

1

Life as the Schema of Freedom

Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy



Subjectivism and the Annihilation of Nature

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling. One major reason for this renewed attention lies in the symphonic power of this thinker's work, the expanse and complexity of which provides a robust alternative to the anemic theorizing one encounters in contemporary academic philosophy. Too far-reaching to fit into the categories of either German Idealism or Romanticism, Schelling's oeuvre is an example of an organic philosophy which, rooted in nature, strives to support the continuous creation of meaning within a unifying and integrated framework. Realizing that the negative force of critique can never satisfy the curiosity of the human spirit, he insists that philosophy must itself be as capable of continuous development as life itself. Advancing such an ambitious project led Schelling to break away from the conceptual current of modern subjectivism to develop a way of doing philosophy firmly planted in the sensual world of human experience and nature. For it was only from such an organic standpoint that he believed he would be able to overcome and integrate the dualisms that necessarily follow from modernity's standpoint of the subject, posited as the otherworldly source of order and form required to regulate the chaotic flux of life.

As Kant realized, the ideal of unity is the condition of possibility of employing reason systematically. For Schelling, however, Kant failed to pursue the logic of his reasoning to its necessary conclusion, thereby denying continuity between the virtual world of pure reason and the existing reality of nature. Hypostatizing the patterns of his logic, Kant "prescribes" an unbridgeable duality between the object

world of *physica rationalis* and the subjective interiority of *psychologia rationalis*.¹ In doing this, Kant limits the unconditional demand both of the Transcendental Ideal and the Kingdom of Ends to the sphere of the thinking subject, thereby demoting the other 'Kingdoms' of nature to the status of mere means to be exploited by humans. While creating a powerful yet limited position from which a disembodied subject can "constrain nature to give answers," the destructive consequences of such an approach vis-à-vis nature were all too clearly visible to Schelling.²

In its essence, Kant's Copernican Revolution resulted in what Schelling calls "the pure inversion" of traditional dogmatism,³ an inversion in which the static and unchanging doctrines of a Wolffian form of scholastic metaphysics are replaced by the "dogmata" of Kant's a priori synthetic propositions which, according to Kant, are as "closed and complete" a "body of doctrine" as the logic of Aristotle.⁴ The consequences of this inversion produce an even more destructive dual-plane model of reality than that of dogmatic theology, since it culminates for Schelling in a new form of "dualism" he held to be a "necessary phenomenon of the modern world."⁵ Initiated by Descartes, formulated by Kant, and perfected by Fichte, the subjective idealism of modernity denies the objective reality and intrinsic value of nature, since as "a product of the I," the world of nature becomes nothing more than a "*Gedankending*" to be posited by the thinking subject "when needed."⁶ According to Schelling, this devaluation of sensuous nature has its roots in modernity's promotion of the thinking human subject to the rank of the absolute, an inflation of the cogito that leads to the vainglorious deification of the human subject at the subsequent cost of what Schelling presciently calls the "annihilation of nature":

Descartes, who through the *cogito ergo sum* gave philosophy its first orientation to subjectivity, and whose introduction of philosophy (in his *Meditations*) is in fact identical with the later grounding of philosophy in Idealism, could not yet present the orientations entirely separate—subjectivity and objectivity do not yet appear completely divided. But his real intention, his true idea of God, the world, and the soul he articulated more clearly in his physics than through his philosophy. In the comprehensive spirit of Descartes, his philosophy permitted the annihilation of nature, which the idealism of the above mentioned form [Fichte's] extols, just as truly and factually as it actually was in his physics. (I/5, 274)

The annihilation of nature addressed here has at its root the elevation of epistemology above all fields of philosophy, most notably ontology,

ethics, and aesthetics. No longer the primary reality of our being, nature becomes something derivative, dependent for *its* being on the thinking subject. This occurs when the subject's cogito becomes the sole arbiter of the being of what is real in our world. The first step in this process occurs when Descartes defines reality as the self-certainty of the cogito, understood as the subject's own reflective knowledge of self. Overcome by the methodological control of knowledge promised by this definitional dance, the price of breadth and depth in terms of what can be parsed by this new epistemological formula seems negligible. Yet if what is real and true can only be that which corresponds to this reflective self-certainty and can only be articulated through the predicates of discursive thought, then the thinking of the unity of nature becomes impossible. The "living band"⁷ of a transitive *being*, which as *natura naturans* connects humanity with nature, is thereby dissolved into the discrete moments of logos, of the *relata* of subject and predicate. Thus does the generative relating of the copula *qua* verb become transformed into a static and discrete operator of logical subsumption, while the unbridgeable divide between human subject and the object world becomes the condition of the possibility of true and certain knowledge.

Schelling's point seems to be that when one begins with the dualism of a Fichte, and accepts the disembodied cogito as determinative, then "all knowledge" derived from this principle will remain trapped within an "insoluble circle" of its own fabrication, with the result that the thinking subject, pressed up against the conceptual lens of its own making, can only look out at the world of sensuous nature as if it, the cogito, "didn't also belong to the world" as well (I/6, 144). Drawing attention to what would seem an obvious fact of our existence, namely, that our thinking also belongs to this world, Schelling demands that philosophy not only begin with, but also integrate, that which seems to be so radically *other* than thought, namely the living world of nature. And with this we come to perhaps the most relevant and important reason for the resurgence of interest in Schelling, which is his analysis of how subjectivism sets the theoretical stage for the actual destruction of our natural environment.

