

Benjamin Berger, Daniel Whistler. *The Schelling-Eschenmayer Controversy, 1801: Nature and Identity*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. xvi + 269. Cloth, £80.00.

This excellent book focuses on a decisive moment in Schelling's philosophical development: his 1801 dispute with Eschenmayer shortly before publishing *Presentation of My System*, the inaugural text of his identity philosophy. Carl August Eschenmayer was a German physician whose Kant-inspired writings in the philosophy of nature greatly influenced Schelling, especially with respect to the doctrine of the potencies. Nonetheless, he is a marginal figure in the history of philosophy, and one might assume that this volume will only interest Schelling specialists or those concerned with the minutiae of nineteenth-century *Naturphilosophie*. That would be a mistake. As Berger and Whistler demonstrate, the 1801 controversy has significant implications for understanding the trajectory of German Idealism and its debates on methodology, the meaning of identity, and the place of nature in philosophy.

Part 1 contains translations of the two essays at the heart of the dispute, both published in January 1801. (Judith Kahl and Daniel Whistler are the translators.) The essay by Eschenmayer, *Spontaneity = World Soul, or The Highest Principle of Philosophy of Nature*, critiques Schelling's 1799 nature-philosophy and presents his own Fichte-inspired approach. Schelling's rejoinder is the essay *On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature and the Correct Way of Solving Its Problems*, which anticipates the new identity philosophy he would present later that year. Translations of the two thinkers' correspondence and selections from other works by Eschenmayer are included in appendices. Overall, the translations are precise and quite readable—an achievement for German texts with scientific jargon. Moreover, the translators are thoughtful in their rendering of tricky words like *Verhältnis*, which can mean “relation,” “proportion,” or “ratio” in different contexts (see xiii-xiv). Occasionally there are minor inaccuracies, but they do not detract from the texts' main arguments.

What, then, are the main points of disagreement between Schelling and Eschenmayer? In the preface, the authors identify a “twofold difference” (ix). The first concerns the relationship of

the philosophy of nature to transcendental philosophy. Eschenmayer follows Fichte in including the former within the latter: the I is ultimately responsible for nature's determinate features. By contrast, Schelling insists on the self-sufficiency of nature-philosophy and argues for its priority: consciousness and the transcendental standpoint are not original but derived from nature (9-10). The second difference concerns the source of qualitative difference among natural phenomena. While Eschenmayer reduces quality to mathematical proportions of attraction and repulsion, Schelling argues that such a reduction amounts to explaining nature's diversity through varying degrees of density (56).

The bulk of the volume (Part 2) is a series of chapters on themes related to the dispute and its aftermath. Though labeled "commentaries," they are really critical essays, providing historical context and analysis while engaging with an impressive range of secondary literature. The first is devoted to the construction of material qualities, the "guiding thread" of Eschenmayer's essay (83). The authors carefully trace the problem from Kant through the two philosophers' evolving conceptions of nature-philosophy leading up to the 1801 dispute. Though Schelling rejects Eschenmayer's account of quality in terms of attraction and repulsion, he is "greatly influenced" by his sparring partner's emphasis on quantitative difference in explaining quality, even adopting some of his mathematical concepts (89).

The most important of these is "potency," the subject of the next chapter and one of the central concepts in Schelling's thought for the next forty years. After an account of its roots in mathematics and Eschenmayer's nature-philosophy, the authors analyze core features of potency in the 1801 *Presentation*, contrasting it with *dynamis* in Aristotle. Fundamentally, the series of potencies involves differentiation through intensification of the same underlying identity: "Life is nothing more than intensified inorganic matter" (102). The chapter concludes with a strong defense of Schelling against Hegel's charge of formalism—though it still seems to me that the schema of the potencies is (at times) procrustean.

The third essay focuses on the nature of identity, specifically the non-dialectical "indifference" of the 1801 *Presentation*. The authors note the tendency among scholars of

German Idealism to privilege the Hegelian model of an identity that includes opposition—a model Schelling himself will adopt in various forms. In contrast, the authors argue that the indifference model is distinct and “not obviously inferior” (124), allowing for quantitative difference that is non-oppositional (136-7). It is part of Schelling’s “series of experiments in modelling the concept of identity” (132).

The last two chapters have to do with the foundations of nature-philosophy. The theme of chapter 4 is the concept of “drive,” which Eschenmayer employs to account for nature’s activity and diversity. Building on Fichte’s use of the concept, he places the “original drive” at the midpoint between the I’s spontaneity and nature’s passivity (146). It may appear as if nature has the source of spontaneity within itself, but its ultimate source is the I and its drive.

Schelling, by contrast, maintains that nature is originally active and the *I* is derived from nature. But how do we gain access to nature’s activity? This is the theme of the final chapter, “Abstraction.” In *On the True Concept*, Schelling claims that by abstracting from the subjective element in intellectual intuition one can break out of “the circle of consciousness” (49) and access nature as it is in itself. Though Schelling’s method here has met with harsh criticism by Hegel and scholars like Eckhart Förster, the authors offer an insightful—even poetic—defense. Through abstraction, philosophers “become nature” (173), immersing themselves in its depths so as to philosophize from its point of view. Questions remain about the possibility of such an abstraction, but the authors helpfully connect it to Schelling’s later interest in mysticism (181).

On the question of abstraction, the authors read *On the True Concept* in continuity with *Presentation of My System*, published five months later. And yet there is an element of apparent discontinuity they do not discuss, but which gets at the heart of the controversy. It comes down to the question—where does philosophy begin? In Schelling’s exchange with Eschenmayer, the answer is clear: nature. The product of abstraction is nature in its lowest potency, from which point nature-philosophy begins its series of constructions. In the *Presentation*, however, the result of abstraction is absolute identity as indifference, and the initial sections are dedicated to understanding this identity without a specific focus on nature-philosophy—a pattern followed in

the 1804 *Würzburger System*. So is nature-philosophy “first philosophy,” or should that designation be reserved for the initial account of absolute identity? Whatever the answer, it remains the case that nature-philosophy is prior to the standpoint of consciousness; moreover, the account of absolute identity is itself heavily indebted to nature-philosophy, as the authors have effectively demonstrated.

A final word about the nature of Schelling’s dispute with Eschenmayer. The word “controversy” in the book’s title calls to mind the intellectual firestorms set off by Jacobi’s accusations of pantheism and atheism. This exchange has a very different character. Berger and Whistler show how much the two philosophers learn from each other despite their fundamental disagreements, and one senses their friendship and mutual respect. To be sure, this volume makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the development of German Idealism—but it also provides a model for dialogue and philosophical collaboration.

MARK J. THOMAS

*Central College*