the absolute, “so as to bring about the unity of cognition,” and both find this impossible. However, they continue to strive for that unity, and absolute identity remains for them the end goal: “the endless striving” on the part of the finite “to lose itself in the infinite” (SW I: 315). We recognize in this the general logic of striving, now applied to philosophy itself. Finitude re-mediates the demand *Be identical with the infinite!* into an endless striving towards the unity of knowledge.

Since this demand is, as we know, ultimately practical and not theoretical, that leads Schelling to focus on the difference between criticist and dogmatist morality. Both “*demand* the *agency* through which the absolute is realized” (SW I: 333). This



practical solution is, again, “the only possible solution” to the knot of the world, it is just that dogmatism and criticism interpret it differently (SW I: 314). Seeing as one prioritizes the subject and the other the object, the paths they take towards oneness are opposed. It is “not through the *goal*,” but “in the way they *approach* it,” that the two systems diverge (SW I: 332). The dogmatist agency is submission, the dissolution of the I in the absolute object—an absolute passivity (embraced, per Schelling, by Spinoza [SW I: 316]).

This passivity is indicative of the worst fanatical enthusiasm: “Return into the divinity, the primal source of all existence, unification with the absolute, annihilation of the self—is this not the principle of all fanatical philosophy?” (SW I: 317). Note the direction of the movement here: the self as giving itself up to the objective, not as expanding so as to preclude it. “This scary [*schrecklich*] thought”⁸ of self-annihilation is positioned by Schelling in terms of existential dread. Thereby, “philosophy is abandoned to all the horrors (*Schrecken*) of enthusiasm” (SW I: 332). The self is “deprived” of all power (SW I: 334), abandoned to the alien, external world.

Criticism, by contrast, takes up the banner of finite freedom. Already in *Of the I*, Schelling spoke of “the bold deed of reason”: “to rid humanity of the fear of the objective world” (SW I: 157). In *Philosophical Letters*, he takes finite freedom’s side even more emphatically, to the point that it becomes *heroic*. Whereas dogmatism “progressively constricts the boundaries of my freedom so as to expand those of the objective world,” criticism reverses the direction: “By expanding the boundaries of *my* world, I constrict those of the objective world” (SW I: 334-5). In this, criticism combats the fear of objectivity—and combats dogmatism, too.

In the final, tenth letter, the battle against dogmatism becomes a battle over the world and the human soul, and of highest eschatological intensity, the decisive battle of the contemporary epoch. The narrative setup of this letter is interesting in this regard. It begins with the image of heroically fighting an overwhelming alien power—and perishing in this fight:

[O]ne more thing remains: to *know* that there is an objective power that threatens our freedom with annihilation, and, with this firm and certain conviction in our heart, to fight *against* it, to mobilize one’s entire freedom, and *thus* to perish This possibility, even after having vanished before the light of reason, must still be preserved for art—for the highest of art [i.e. tragedy] (SW I: 336).

The parallel with dogmatism is clear. Schelling, however, holds back from making it explicit and presents this idea as archaic for reason, limiting it to tragic art. A discussion

8 Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. I. 3, ed. Hartmut Buchner, Wilhelm G. Jacobs and Annemarie Pieper (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982), 85. SW I omits the adjective “scary” (SW I: 316).

of ancient tragedy follows, in which the tragic heroine, fighting against the external power of *fatum*, would assert her freedom precisely in her fight against this power, in being punished for the crime she was doomed to commit (this punishment indexing the recognition of the freedom inherent in the fight), and in her very demise. “It was a *great* thought, to suffer punishment willingly even for an *unavoidable* crime, and so, through the loss of one’s freedom, to prove this very freedom, and to perish then with a declaration of free will” (SW I: 337).

It is, arguably, the part where the hero perishes—where the alien power is presented as unconquerable—that makes Schelling declare this heroism archaic from the standpoint of reason. At the same time, the parallel between the idealist and the hero is obvious, and the entire conclusion of *Philosophical Letters* becomes, from here onwards, colored by heroism. Schelling’s point, however, is not to present the power of objectivity as undefeatable, but to combat precisely the idea of such an overwhelming power. Heroism does have a place in the contemporary world (the letter ends on a heroic-revolutionary note with the proclamation of a “covenant (*Bund*) of free spirits” [SW I: 341]), but the thought of an overwhelming external power does not. To save humanity from corruption by exposing the lie of dogmatism and revealing the truth of freedom, becomes the task of the contemporary epoch. “It is duty to uncover the whole [dogmatist] deception”—to fight for the principle of freedom. “It is in this alone that the last hope for the salvation [*Rettung*] of humanity lies”: in a return “to the freedom of the will” (SW I: 339).