As obvious as it is prescient when considered from the beginning of the twenty-first century, Schelling claims in his *Naturphilosophie* that the otherworldly subjectivism of a Descartes or Fichte permits the dismemberment of the organism of nature into its purely accidental qualities, the worth of which equals the profit we reap from their control and manipulation. Nature thus becomes valued merely as an object to be used according to the "economic-teleological" principle

whereby, for example, trees in and of themselves have no worth save when turned into furniture (I/7, 18). In this way we reduce the world of nature to nothing more than the material stuff we exploit to satisfy our human desires, ultimately leading to, as we see around our world today, the threat of a real annihilation of nature (I/5, 275). The complicating yet all too obvious fact, however, is that we too are a part of this world, and cannot therefore rip ourselves out of the ground from whence we live and, in good Gnostic fashion, jettison our material existence for the sake of a more perfect theoretical elegance and absolute certitude. If the world of actual life is sacrificed in the name of logical consistency, philosophy is then left to deal "with the world of lived experience just as a surgeon who promises to cure your ailing leg by amputating it."⁸ Yet even then, once a philosophy surrenders the chaos of real experience to gain the methodical order of its reflected imitation, it will only find itself trapped within the prison of its own success. For example, while Kant perhaps succeeds in accounting for the possibility of a knowledge grounded in the *reflexio* of the thinking subject, he does so at the price of ever being able to account for actual knowledge, since to achieve this his transcendental edifice would have to integrate what its foundation rejects, namely, the organic world of lived existence and its sensual nature. In direct opposition to Kant's rather dogmatic proclamation that "real metaphysics" can only thrive when it is "devoid of all mixture with the sensual," Schelling challenges philosophy to return, as it were, to its senses, and integrate the metaphysical with the physical, in the hopes of creating a unifying, and thus meaningful, understanding of our world.⁹ The supremely difficult yet necessary challenge is thus to somehow to integrate the other of discursive thought, traditionally spoken of as the intuitive comprehension of the sensual. Epistemologically this is highly problematic. As Schelling points out, "If philosophy refuses to amputate existence, then it must begin by ascribing being to those elements of nature that are not known."¹⁰ The seeming impossibility of doing this, however, disappears when one stops equating philosophy with the *cogito* and its epistemology of certitude, and instead begins to do philosophy with the entirety of our natural faculties, conceptual as well as sensual, cognitive as well as affective. For it is only by pursuing such a strategy that we can begin to account not only for Kant's possible knowledge, but more importantly, that we can begin to wrestle with *actual* knowledge by attempting to lay bare the unity of existence that forms the basis from which all forms of dualism spring. The sensual and the understanding, intuition and concept, the physical and the metaphysical, logos and mythos: these are just some

of the more critical dualities that remain inexplicable unless we not only account for the shared ground upon which they interact, but also explain how the opposing members of such dualities work together.

This requires what Schelling calls "an inversion of the principles," which results in the overturning of modernity's ordering of the subject over being, and therewith of epistemology over ontology (I/1 156). In doing this, however, Schelling finds himself forced to begin his philosophical work in the cognitive no-man's-land of pure being, which can only be grasped through intuition, since there is no discursive access to the intransitive being of the copula which unifies subject and object. The grasping awareness of that which precedes the logos of thinking is fundamentally an aesthetic act of *poesis*, whereby the philosopher constructs for himself the intuition of this undetermined oneness. Paralleling the dynamic sequence of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, the philosopher's creation is initiated by the chaotic force of the sublime, which in overpowering all limit and measure must be then made complete by the balanced form of beauty. Directed against Kant's woefully inconsistent doctrine of method, Schelling employs synthesis and construction, putting the philosopher beside the geometer, arguing that both must first construct form and space in their intuition, in order to then subject their creations to the analysis of conceptual thought. Like the explosive power of the sublime, this initial moment of aesthetic production provides us with the very real, but very volatile stuff of our intellectual world, since as aesthetic, this subsoil of discursivity remains beyond the oppositional predicates of all thought that otherwise calms and comforts the knowing mind.

Forsaking the artificial certainties of beginning with an act of knowing, shaped as it is by the laws of logic, Schelling begins in the epistemologically problematic realm of being. It is only in that which cannot be determined that he can find the possibility of freedom, and it is freedom that will allow him to meld his strategy with the creative efforts of nature's own generative power, as well as provide him with an opening to establish ethics as the guiding force of philosophy. Freedom thus becomes the "alpha and omega of philosophy" in that it alone can create order within the chaotic field of existence, and thereby provide a unifying basis that can integrate the ensuing orders of ontology and epistemology. Following this strategy philosophy would finally integrate what metaphysics has almost always amputated, thereby freeing it to create a more comprehensive, robust, and ultimately meaningful account of existence.

Necessity and freedom, reason and faith, good and evil, being and

becoming: the positive status and reality of the second member in each of these dualities has too frequently suffered a fate similar to that offered to the aforementioned sick leg. The consequence of such philosophical malpractice is too frequently a weakened and crippled philosophy, no longer robust enough to support the transformative meaning Schelling demands of philosophy. Agreeing with those critics of academic philosophy who see in it nothing more than extraneous scholastic debates, he argues that a measure of the truth of a philosophy demonstrates itself in the inability of others to treat it as irrelevant. Addressing the seemingly natural tendency of most philosophies to devolve into such anemic scholasticism, Schelling argues that the question of unity forces us to ask of philosophy this very question of relevancy, thereby compelling us to investigate how an idea or method fits into our overall understanding of existence. The power to do this in an engaging and meaningful manner distinguishes those philosophies that offer us what William James calls "a live option" from those that, incapable of integrating experience into a symphonic whole, do not.

Case in point is Kant's baffling splintering of our experience into two worlds, the phenomenal and noumenal, leaving us with no way of accounting for our knowledge of the fact of freedom, since we only know it to the degree that it reveals itself in the phenomenal world. While Kant's strategy here might successfully rebut Hume's critique of causality, it fails to address our need to understand the reality of freedom, which is something that requires an account of how free will and necessity are integrated. Or again, refusing Kant's attempt to disassociate reason and philosophy from faith and religion, Schelling worked throughout his career to integrate religion and philosophy in such a way that they would no longer have to apologize for each other. Against the prevailing spirit of modernity, he sought to bring logos and mythos back to the negotiating table, working to keep their negative and positive tasks united in an uneasy alliance of belief and doubt. The same holds true for his groundbreaking examination of evil in his *Treatise on Human Freedom*, where, in a manner parallel to his treatment of existence and sensual nature, Schelling refuses to ignore radical evil as a mere privation of the good, and instead acknowledges the all too painful reality of evil's existence and its agonizing relationship with the good. These two vital yet problematic constants in our metaphysical tradition coalesce in a new understanding of the sacred, in which the deity, in order to account for its responsibility as a source of evil, must be conceptualized as a part of the ongoing process of creation that Schelling provocatively describes as a process of "dynamic evolu-

tion" (I/3, 61). As source and sustaining force of creation, Schelling's conception of the divine embraces our physical nature in that our world must, from this perspective, be seen as the ongoing self-revelation of that which is most sacred, namely, the source and sustaining power of all life.

The status of nature as the essential medium through which the sacred reveals itself brings us to Schelling's idea of *life as the schema of freedom*: due to the non-linear dynamic of self-organization, life so conceived "manifests the appearance of freedom," no matter how faint and seemingly chaotic (I/5, 527). Life, understood as being "that carries the ground of its *Daseyns* in itself," since "it is cause and effect of itself" (I/2, 40), not only introduces an irreducibly chaotic element into the linear frame of mechanical reasoning, but it also calls into question the limits of such a mechanistic explanatory framework. In Schelling's hands, a mechanistic environment distinguishes itself from an organic system in its reactive obedience to initial conditions and its incapacity for the progressive creation of new and original actions. Like a well-tuned engine that never misfires, a mechanism executes an action "in a circle, so that in every such cycle of actions there is only one action (always repeated)" (I/1, 470). While such a mechanism may break down, it can never break out of its predetermined course. It is also incapable of accounting for the fact of what Schelling calls the "individualization of matter" (I/2, 520), which he holds to be indicative of the "dynamic evolution" of nature. "Even within the same type" he writes, "nature knows of a certain unmistakable freedom, which maintains a certain leeway for differentiation . . . so that no *individuum* is ever absolutely equal to another" (I/10, 378). By positing this low-level freedom in nature as a type of chaotic force that propels the evolutionary differentiation of life, Schelling generates the conceptual resources required to integrate freedom and necessity into a unified account of nature, in which the noumenal and phenomenal intertwine in an organic, and thus chaotic, evolving cycle of self-differentiation.

In this reading, while limited regions of natural phenomena can be explained through mechanistic laws of nature, the entire process of our world's becoming can ultimately be understood in its systematic entirety only when we conceptualize it as a self-organizing, organic whole. Put simply, the progressive development of our world cannot be reduced to a sequence of antecedent causes, since if this were possible, the static structure of the law that governs this causal mechanism would require, like the disembodied cogito, that it not be "of this world" or itself subject to the progressive development which it governs. Thought

through consistently, to accept a mechanistic account of the laws of nature would require that we retain some vestige of a dual plane model of reality, as some form of a Platonic realm of eternal laws, which as inalterable axioms would themselves have to be exempt from the very change and evolution we employ them to explain. Schelling refuses to take refuge in such a traditional position not only because it begs the question of how these laws of nature came to be, but because such a bifurcated arrangement rules out the possibility of a future which is not determined by the past, denying the reality of freedom, and thereby removing the possibility of incorporating creativity and purpose into the very fabric of our natural world.

Standing conventional wisdom on its head, Schelling insists that the linear and mechanistic framework of physics can be adequately comprehended only when it is subsumed under the more comprehensive framework of organic life; or in William James's words addressed to C. S. Peirce, Schelling insists that "the inorganic" can only be understood as a "product of the living."¹¹ Far from being an enigmatic appendix to physics, the dynamics of organic systems must, according to Schelling, become the determinative model that ultimately organizes and accounts for our explanations of the universe. This does not deny the utility and worth of the physicist's investigation into the mechanical regularities of nature that are susceptible to linear, causal explanation. Schelling's point rather, is to draw our attention to the underlying roots of these patterns, which reach deep into nature's dynamic of self-organization. For once we consider the reciprocal form of causation and interconnectedness indicative of organic systems, we can then move from the ontological to the epistemological, and call into question the myth of the objective scientific observer who, from his Archimedean standpoint outside of our system of nature, is alleged to be capable of accounting for the world as it is in itself, devoid of human interests and values.¹²