The freedom of the will is, however, *not* absolute freedom or bliss. It is the freedom of striving. Salvation consists here not in the state of bliss, but in the very striving to reach it—a striving that must, as such, *never* reach its goal. The ninth letter makes this clear. Just after discussing bliss as the end goal, Schelling turns to *criticize* it, precisely for its apocalyptic, world-destroying character. Idealist freedom is the assertion of the power of the I, the expansion of the self towards absolute freedom. And yet, in bliss, the self *and* the world are equally annihilated. Bliss is the immanent inhabitation of nonbeing, and not the finite life of striving. It annihilates all binaries—including between subject and object or freedom and necessity. As a result, at the standpoint of bliss, criticism becomes *indistinguishable* from dogmatism (SW I: 328–329). Both systems, reminds us Schelling, strive towards absolute identity. Dogmatism may strive towards it by submitting the I to the not-I, and criticism by affirming the I over and against the object—but this opposition itself only holds *within* finitude, and not at the standpoint of the absolute. If criticism were to reach the goal of absolute bliss, this would spell its self-annihilation:

Where an activity, no longer limited by objects and wholly absolute, is no longer accompanied by any consciousness; where unlimited activity is identical with absolute repose; where the highest moment of being begins to border on nonbeing: there criticism is bound for self-annihilation just as



much as dogmatism is (SW I: 327).

At this point, all knowledge and morality cease. There is here nothing to know, nothing to strive for, no doubling and no reflection. The world goes down, and the opposition of dogmatism and criticism goes down with it. Schelling does not, however, want to allow this. Criticism is too important to let it blissfully perish. He needs to preserve the principle of criticism, the I—and thus to preserve and justify *the world* as the realm where the opposition takes place. This opposition gone, how would the idealists be able to strive so heroically? Dispossessed, blissful, how would they be able to save humanity from fanaticism and deceit?

Criticism must be preserved, and it can only be preserved by insisting on the unreachability of bliss. Oneness with the absolute must remain the vocation (*Bestimmung*) of the human being, without thinking of it as actually reachable, and without allowing bliss to annihilate the value of the world. “In criticism, my *vocation* is: *striving for* unchangeable selfhood, unconditioned freedom, unlimited activity” (SW I: 335; cf. 327)—a binding of the I to the world of striving. At the standpoint of bliss, unlimited activity would coincide with unlimited passivity and all selfhood would dissolve; something that criticism does not want to allow. *Strive*, but do not *reach*. In *Philosophical Letters*, Schelling theorizes bliss only to foreclose it, turning it into an unreachable regulative ideal. The unification of all philosophy is theorized only to be denied, since it would spell the annihilation of philosophy as such, and critical philosophy in particular.

Bliss is absolutely uncaring, a zero-point at which no world is possible or needed. Philosophy, however, ultimately cares too much about the world, seeking to uphold and justify it, since it is required for philosophy’s own survival. Therefore philosophy *encloses* bliss, divides the absolute in two—the I and the not-I—and takes sides, in the case of criticism, with the former. This division in place, philosophy *expands*, assimilating the not-I to the I (or vice versa): philosophy’s own colonial logic. For that, it needs the division to remain. It is on this division alone that it lives and feeds; and so it affirms finitude and life, over and against what it perceives to be nonbeing, dispossession, death. At the same time, it is this nonbeing that, denied by the world, remains the absolutely-Real on which the world is imposed—and where we simply are in our essence, prior to the imposition of a world.

The 1795 Schelling programmatically defers the power of bliss, refusing to insist on the annihilation of the world and investing instead into its survival. It is, ultimately, only the existence of the world that provides the possibility for criticism to avert the horrors of dogmatism. And it is only by acting as the bulwark against the end of the world that criticism can stave off humankind’s corruption. In this, criticism acts as what Carl Schmitt has called *the katechon*, that which withholds or restrains. Taken originally from St. Paul, this term indexes for Schmitt “the power to restrain the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon.”⁹ Accordingly, *the*

9 Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 60.

katechon has an ambivalent function: it is the defense against chaos, but also the indefinite deferral of salvation (*as* the end of the present world). It is this double function that criticism has, too. “For the sake of everything in the world I would rather not be blessed (*seelig*)!” repeats Schelling after Lessing, adding: “For someone who does not feel *just this way*, I cannot see philosophy to be of any help” (SW I: 326; note the philosophy–world conjunction here). Criticism opposes dogmatism, but therefore it must also justify the world and oppose bliss. In his diaries, Schmitt notes: “One must be able to name *the katechon* for every epoch ... The place has never been unoccupied, or else we would no longer exist.”¹⁰ Criticism occupies for Schelling this place in the contemporary epoch—the epoch of the battle against dogmatism.