The ramifications of this shift to an organic paradigm are major. Epistemologically, if we accept the irreducible interconnectedness of nature and acknowledge our starring role in this world—a role, it must be pointed out, demonstrated not in our power for creation, but rather proven by the distressing fact of our seemingly infinite capacity to destroy life—then we become faced with the prospect of what Schelling termed our *conscientia*, or *Mitwissenschaft* with nature. Refusing to accept the absolute skeptic's terms of debate, Schelling reframes modernity's epistemological quandary in accordance with the reciprocal dynamic of self-organizing systems, and our status as the organ of knowing within this system. This is why we are capable

of knowing with “direct certainty” that “there are things beyond us,” even though this knowledge “refers to something quite different and opposed to us” (I/3, 343). We are capable of knowing that which shows itself to be other than we are because we are “of this world,” having been created through the very same dynamic organization that has brought our entire cosmos into being. What unifies knowing subject and known object is this underlying order of organic nature that bonds us with the phenomenal world we live in. Our power to appreciate “the unfathomable intentionality, the unbelievable naiveté of nature in the achievement of its purposes,” points to “the view of a true inner history of nature” in “whose formation humanity can look into as into that of a related being” (I/10, 378; I/10, 381). As such we share the ontological DNA of our world, which in accordance with Empedocles’ dictum that only like can know like, provides us with the means for our *conscientia*, our knowing of and with nature, since it is nature itself that comes to know itself through our knowing of it.¹³ “Poured from the source of things and the same as the source, the human soul has a co-knowledge (*Mitwissenschaft*) of creation” (I/8, 200; I/9, 221). Most clearly demonstrated by the works of the genius, in the autoepistemic structure of nature our function is that of the organ whereby nature comes to know herself. And as so much of twentieth-century science has shown, the infamous epistemological divide between object and observing subject often reveals itself to be more a theoretically required heuristic than a factual ontological divide.¹⁴

Once we get beyond this epistemological heuristic, Schelling argues that we can begin to appreciate the ethical and aesthetic ramifications of this shift to an organic paradigm. For in overthrowing the supremacy of epistemology over ethics, we open the door to dethroning the Cartesian cogito from its lordly position vis-à-vis nature. In Schelling’s reading, the Cartesian cogito or Fichtean ego offer the clearest example of the philosophical pathologies of the modern self. By elevating the individual ego to the center of its solipsistic universe, the self denies its alienation from its source in nature, leading it to pursue its satisfaction by destroying precisely that from which it is estranged, namely, nature. If, however, we examine the ethical ramifications of the organic standpoint, the self begins from a position that acknowledges both our alienation from, and our fundamental dependence on, nature. Coming to terms with our relation to nature forces us to try to understand what in theory is somehow a part of us, yet is experientially and practically a world apart and different from us. At the heart of Schelling’s idea of Identity then is this task of realizing the unity of self and nature, and thus grasping how what is radically other is actually related to us.

Beyond the obvious yet unfortunately too often overlooked fact that in destroying nature we harm ourselves, we can see that implicit in Schelling's critique of subjectivism's treatment of nature is the demand to extend Kant's kingdom of ends to all the kingdoms of nature. This follows clearly from his call to cease treating nature merely as a means to serving humanity's "economic-teleological ends," as if it had no inherent value in itself. Schelling makes this point clearly in the *Freedom Essay*, calling for the decentering of the self, and therewith the removal of the self-imposed limitations, created by the cogito, that exclude not only the other of organic nature, but even the more familiar other, as in other human beings. In doing this we begin to overcome our alienation from other beings, and in this important sense Schelling claims that the realization of the unity of self and nature generates a knowledge that is in fact *redemptive*. The only way that we would ever be capable of realizing this, however, would be if we were to understand this not in a theoretical way, in the parlor-game manner, for example, in which a Descartes or a Hume doubts the existence of the world, but rather in an emphatic and experiential way, in which what is known is of such importance that one could never be "indifferent" about it. In the case of our relation to nature, this emphatic knowing is both experiential and redemptive. And with this, we begin to grasp the heretical nature of Schelling's philosophy, since it aims not just at theoretical knowing, but more importantly, it aspires to the creative act of realizing our oneness with nature, which, following Schelling's understanding of nature as the revelation of the divine, means the act of creatively realizing our oneness with the divine. This is something that we will only be capable of doing, however, if we become open to the other of logos, with its obscure language of mythos, which speaks with the voice of nature as it "sensualizes truth."¹⁵ This is a possibility that can only be entertained if unity becomes a telos of philosophy, thereby challenging it to harness the disclosive and transformative powers of logos and mythos.

Immanent Reconstruction

The ideal of unifying logos and mythos is only one of the reasons why it is so difficult to understand Schelling on his own terms. Working against the more skeptical and analytical tide of modernity, his acceptance of the mythic, the sacred, and the irrational, as essential and potentially life-enhancing factors at play in our existence, has always caused problems for the reader more in conformity with the dominant

Zeitgeist. Another reason for difficulty is the simple fact that until recently we have not had access to his earliest writings; a fact that partially excuses the standard reading of Schelling as a type of brilliant imitator of other philosophers' ideas, with no real thoughts of his own.¹⁶ Yet Schelling claims in his earliest essays that he is presenting ideas he has been wrestling with for some time before his exposure to a Kant or a Fichte. One of the central points we will explore in the following pages is the extent to which we can justify Schelling's claim to originality, a challenge that requires our examination of not only his earliest writings, but the milieu in which he was raised. But while appreciating the intellectual soil from which Schelling emerges is necessary to grasp the singularity of his thought, it is by no means sufficient. What is required for this is an *immanent reconstruction* guided by the internal coherence and meaning of his writings. Justifiable on its own terms, such a "hermeneutic of retrieval" is explicitly advocated by Schelling when he describes his own strategy of interpreting Kant:

it has never been my intention to copy what Kant had written nor [my claim] to know what Kant *had* properly intended with his philosophy, but merely [to write] what, in *my view*, he *had* to have intended if his philosophy was to prove internally cohesive. (I/1, 375)¹⁷

Applying this interpretative technique to his own work, our task is quite clearly to discover what Schelling "had to have intended if his philosophy" is "to prove internally cohesive." While such a task in the case of a thinker like Kant is daunting, it is nonetheless expedited by the astonishingly consistent pattern of thinking employed by this logician's analytic mind. Schelling's oeuvre, on the other hand, presents us with a quite different pattern of thought. Instead of the elegantly brutal purity of Kant's binary architectonic, we face a vertiginous pattern of seemingly contradictory principles and constantly evolving systems. Considered from a distance, it would appear that the attempt to discern *one* "internally cohesive" pattern in Schelling's system is destined to fail.

There are, however, other perspectives from which to view the systemic pattern of his work; the most fruitful no doubt would be from a standpoint *within* his body of work, at the very epicenter of his thinking. Thankfully, Schelling provides us with yet another glimpse into his own strategy of immanent reconstruction when he writes that the only way to truly "honor a philosopher" is to uncover his "fundamental thought":

If one wants to honor a philosopher, then one must grasp him there, in his fundamental thought (*Grundgedanke*), where he has not yet proceeded to the consequences; for against his own intentions he can go astray in the further development, and nothing is easier than to go astray in philosophy, where every false step has infinite consequences, where one on the whole finds himself on a path surrounded on all sides by chasms. The true thought of a philosopher is precisely his fundamental thought from which he proceeds. (II/3, 60)

The context in which Schelling makes this point is his critique of Hegel's system. Yet like Kant, Hegel is also a logician who desires to develop a set *method* of doing philosophy which, as he put it when still a gymnasium instructor, students can learn as easily as they do geometry.¹⁸ Consequently, if Hegel's philosophy should be as simple to learn as geometry, then the fundamental idea that informs it should also be just as simple to ascertain.¹⁹ To uncover the fundamental thought of Schelling, however, presents us with a much more difficult challenge, since in his mind philosophy is not a *techne* of mimesis, but is rather the ongoing practice or activity of a person constructing their own philosophical system.²⁰ The singular nature of his prodigious work thus presents a formidable test and challenge of his own hermeneutic strategy.²¹

Fortunately, Schelling himself once again offers a highly suggestive clue as to how one might approach his apparent "chaos of different opinions." This hint is found in the following extended passage from 1797, in which Schelling provides us with an account of how to read Leibniz in particular and the entire history of philosophy in general—an interpretative strategy that should also deliver the key to unlocking Schelling's own "fundamental thought":

One must have found Leibniz's 'perspectival center of gravity' from which the chaos of the different opinions, which from every other standpoint appear totally confused, exhibits consistency and agreement. In order to find what Leibniz found—that which even in the most contradictory system is actually *philosophical* [and] also true—one must keep in mind the idea of a universal system that provides context and necessity to all individual systems—as opposed as they may be,—in the system of human knowing. Such a comprehensive system can first fulfill the obligation of uniting all the conflicting interests of all other [systems], to prove that as much as they appear to contradict the common understanding, none of them has actually demanded something meaningless . . . For it is manifest that reason can propose no

question that would not already be answered within it.—Thus just as in the seed nothing emerges that was not already united within it, likewise in philosophy nothing can come to be (through analysis) that was not already present (in the original synthesis) in the human spirit itself. For this very reason, a *common (gemeinschaftlicher)* ruling spirit permeates all individual systems earning this name; every individual system is possible only through deviation from the universal archetype (*Urbild*), to which all, taken together, more or less approach. This universal system is, however, not a chain that runs upwards, where it hangs onward into infinity link-by-link, but is rather an *organization*, in which every individual member is in relation to every other [member], reciprocally cause and effect, means and ends. Thus too is all progress in philosophy only progress through *development*; every individual system which earns this name can be viewed as a seed which indeed slowly and gradually, but inexorably and in every direction, advances itself in multifarious development. Who has once found such a center of gravity for the history of philosophy is alone capable to describe it truly and according to the worth of the human spirit. (I/1, 457)²²

As we will briefly see, Schelling believed that he had found “such a center of gravity” of philosophy, and his choice of words to describe this universal archetype of systematic unity is rich in connotations. As the perspectival center of *gravity*, his universal archetype (*Urbild*) is the *one* integrating locus whose centripetal force permeates the *multiplicity* of systems, no matter how different or contradictory, providing them with the shared (*gemeinschaftlicher*) coherence that unites all of them into what can only be an organic system of human knowing. Like the initial conditions of a self-organizing system, this initial archetype reveals itself, in accordance with the principle of self-similarity, in every subsequent phase of this system’s evolution. This account of how to read Leibniz’s chaos of contradictions provides us with a clear articulation of Schelling’s own perception of what unites all systems of philosophy in every age, including his own; a position that implies that this particular account of the epicenter of philosophy must also hold as the focal point of his own system.