Not that, however, criticism really cares about the world: what it cares about is its own striving—the expansion of the I vis-à-vis the external world—and it only needs the world (the structure of opposition) for this striving to be possible. In this, striving remains the operativity of absolute freedom, as nonrelation and preclusion, within the confines of finitude. And yet, not unlike in the case of moral progress, it is this (finite) freedom that serves, in practice, to foreclose absolute freedom—and to reproduce the world *as* the infinite not-yet. By means of morality and freedom, the immediacy of the apocalyptic demand is mediated into an indefinite eschatological horizon.

Conclusion

The world must be, conclude *Philosophical Letters*. Just as it began in *Of the I* with the demand of world-annihilation, Schelling’s 1795 metaphysics ends with a justification of the world in its finitude. At the same time, *Philosophical Letters* theorize bliss as the refusal of all worldly logics—including the refusal of justification, since bliss simply *is* and does not seek to justify itself (or anything else). As long as the world is there, however, it remains constitutively impossible to simply be blissful—to *simply be*, without any negativity or striving. Absolute freedom is foreclosed by the world, and bliss is deferred into an unreachable future. The point is, however, not to endorse this foreclosure, but to trace its structure: to see how, by thinking in terms of possibility, futurity, *telos*, etc.—in terms of a possible future—the subject reproduces the way the world is. Thus, if we want to think bliss, we cannot do so in terms of *telos*. Even for it to appear as a future goal from within the world—to be re-mediated by the world—bliss needs to be thought (or intellectually intuited) in its immediacy. This entails, however, an essential clash of bliss with the world. Considered immanently, in the absence of a world, bliss is free from antagonism, violence, hierarchy or striving—and yet, in the presence of the world, it turns into the immediate apocalyptic demand, the demand that the world, this world of antagonism and negativity, must not be.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium. Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1947 bis 1958* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015), 47.



Appearing from within the world as “death” and “nonbeing,” no wonder that the world has to re-mediate it to survive.

At the heart of this re-mediation, however, there remains for Schelling the core of absolute immanence, nonrelation, dispossession, nonwill. Both demands, *The world must not be* and *The world must be*, are premised on the fact of the world—so that, in order to think its possibility, we need to think opposition, negativity, and striving. And yet the core of our soul, the absolutely-Real which we access in intellectual intuition and in which the world is completely suspended, remains absolute identity and freedom. Even though it appears, from within the world, as the goal of all striving, as such this Real remains without relation to or care for the world. In neither of its modes of operativity (synthesis or morality) does the I care in the least about the world that it itself creates through synthesis. The world may be a mystery, but this mystery is, in effect, nothing but a hindrance, an inescapable nuisance—the I’s structural, constitutive unhappiness—the annihilation of the world amounting, for the I, to pure joy and bliss. The goal of all of the I’s fallen, unblissful striving in the world is: to break the vessels of finitude; to finally be at rest; to cut the Gordian knot of mystery and be absolutely free from the world, without justification. And yet the world is there, and the subject continues to struggle in its nets of mediation and the not-yet—doomed to infinitely long for bliss from within the world. This is, I would suggest, Schelling’s own philosophical struggle, too: why the world at all? why must it be?—and so, in his thought, he will continue to seek ways to justify finitude—to justify the world—even as bliss will remain for him pure nonrelation, refusing all justification and refusing the world.¹¹

11 Research for this article was supported by the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (grant 19-01-045, 2019–20) and by the Russian Academic Excellence Project “5-100.” I would like to thank Joseph Albernaz and Daniel Whistler for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. On bliss in the later Schelling, see furthermore Kirill Chepurin, “Indifference and the World: Schelling’s Pantheism of Bliss,” *Sophia* 58. 4 (2019), 613-630, and “Knot of the World: German Idealism between Annihilation and Construction,” in Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet (eds.), *Nothing Absolute: German Idealism and the Question of Political Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).