What precisely is this locus? Clearly Schelling is appropriating significant elements of Kant’s reified Transcendental Ideal, the *Vernunftseinheit* which is both ground and sum of Kant’s system, and which the old master himself described as an organic archetype (*Urbild*) of all reason. In the first *Critique* he provides the following description of this one “form of a whole of knowledge”:

If we consider in its whole range the knowledge obtained for us by the understanding, we find that what is peculiarly distinctive of reason in its attitude to this body of knowledge is that it prescribes and seeks to achieve its systematization, that is, to exhibit the connection of its parts in conformity with a single principle. This unity of reason has always presupposed an idea, namely, that of the form of a whole of knowledge—a whole which is prior to the determinate knowledge of the parts and which contains the conditions that determine a priori for every part its position and relation to the other parts. (A 645/B 673)

What Schelling in the previous discussion of Leibniz calls the “the universal archetype” of all philosophical systems is clearly in harmony with the position Kant here expresses. Moreover, both Schelling and Kant can only speak of this archetype through the use of Kant’s dynamic categories of community and reciprocity which explain organic systems. For example, Schelling’s “center of gravity” is the self-organizing principle which Kant sees as the “single principle” of a one “form of a whole of knowledge”; a unified whole of knowledge which, according to Kant’s account of the apprehension of the reciprocal causality found in a living organism, must be *prior* to our determinate knowledge of its constituent parts.²³ And again: both Kant and Schelling are very clear about the asymptotic quality of this archetype: instantiations of the genus ‘philosophy’ will strive, yet always fail, to live up to the ideal of systematic unity that reason demands of them.²⁴

Perhaps the most reliable demonstration of Schelling’s fidelity to Kant’s project are his own words that state the decisive role Kant’s “ideal of reason” played in focusing his earliest work. In 1847, some fifty years after writing the aforementioned passage, Schelling makes explicit “that point in the structure of the Kantian Criticism on which the later developments” of his system “connect as a necessary consequence”—a point which Schelling designates as “Kant’s doctrine of the ideal of reason.”²⁵ But although Schelling may be referring to Kant’s ideal of reason, and although Kant would agree with Schelling that this archetype can only be conceptualized and articulated through the dynamic categories of community and reciprocity, Schelling is much more consistent in actually doing this than Kant himself.

Essential to understanding Schelling’s starting point is his position that this ideal of “a universal system” is not accessible via Kant’s regressive method of logical analysis, which can only engage in a sort of *hindcasting*, always arguing backwards, from the conditioned to the

unconditioned.²⁶ Kant's "chain" of an "ascending series" of successive cause and effect relations, which "subordinated to each other as conditions of the possibility of one another," "runs upwards, where it hangs onward into infinity link-by-link"—such a regressive strategy will never succeed in grasping the unconditioned.²⁷ It will never succeed because, in accordance with Kant's regressive method, this approach to the unconditioned requires a discursive and subsumptive employment of prosyllogisms that proceed in *antecedentia*, an approach that assumes that the archetype of the unity of all thought can somehow be found in one member in this series of cause and effect relations.

Refusing Kant's exclusive reliance on such an analytic approach, Schelling adopts precisely that method of inquiry that Kant suggests, yet nonetheless explicitly excludes from his critical program: that of the progressive method employed by the dynamic categories. In contrast to the procedure of the mathematical categories, the dynamic strategy articulates the unconditioned unity of system through a *progressive synthesis*, which, beginning with the unconditioned itself, proceeds in *consequentia* to the conditioned. The only class of Kantian category capable of effecting this movement of thought is the dynamic category of community and reciprocal causation (*Gemeinshaft* and *Wechselwirkung*). The challenge in this strategy, therefore, is to grasp in one instant the whole in its entirety (a coordinated aggregate), just as one grasps the relationship of an organism's parts in their unity as a whole. To do this, the whole itself must be presupposed as the standpoint from which the movement of thought must begin.²⁸ And it is only from this epistemological position that Schelling can employ his *ordo generativus* to account for the "organization" of Kant's ideal of reason, "in which every individual member is in relation to every other [member] reciprocally cause and effect, means and ends" (I/1, 457).

Breathing life into Kant's nominalistic Transcendental Ideal, Schelling's use of a genetic method enables him to present this integrating force as a *developing organization* whose trajectory of growth aims at the *future*, a move that not only integrates the transcendental into the very center of the temporal world of living creatures, but conversely, enables Schelling to inject life and its dynamic development into the noumenal world of reason.²⁹ Consequently, his ideal system of knowing "inexorably and in every direction advances itself in multifarious development," propagating itself in the autopoetic act of self-differentiation that produces an ever greater diversity of knowledge. This universal archetype of reason, construed as the form of this dynamic and self-organizing system, shatters the static and dualistic

world of Kant's architectonic. While it makes possible the understanding of a historical development of reason, this strategy also supports the more metaphysical position of a transhistorical category of truth: as the organization of reason grows and individuates, the self-similarity of the archetype of unity, revealed in this system's organization, itself remains constant. And it is this integration and unification of the eternal with the temporal that informs the standpoint from which Schelling can then describe the entire history of philosophy "according to the worth of the human spirit." In doing this, Schelling seeks to demonstrate a unity of existence that overcomes the corrosive dualities of the understanding, and thus to overcome the estrangement that for him characterizes our existence:

With this acknowledgment of the eternal within all things, however, the philosopher sublates the last estrangement (*Entzweiung*) between the phenomenal world and the things-in-themselves. He recognizes that there are not two worlds, but rather one true world, which is not beyond or above the phenomenal, but is rather right here in this one. (I/6, 274)

This reading of Schelling's hermeneutical strategy suggests the considerable degree to which he is working within the conceptual structure Kant advanced to explicate his ideal of reason. Not only does it confirm the older Schelling's assessment of his initial point of departure, but it also recognizes that Kant's Transcendental Ideal constitutes an essential *element* of Schelling's "fundamental thought." But, as we see, his account of how to explicate the unconditioned element of this ideal differs quite significantly from Kant's. Whereas Kant's ideal is an *analytic* archetype, confined to the unchanging realm of the noumenal, Schelling's ideal is a truly *synthetic* unity, which through its archetype of autopoiesis and self-organization informs the evolution and development of all nature, including the noetic system of philosophy. Because Kant's unconditioned, the Transcendental Ideal, cannot *become in time*, it cannot be the center of gravity Schelling deems worthy of explaining philosophy's development past, present, and future. While Kant's Transcendental Ideal and his dynamic categories of relation offer a possibility for articulating Schelling's position, they nonetheless fail to completely satisfy his demand to find the center of gravity for the *history* of all philosophy. One of the more easily discernable reasons for Schelling's insistence that the archetype for the entire history of philosophy be provided no doubt stems from his conviction that he has uncovered the very form (center of gravity) of all philosophical

inquiry in the writings of Plato; an eternal form of reasoning he also finds confirmed in Kant's philosophy. Read and understood through the genetic philosophy bequeathed to him by his upbringing, Schelling utilizes a transcendental ideal made immanent to account for how the integration of the physical and metaphysical might occur and thereby engender a wholeness and completeness in philosophy that would make it capable of realizing the *ἐν καὶ πᾶν*.

Having grasped for the moment the fundamental role this idea of organic unity plays for Schelling, let us turn now to examine in more detail why this same thematic is also central to Kant and the project of German Idealism.

Kant and the Categorical Imperative of Unity in Reason

For Schelling it is in the labyrinth of the subject that we run into the duality as perplexing as it is important for Kant and all of modern philosophy, namely, that of the analytic and synthetic unity of self-consciousness. Although Kant claims "the *analytic* unity of self-consciousness must be preceded by a *synthetic* unity," he fails to explain this proposition adequately, "although," as Schelling rightly points out, "it contains the core of the Kantian philosophy" (I/1, 448).³⁰

The "core" demanded here must be a form of unity, capable of generating and sustaining the interplay of dualities at the heart of Kant's work, an originary synthetic unity that must also articulate the form of philosophy in general (*überhaupt*). As Kant himself proclaims in the *First Critique*, there "is a necessary law of reason" that "requires us to seek for this unity," since without such a unity "we should have no reason at all" (A 651/B 679). For "what is peculiarly distinctive of reason" is "that it prescribes and seeks to achieve" the "systematization" of its knowledge, "that is, to exhibit the connection of its parts in conformity with a single principle" (A 645/B 673). This principle, however, must be organic, since in this systematization of knowledge Kant must also be capable of accounting for "the self-development of reason" (A 835/B 863). With this, Kant announces what we might call the categorical imperative of unity in reason.³¹

To fully appreciate this unconditional demand for unity we need to turn to Kant's idea of the *maximum*. This most enigmatic and essentially indeterminate idea is defined in the first *Critique* as a supreme "idea of all ideas," whose function is to insure that all other ideas strive for unconditional completeness.³² The problem with Kant's nominalistic strategy, however, is that to create systematic unity, this idea of the *maximum* requires a binding force external to—and *other than*—his

conceptual structure: to avoid the intellectual vertigo of infinite regress, the unity of ideas cannot itself be guaranteed by yet another idea. At some point, the other of the idea must enter the equation.

In the third *Critique* Kant attempts to provide this maximum with more than merely prescriptive efficacy through the introduction of the aesthetic idea of the sublime.³³ Kant claims here that it is the "absolute whole" supplied by the sublime that will not only reveal the supersensible substrate of nature and our thought, but will also provide the purposive kick required to generate systematic unity. To articulate the magnitude of an absolute whole, however, Kant must elevate the dynamic category of *Community* and *Reciprocal Causation* to synthesize an idea of reason—an honor that he specifically denies it in the first *Critique*.³⁴ Yet while this move in the third *Critique* corrects the architectural flaw of the first, it also upsets the careful bulwark Kant initially constructed between the mathematical and dynamic categories and their respective methodologies of synthesizing the unconditional. For whereas the mathematical categories merely articulate a *potentially infinite* totality, the dynamic categories can account for an *actual infinite* that belongs to the nature of human existence—a fact that suggests to Schelling that this latter set of categories can be made constitutive of *other domains* of experience beyond the limited instance of the sublime. The following paragraph from the *System of Cosmological Ideas* in Kant's first *Critique* captures the radically different capacities of each class of category with admirable clarity:

We have two expressions, world and nature, which sometimes coincide. The former signifies the mathematical sum-total of all appearances and the totality of their synthesis, alike in the great and in the small, that is, in the advance alike through *composition* and through *division*. This same world is entitled nature when it is viewed as a dynamical whole. We are not then concerned with the aggregation in space and time, with a view to determining it as a magnitude, but with the unity in the existence of appearances. In this case the condition of that which happens is entitled the cause. Its unconditioned causality in the [field of] appearance is called freedom, and its conditioned causality is called natural cause in the narrower [adjectival] sense. The conditioned in existence in general is termed contingent and the unconditioned necessary. The unconditioned necessity of appearances may be entitled natural necessity. (A 418/ B 446f)

Kant's distinction between these two *cosmological ideas* of world and nature is one of the systematic openings Schelling takes full advantage

of in the construction of his method. As we will see, he employs these two ideas in his commentary on the *Timaeus* through his technical use of this very distinction between *Weltbegriff* and *Naturbegriff* to interpret Plato's *maximum* (TK, 36), which, in contrast to Kant, Plato provides to his cosmogony through the appeal to the unity of a *living organism*. Construed as the power of self-movement and organization, Plato employs the idea of a living *soul* to supply the absolute magnitude of *Einheit* (oneness) that binds his system into an ordered unity.³⁵ Synthesizing these two strains of thought, Schelling utilizes Kant's rehabilitation of the dynamic category in the third *Critique* as a justification for *inverting* the dynamic categories over the mathematical, thereby accounting not only for the absolute causality of Kant's freedom, but of Plato's account of the unity of organism as well. Building on Kant's distinction between *Weltbegriffe* and *Naturbegriffe*, he employs the progressive method of the latter to understand *life* itself as a form of Kant's *freedom*, here defined as "*absolute self-action*" (A 418/ B 446). For it is only the dynamic category of reciprocity and community that can articulate how a living organism can simultaneously be both cause and effect of itself, in the type of self-action indicative of self-organizing systems. Exploding the linear causality of the mathematical categories, the multivalent causality of nature as a dynamic whole provides Schelling with an understanding of life, as absolute self-action, as the schema of freedom. And it is this absolute *self-action*—articulated through Plato's triad of forms and Kant's category of *community and reciprocity*—that Schelling then uses to articulate his interpretation of Fichte's formula of identity, 'I = I.'³⁶ The end result is the application of Kant's inverted categories, beginning now with the dynamic categories of experience and relation, not mathematics and numerical identity, to articulate the Platonic form of self-organization. The *Urform* of the *Form Essay* thus betrays a lineage that begins with Plato's *Philebus* and extends through Kant's critiques.

Schelling finds in Kant's own critical program the textual and logical justification for this inversion: the architectonic of the critical program is baseless if it cannot incorporate what its own internal ordering demands, namely, its unification in, or by, an *absolute magnitude* provided by the *Naturbegriffe* of the dynamic category of *community and reciprocity*. If this method of unification is accepted, it follows that the categories of experience must then ground the abstract mathematical categories, and that the *Naturbegriffe* of these categories—specifically Kant's application of them to the purposiveness of organic life in the third *Critique*—should then provide the "*absolute self-action*" Kant himself advances as the absolute causality of freedom. Following Schelling's

reading, this absolute of freedom must then become the principle upon which a transformed critical edifice will be erected, and in which it will culminate; a construction, however, which not according to the regressive method of the mathematical categories, but rather according to the progressive method of the dynamic categories of experience. The resulting system thus develops from the form of a disjunctive (and thus oppositional) logic of community and reciprocity, thereby initiating a genetic dialectic in which form and content, concept and intuition, the intelligible and the sensual simultaneously impact and condition one another in a dynamic and purposive process of *generation*—the only such process commensurate with, and indicative of, its author's mode of existing in the world (intentionality). This and only this, according to Schelling, would be a truly synthetic method, grounded in the absolute of a freedom that is capable of integrating both the dualities of human existence, and of accounting for the unconditional unity philosophy demands of system.

Yet, as we will see, it is Kant's own regressive method that holds him back from satisfying his demand for a single principle that should account for the “form of all knowledge,” and therewith provide the systematic unity he himself claims is demanded by reason itself. His insistence that his philosophy only deal with the mathematical world and its sum total of appearances ensures that he will always only deal with the conditioned causal chain of observable natural causes, never grasping the unconditioned causality of nature “viewed as a dynamical whole.” His division between the noumenal and phenomenal world appears then to require two different causal realms, one whose causal sequence forever remains inaccessible, while the natural causes of appearances submit to ready observation and analysis. Schelling sees in Kant's division of causality into two different realms, one visible and natural, the other non-observable and thus otherworldly, a problem of philosophy he first encountered in the writings of Plato. Moreover, it is in Plato that Schelling finds a way of integrating these two realms of causation by discovering a form of unity that delivers what Kant could not, namely—in Plato's words now—how “the knowledges collectively are many” (*Phil.* 13e8).

Plato's ὁδός and the Eternal Form of Philosophy

In August of 1792, during his second year at the Tübingen *Stift*, the seventeen-year-old Schelling dedicates a notebook entitled “On the Spirit of Platonic Philosophy” with the following passage from Plato's *Timaeus*: