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**The Theory of Ideas in Schelling's Identity System –**

**A Wittgensteinian Interpretation**

**AMIR YARETZKY**

**Introduction**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Schelling arrived at the understanding that both nature and the subject originate from a single source, which he refers to interchangeably as God, reason, or the absolute.[[1]](#footnote-1) This source is characterized by an identity in which all differences between metaphysical contraries are nullified. This newly developed stance allowed Schelling to merge his Spinozistic tendencies, viewing nature or substance as the self-grounding origin of all things, with his Fichtean tendencies, viewing the subject as the self-grounding origin of all things. Central to this newfound understanding is a theory of ideas, or archetypes, which explains the role of individuals within the philosophy of identity. The notion of an idea or archetype remains significant throughout Schelling’s career, from the *Naturphilosophie* of the late eighteenth century, through to the *Freiheitsschrift*, and up to his lectures on positive philosophy. However, it is in the context of identity philosophy that this concept receives its most thorough treatment.

In this paper, I argue that identity philosophy can, and should, be read as a theory of meaning, delineating what it means for anything to make sense or be intelligible. This will place it alongside interpretations of Hegel that read him as “making sense of making sense”[[2]](#footnote-2) - as making sense of the making sense *of the world*, which entails a presentation of being as something intelligible. The intelligibility of the world means that it is not *other* to thought, something given to it from the outside, but rather that it is in some sense identical with it. However, Schelling’s position offers an alternative to a common contemporary Hegelian conception of what making sense of making sense amounts to; namely, Schelling’s philosophy is not logic. This conception is succinctly formulated by Robert Pippin as the idea that the “identity” between thinking and being “is an identity of logical form,”[[3]](#footnote-3) where logical form is that which is made explicit in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Precisely what Hegel’s conception of logic amounts to is a controversial topic.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nevertheless, it is clearly an articulation of the determinations that comprise what it is to think at all. Insofar as being is reflected in thought and vice versa, it is an articulation of what it is to be anything at all.

Schelling’s conception of the identity of thinking and being—that is, of the conditions of sense—is articulated as a theory of ideas, distinct from a logic in the familiar sense. This alignment finds an unexpected ally in Wittgenstein, and particularly in his earliest work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. By juxtaposing identity philosophy with the *Tractatus*,Schelling’s relevance for analytic interpretations of German Idealism becomes apparent, highlighting the overlooked unique features of his position in relation to that of Hegel’s.

The paper will proceed as follows: Section 1 will give an exposition of Schelling’s philosophy of identity, focusing on his theory of ideas. Section 2 will present an interpretation of the first part of the *Tractatus*, namely its conception of form and object and their unity. This will show form to be a non-extensional space of possibility, leading to a unique understanding of the relation between actuality and possibility. This will serve as crucial foundation for the interpretation of Schelling’s theory of ideas as developed in Section 3, where the three main attributes of ideas will be expounded: (1) their embodiment of the principle of identity, (2) their status as totalities or universes in themselves, and (3) their conception as individuals *within* a unified totality that are essentially one with it. These features will be explained and shown to underly the conditions for anything to be meaningful.

I

Schelling’s first and most schematic articulation of the identity philosophy is found in the 1801 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*. There, the proposition A=A is described as the “sole truth posited *in itself*”[[5]](#footnote-5) and the essence of reason. Unpacking this proposition, if it can be called a proposition at all, is the main task of identity philosophy. Schelling refers to the first A as the subject and the second A as a predicate. Schelling provides various interpretations for this pair throughout his identity philosophy. The first A is understood as the subject, the affirming, the act, or the ideal, while the second is the object, the affirmed, being, or the real. The identity, then, is the identity of subject and object, acting and being, and ideality and reality. This has different manifestations in different philosophical contexts, such as the identity of possibility and actuality or concept and object, and in Schelling's *Naturephilosophie*, the identity of production and product. What this identity might mean will be explained in what follows, but for the time being, it should be made clear that it is not the identity of being the same nor an empirical relation of any kind.

Schelling goes on to claim that “*Absolute identity is absolute totality*,”[[6]](#footnote-6) referring to absolute totality as “the universe.” Here, we find that the absolute, conceived as A=A, is not merely an identity of aspects but also a totality of beings. In other words, it is not merely the two aspects of identity but the whole of the universe. However, it is noteworthy that individual beings or “things” are said to exist outside this totality. Schelling states,

There is also nothing in itself outside totality, and if something is viewed outside the totality, this happens only by an arbitrary separation of the individual from the whole effected by reflection. But in itself this separation simply does not happen, since everything that *is* is one.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Thus, the reality of things is tied to their belonging to an indivisible totality. This is argued to stem from the fact that individual finite things are not in their essence absolutely identical and given that absolute identity is the only true essence, they are deemed illusory entities.

Nevertheless, this does not take individuals out of the picture entirely. One might conceive of individuals as essentially unified within the absolute indivisible universe. Their essence would coincide with the essence of the whole, which is none other than absolute identity: “Absolute identity is even in the individual, since every individual is but a determinate form of its being, and it is entirely in every individual, since identity is simply indivisible and can never be suspended as absolute identity.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Here, individuals appear to play some role in the identity system after all, given that they are the determinate form of the being of absolute identity. This view is developed into a theory of ideas or archetypes in subsequent writings from the period.

The philosophy of identity, then, is not merely a reductionist program aimed at doing away with “things” or particulars that comprise the content of our conscious experience. Instead, it seeks to reveal these things in their archetypal form. This approach can be viewed simply as a continuation of the task of nature philosophy, wherein the determinations of nature are intended to be revealed as archetypes indissociable from the totality of nature.

In the 1802 *Further Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, Schelling writes:

No aspect of the particular entity, therefore, not even its species or natural kind, is within the absolute. There is no plant in itself or animal in itself; what we call plant is mere concept, mere ideal determination. All forms obtain reality only because they receive the divine image of unity, but, owing to that, they themselves become universes and are designated ideas; each ceases to be a particular entity in that it enjoys the double unity in which absoluteness consists.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Clearly, nothing that belongs to a possible description of the plant belongs to its ideality. This is essentially because the absolute does not admit plurality and cannot be subdivided in accordance with concepts. Thinking of a particular entity in terms of its description implies thinking of it as limited, as accepting some predicates rather than others. Ideas, on the other hand, are “universes,” which means that they are totalities—there is nothing that they do not contain. Thus, the philosopher

does not construct the plant or animal, but the universe in the figure of a plant, the universe in the shape of an animal. These schematisms are possible only in virtue of their ability to receive the undivided fullness of unity. Thus, they are negated as particular. For as particular, they would limit absolute essence, since they exclude other forms from themselves.[[10]](#footnote-10)

From the perspective of the absolute, all individuals are the same, because only their essence, as the self-identical universe, matters. From the perspective of finitude, identity falls apart. Nevertheless, there are different ways in which this can be understood. One such way is fully illusory, succumbing to the forms of knowing the world through “reflection” or through understanding rather than reason. This approach conceptualizes the difference between individuals in terms of what Schelling calls qualitative difference (i.e., as predicative difference). The second interpretation is that which is taken up by the philosophical method and views individuals as differing quantitatively. Such a view keeps the conception of individuals as essentially the same, without imposing metaphysical categorical borders between them and seeing their differences as matters of degree. Thus, those who insist upon a categorical difference between items such as causes and reasons or even thinking and being will not find an ally in Schelling. That is not to say that Schelling is a materialist, a panpsychist, or even a neutral monist. Schelling’s ontology, to the extent that he has one, revolves around ideas and thus the perfect identity of thinking and being, the ideal and the real.

However, any ontological interpretation of the meaning of quantitative difference might mislead us into thinking that we are dealing with an objective or substantial difference. It is natural enough to assume that a difference in degree implies a difference in description, much like the difference between the temperature of two bodies. But we must keep in mind that quantitative difference is not a difference between properties of objects. Rather, two aspects of an object, or potencies, would differ in respect to the degree one or the other of the two As in the proposition A=A (the subject or the objective, ideal or the real, producing or produced – they all amount to the same thing) predominates, where “*Subjectivity and objectivity can be posited as predominant only in opposite tendencies or directions*.”[[11]](#footnote-11) To be more subjective or more objective is not a property of the potency (say, of the organism or a work of art) but rather two ways in which the potency is expressed—it offers two perspectives on it.

To conclude, ideas possess a threefold nature: (1) they express the principle of identity, (2) they constitute totalities or universes themselves, and (3) they are individuals conceived *within* a unified totality and are essentially one with it. This threefold nature of the idea has often been overlooked, resulting in a partial and distorted understanding of what ideas are. Attempts to make sense of (3) have led to the misconception that ideas have the same “content,” the essence of the absolute as identity, which is seen as a structural or formal feature shared by all ideas beyond their differing “forms” or manifestations.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, this contradicts (1), as there can be no duality of form and content or essence and appearance within the idea. Consequently, one cannot speak of ideas as having a common element because nothing can be abstracted from their differences.

Another problematic understanding of ideas stems from Schelling’s characterization of unity in terms of organism.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although (3) could be explained in terms of the organic unity of the absolute, it is difficult to see how the organs of an organism could themselves be universes. While Schelling does articulate (3) in terms of organism, he sometimes articulates (2) in terms of the self-sufficiency of ideas, using the metaphor of planets that are “care free and self-sufficient.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This creates a tension that has not received sufficient attention in the literature.

Finally, these interpretations cannot account for what is perhaps the strangest feature of ideas—that they are without number. We shall explain how this is to be understood in light of the threefold nature of ideas in what follows.

**II**

The topic of the unity of thinking and being has been a staple of philosophy from its very beginning. Despite twentieth-century analytic philosophy’s aspirations for metaphysical modesty and methodological sobriety, the topic remains pivotal. One of the most prominent takes on the question is perhaps found in Wittgenstein’s early work, the *Logico-Philosophical Tractatus*. This work differs from Schelling’s works in its motivation, its areas of interest, and its method. However, although this difference should not be ignored, there is an underlying affinity between the worldviews found in the *Tractatus* and the works of identity philosophy. Therefore, this section will be devoted to presenting a certain reading of the *Tractatus*, which will serve as a key for unlocking some of Schelling’s highly dense and abstract claims about the identity of the ideal and the real.

The terms “real” and “ideal” do not appear in the *Tractatus*. Thoughts are conceived in terms of propositions that are themselves depicted as “pictures” of facts. These propositions represent how these facts are, but they are not ontologically distinct from them; pictures are also facts. One notable difference from Schelling’s approach, as seen in the *Bruno* for example, is that the issue of fit between thought and reality is considered in terms of the unity of intuition and concept. This is akin to considering it in terms of the fit between function and argument within a proposition, rather than how a proposition aligns with a fact. In the *Tractatus*, there is no inquiry into how a general item (a concept) can match with a particular one (an intuition). More importantly, there is no discussion about how pictures correspond to reality at all; there is no metaphysical gap to bridge. However, there is an aspect in which the picture is *identical* with the pictured reality—form.[[15]](#footnote-15)

It is important to note, however, that despite Schelling’s adoption of the terminology of concept and intuition, he is not a Kantian in his theory of representation and does not inherit Kant’s problems. Namely, he is not concerned with showing that concepts can legitimately be applied to intuitions; instead, he aims to show that, from an absolute perspective, concepts and intuitions are essentially the same—that is, that their unity precedes them and that their disparity is merely illusory. This already brings him closer to the arguments of the *Tractatus*. Something along these lines can be found also in Hegel and in contemporary analytic Hegelianism, where the unity of thinking and reality is understood in terms of the inherent conceptual form of being as such. In this view, the conceptual form of true propositions or judgments is identical with reality in its conceptual content. Schelling differs from this kind of Hegelianism, however, insofar as he regards the conceptual content of thought merely as an aspect of that which unifies thinking and being—namely, the idea. Thus, the unity of thinking and being is made intelligible not by articulating the conceptual structure of judgments and syllogisms, or by showing reality to act as truth conditions or justifications of judgments, but rather by presenting the realm of ideas that makes judgments possible in the first place.

To make sense of this view, we can turn to the *Tractatus*’ notions of objects and their form. In the *Tractatus*, *s*tates of affairs are combinations of objects, where these combinations are ontologically prior to the objects themselves. This implies that objects are not independent entities that are subsequently combined. Furthermore, objects are not combined by some third element (say, an external relation or act of synthesis), but are rather internally combined.[[16]](#footnote-16) They have no reality outside their particular combinations. According to Wittgenstein: “The possibility of its occurring in a state of affairs is the form of the object.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This means that the form of an object constitutes a space of possibilities regarding its occurrence in states of affairs. Wittgenstein illustrates this with the example of space, where objects are depicted as points. Clearly, all possible interactions of points are inherent within the points themselves, simply by virtue of their being points in space. These possibilities encompass *all* the possibilities these points possess, as they are essentially spatial and have no reality outside their spatial form.

A particular combination of objects is called a “structure.” Given that form encompasses all of the possible combinations of an object, Wittgenstein also defines it as the “possibility of structure.” This serves as another reminder that we should not think about objects outside their possible combinations. There is no sense in thinking about an object with form X combining with an object of form Y. Combinations are intelligible only against the backdrop of a determinate form. Thus, when we think about a picture or proposition, we think about it as representing a certain structure. A false picture represents a possible structure, and its possibility constitutes the picture’s form, which it shares with reality: “What a picture must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it—correctly or incorrectly— in the way it does, is its pictorial form.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This view differs from one in which a proposition is related to reality when it is true (such as when its content corresponds to a fact),[[19]](#footnote-19) as it establishes the identity of a proposition with reality independently of its truth. What matters is that the proposition is a possible one, rather than a true one. Hence, in a sense, a proposition and its negation are unified in the way in which they are identical with reality.

There is an important connection in the *Tractatus* between the form of a representation and the unity of a proposition with its negation. The *Tractatus* famously presents a theory of negation that aims to overcome the problems raised by Frege’s and Russell’s views on the matter. Namely, it seeks to understand negation in such a way that its logical unity with the negated proposition is maintained (i.e., that ~P is not simply incompatible with P but contradictory to it). In other words, the possibility of ~P is fully determined by the content of P. This requires a negative proposition to have the same content, in some sense, as the negated proposition. This means, and this is crucial in the *Tractatus*, that negation does not affect in any way the content of a picture. Accordingly, there is nothing in what is represented—in that delimited part of the world—that corresponds to the sign of negation.

The unity of the contradictory pair of P and ~P, and the fact that negation is not a matter of altered content, is captured in the formulation of negation as a reversal of the negated proposition.[[20]](#footnote-20) This notion of the directionality of sense allows Wittgenstein to talk about difference in terms that do not affect the content. Another formulation of that point is: “The propositions ‘p’ and ‘∼p’ have opposite sense, but there corresponds to them one and the same reality.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

This analysis of negation does not yet tell us how negation is *determinate*. For example, how is it that something not being blue means that it is of some other color, rather than another shape or type? “The sense of a proposition,” Wittgenstein tells us, “is its agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs.”[[22]](#footnote-22) How, then, are these possibilities determinate? Because a negative proposition cannot represent a content different from the negated proposition, we cannot conceive of it as representing the disjunction of all other possibilities relative to some form. For example, we cannot interpret the phrase “This book is not red” as meaning “This book is blue or green or yellow or…”[[23]](#footnote-23) It has been suggested that negation in the *Tractatus* should be conceived in terms of “otherness”—that is, as not specifying any set of possibilities but as simply saying that things are otherwise than the negated proposition.[[24]](#footnote-24) This otherness is delimited by the form of the negated proposition, without necessarily containing any positive content in terms of possibilities.

This reading requires us conceive of a space of possibilities as something that can be grasped or realized without going over its particular possibilities. This view fits with Wittgenstein’s rejection of the extensionalist understanding of possibility.[[25]](#footnote-25) The extensionalist view would think of a space of possibility as a totality (perhaps infinite) of possibilities inherent within the space itself. This would be like thinking that the possible uses of a word are all given in advance, somehow contained in the meaning of the word, and perhaps explicit only for a divine creature given their infinite number. A non-extensionalist approach, on the other hand, might deny that they are given in advance and that they are in fact decided only on the spot, with each new use, with the risk that we have failed to use the word properly.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, Wittgenstein’s notion of negation demands that possibilities be fully determinate. Thus, there must be a sense in which the totality of a space of possibilities is given to us at once. In other words, each possibility is contained in the rest. We use our words without having to decide, with each use, whether we are using them correctly.

Let us think again of the example of space: the possibility of any structure in space is contained within the very idea of space, and thus within every spatial determination. To fully grasp the totality of these possibilities, we do not require a divine point of view. Consider the example of space as the form of objects: there is some sense in which a triangle is a possibility of space, while it is nonsensical to speak of a merely possible triangle in geometrical (not empirical) space. There is no transition from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality with the triangle; rather, the whole space of possibility is given with every determination of that space, without thereby implying a knowledge of infinite objects.

This has important implications for how we understand modality: rather than beginning from a space of possibilities where some will be actualized and others will not, we start from actuality itself. This concept is encapsulated in the opening lines of the *Tractatus*: “The world is all that is the case.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Somehow, that which is not the case is derived from that which is the case. We might initially think that we move from P to the counterfactual ~P. However, Wittgenstein clearly states that “From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs it is impossible to infer the existence or nonexistence of another.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This statement would be impossible to understand if we conceived of the world as comprising separate entities, whether objects or facts. This is because negation and logical relations as a whole do not apply to states of affairs that are logically independent. Accordingly, elementary propositions that assert the existence of states of affairs cannot contradict each other.[[29]](#footnote-29) Once we conceive of the world as a totality, the nonexistence of states of affairs becomes intelligible: “The totality of existing states of affairs also determines which states of affairs do not exist.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The later Wittgenstein’s insights can shed light on this discussion. Think about the notion of learning a language: how is it that from a finite set of examples, we know how to go on applying words in new contexts, following a rule? Much like in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues against isolating linguistic practices, as if we can learn a rule in isolation from the whole of language, or in other words, our whole form of life. Attributing our ability to go on in a certain way to a natural capacity would be mistaken, because this would isolate it from the whole of linguistic practice. Learning to use color words, for example, may indeed involve our natural endowments, but according to Wittgenstein, it is unintelligible apart from a boundless host of other linguistic practices. [[31]](#footnote-31)

This prevents another way to reify or substantialize a space of possibilities. One might think that even if we take such a space to be non-extensional, we could still conceive it as an objective entity and as being independent of our attitudes toward it, as with a natural capacity. But Wittgenstein’s insistence on the priority of the whole over any specific sphere of possibility shows that no such sphere can be intelligible on its own. Thus, there is no way in which a space of possibility can be understood as an entity *in* the world, something isolated and self-standing.

**III**

Throughout identity philosophy, the identity of the ideal and the real is conceived as an indivisible totality,[[32]](#footnote-32) where each segment contains that totality within itself.[[33]](#footnote-33) No matter how we cut up that totality, there will be no loss of content because each piece reflects the whole. The importance of a non-extensionalist conception of ideas is evident in Schelling’s understanding of the relationship between the elements of identity, referred to as potencies. He describes this relationship in terms of a tension of forces or inclinations, sometimes using the metaphor of a magnetic field. A magnetic field is not an infinite set of discreet locations with gradually changing values. Rather, it is a continuum of force where each point internally related to the others. Each point “contains” the rest.

In both the *Naturphilosophie* and the identity philosophy texts, identity is primarily discussed as the identity of an active (ideal) aspect and a passive (real) aspect.[[34]](#footnote-34) But it is important not to think of the active part, which in the *Bruno* is simply referred to as “act,” as a teleological process. It is sometimes opined that Schelling’s view of nature as productive is akin to natural processes such as the birth of stars or beavers building dams.[[35]](#footnote-35) If that were true, however, Schelling would have a rather strange view of empirical nature as a static world devoid of motion and events. It is more charitable to read Schelling as claiming that a product is anything that can be an object of empirical judgment. Clearly, a beaver building a dam can be an object of representation as evidenced by the simple fact that I can get it wrong—for example, I could believe that the beaver is merely pushing around wood.

The importance of the notion of activity, then, lies in perceiving an infinite multiplicity of moments in time as a single internally unified event. Thus, Schelling claims that nature as active represents an “original infinite series” that “does not arise through *aggregation*, but through evolution, through evolution of a magnitude already *infinite in its point of origination* which runs through the entire series.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This infinite series is not to be conceived extensionally, as an aggregate of steps, but rather as a continuum in which the infinite series is already contained within the very first step:

This way of seeing is lost on the empirical sciences, according to Schelling, and requires a different method. This view is evident in Schelling's rejection of the evolutionist view of organisms according to which the different organisms have developed in stages. He argues: The assumption that different organisms have really formed themselves from one another through gradual development is a misunderstanding of an idea which actually does lie in reason. Namely, all individual organisms should together amount to one product. This would be thinkable only if Nature had had one and the same archetype for all of them, as it were, before its eyes.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Schelling contends that what appears in time as change is in fact the different manifestations of one single archetype. Development, therefore, is actually a single act in which each moment is internally related to all others and reflects all others. From this perspective, while metazoa may appear to display the unity less clearly, they inherently contain all later forms within themselves.

This idea of the archetype implies that what is at stake is not simply the unity of what *actually* took place in the natural history of the organism, but rather what any *possible* variation on the organism might be.[[38]](#footnote-38) It represents a space of possibility that emerges from the perception of a totality of actual items as internally unified. This is captured in Schelling’s terminology of *potency*, suggesting that the stages of nature should be seen as potentialities. This notion is elucidated further in *Bruno*, where Schelling claims that “If you consider the real situation and view the finite in the context of its absolute identity with the infinite, the boundless possibility of other individuals that one given individual contains is immediately joined to its realized actuality.”[[39]](#footnote-39) These individuals are not only causally related to the one individual but also individuals that the one individual can *become*. Like in the *Tractatus*, the object and the possibilities that determine it are properly comprehended only when seen as identical. That is to say, on the one hand, the object does not exist outside its space of possibilities, and on the other hand, this space is nonextensive and completely contained in the actual object itself.

Another affinity with the *Tractatus* arises when examining the relationship between a proposition and its negation in Schelling’s *Bruno.* Schelling asks the following questions:

What about our ability to think of something that does not exist? Can we consider it a perfection of our nature or must we account it an imperfection? And what about the fact that we have the concept of nonbeing alongside that of being, that we can as easily judge that something is unreal as we can judge that it is real?[[40]](#footnote-40)

These questions are answered by denying the possibility of negation within the realm of ideas, given that ideas are the unity of concept and intuition. It is implied that negation assumes that a concept can be posited without a correlative intuition, and thus that the two are intelligibly separable. But this does not mean that negation must simply be taken out of the picture: “With respect to the supreme idea, then, we will find that the distinction of being and nonbeing makes as little sense as does the concept of impossibility.”[[41]](#footnote-41) It is the distinction between something and its negation that is taken out of the picture. This should not be taken to mean that P and ~P become indistinct but rather that their underlying unity is revealed to be what is essential. Like in the *Tractatus*, this unity is not an object of representation itself, nor is it something else over and above being and nonbeing. Rather, it is the identity of the two, completely contained within the actual being of the individual (or, in Tractarian terms, within P).

This helps us to properly read Schelling’s claim that there is no negation within absolute identity: “Nothing that *is* can be negated in its being. For it cannot be negated without absolute identity ceasing to *be*.”[[42]](#footnote-42) This does not mean that the absolute contains only the objects of positive judgments. Recall that in the *Tractatus*, a proposition is essentially related to its negation, which means that there is no act of representation that can be conceived without a negation. As we saw, negation is derivative in some sense from the original fact that the world is all that *is* the case. Thus, the pure positivity that grounds both possibility and negation is not itself an object of representation. But this does not mean, as should now be made clear, that the absolute lies outside the domain of what can be represented. It is not some content over and above that which we represent in our propositions. Rather, the absolute is a content lying *within* our representations, which is obscured by our tendency to view the world in terms of judgeable content or, as Schelling puts it, as separated.

Here, I agree with Daniel Whistler’s assessment that in the identity philosophy, the absolute is “immanent.” That is, Schelling does not espouse a “two-world” metaphysics; the absolute “does not in any way name something distinct from reality.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Nevertheless, I think that Whistler goes too far when he denies the importance of the absolute in the identity philosophy, claiming, for example, that “the absolute ‘as such’ is a fiction (and a pernicious one at that); it is nothing or 0.”[[44]](#footnote-44) A similar devaluation of the absolute can be found in readings that emphasize the creative activity of the philosopher in constructing the system, viewing the productivity of nature as a process in progress, as if its true grammatical tense is that of the present progressive.[[45]](#footnote-45) This is hard to fit with Schelling’s repeated statements about the eternality of ideas and the non-temporal nature of the absolute.

To be sure, if we adhere to our Tractarian interpretation of the identity philosophy, the absolute *must* be acknowledged as real rather than a mere fiction. Without this acknowledgment, there would be no “making sense.” In fact, Schelling is quite clear in asserting that the highest, or even the only, reality belongs to ideas. Thus, it is inadequate to perceive reality as exclusively belonging to finite items *within* the world, treating the absolute merely as a regulative principle or an abstraction from these finite items. Nevertheless, it remains true that the absolute is not real in the same way. It is not a “thing” or a fact.

**IV**

Thus far, our focus has mostly been on the “identity” aspect of ideas. It was argued that the identity of the ideal and the real, or production with the product, can be understood in terms of the *Tractatus*’ notions of object and form. Ideas, then, are the unity of a thing with its space of possibilities. According to this reading, ideas form the foundation for making sense of the world, given the fact that any possible representation is conditioned by them. However, this perspective does not fully capture Schelling’s comprehensive account of ideas. We shall now look deeper into the two remaining features of ideas—their self-sufficiency and their unity.

An idea, Schelling claims, is a universe. But what does that mean? It should be clear by now that this should not be taken extensively, as if the universe is the collection or set of all things. One way to approach the concept of universe is by focusing on Schelling’s claim that ideas are without number. This claim is difficult to understand if we rely on the organic model of ideas and totality. Clearly, organisms can be counted. Schelling provides a useful explanation of this point in his *Philosophy of Art*:

The particular thing in absoluteness is not determined by number, for if one reflects upon the particular within it, it is itself the absolute whole and possesses nothing outside of or external to itself. If one reflects upon the universal, it is in absolute unity with all other things.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The notion of self-sufficiency from the perspective of the uncountability of ideas can be made clearer by turning to Schelling’s favorite example of the triangle. There are, of course, many triangular things in the world, but when we draw a triangle in the context of a geometrical proof (i.e., when we construct a triangle in the Kantian sense), we would not be saying that it is next to anything (whatever is lying on the desk near the page on which we drew it). This is because the triangle is projected into another plane, a geometrical one, where what matters is not its empirical existence. Thus, it is not one object among the other objects of the world, and nor is it to be counted among them. It is not that the triangle exists on a different plane—an imaginary plane where there are no pens and desks but there are circles and squares. Even when projected into geometrical space, the triangle is not next to the circle drawn on another paper. It is senseless to ask how many triangles there are.

It is as if the space in which the triangle is projected is its very own. This is the case with planets, which have their own time and space, but also with art. Sculpture, Schelling claims, “is an image of the universe, which possesses its space within itself and has none external to it.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Thus, while sculpture is clearly a physical object that stands next to other objects, when viewed *as a work of art*, it stands alone. Michelangelo’s *David* is not, in that sense, next to his *Slaves* sculptures. Schelling makes similar claims concerning time in music and poetry. This insight can be articulated by saying that something seen as ideal acts as its own standard of measurement. Whatever standard might be applied to it is applied to it alone. Consider Wittgenstein’s famous example of the standard meter in Paris. Although it has a size just like any other spatial object, insofar as this size has a measure, this measure is not externally imposed. It sets a measure on its own. This is the sense in which ideas, for Schelling, are archetypes.

How can a sculpture be an image of the universe? We can start from the relatively simple example of space and time. What is included in space is not excluded from time. It is not that space describes some entities in the world while time delineates others. We cannot count “entities” apart from the form that they take. Tractarian forms, for instance, cannot be counted separately, as there is no higher form that would act as a common genus. Thus, for something to be its own measure implies constituting a *complete* unified space. For a sculpture to achieve this would mean that we should not count anything as being outside it. But this is still a negative definition. Clearly, being an image of the universe entails a deeper engagement with the universe, rather than merely having nothing to do with it. In line with our understanding of these totalities in nonextensional terms, the universe is not to be understood simply as the sum of things in it. A good example is Heidegger’s understanding of the Greek temple:

It is the temple work that first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expanse of these open relations is the world of this [Greek] historical people.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Here, the “gathering” of a world is understood in terms of a world of significance rather than the mere sum of things. It deals, in other words, with our forms of evaluation, rather than with the things that might fall under them.

Schelling’s claim that philosophy presents “the universe in the figure of a plant, the universe in the shape of an animal” suggests that plants and animals confer their measures on the world and create dimensions of evaluation that define the meaning of their environments. The same goes for more abstract potencies of space and time or matter and light.

It appears that for Schelling, everything can constitute an idea. For example, he writes that “One might object that the idea is finite, since it necessarily refers to a particular object. But the objection considers a concept that is opposed to the object; this is not the case in the idea. Every particular object is in its absolute status idea, and accordingly the idea is also the absolute object itself, just as the absolutely ideal is the absolutely real.”[[49]](#footnote-49) This suggests that there is no hierarchy of objects or exclusive club of items that manifest ideas. This is important because it shows that, even if there is a systematic hierarchy determined by an object’s capacity to exemplify identity, from the perspective of the absolute, this hierarchy is meaningless.

This suggests that anything can serve as a lens through which the world is viewed, imposing a standard that shows the world as unified in a certain way:

the only man capable of unraveling the web of reality woven from the finite and the infinite is the one who comprehends the fact that everything is contained in everything, and who realizes how the abundance of the whole universe is stored in individual beings too.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

It is “only *the manner*,” Schelling writes, “in which the absoluteness is subject-object in the Idea, makes the difference.”[[51]](#footnote-51) This “manner” is not a representable content in the world—that is, it is not a difference that can be captured by a difference in predication presupposing a common measure. Rather, this difference is “absolute”; it is a difference in standards or measures, in how the world shows its significance. Given such absolute differences, how can the unity of such diverse objects be conceived?

**V**

Schelling perhaps differs from Heidegger in claiming that every universe, akin to each Heideggerian “world,” is in essence the same. In this view, all ideal perspectives somehow offer perspectives on the same universe. How, then, should we understand the identity of ideas? Stressing the self-sufficiency of ideas too much could mislead us into thinking that their unity is something externally imposed upon them, as if some higher force sets them in order. But given that each idea is its own measure and is not subordinate to some higher measure, what could such external imposition entail? Clearly, the notion of an organic whole imposes a measure on its parts, but it also conflicts with the self-sufficiency of ideas. Similarly, the notion of some structural similarity, where ideas of different content share an abstract form, cannot apply for the same reason. Were there some shared feature between ideas, they would be comparable to one another. Their being self-sufficient, complete, and enclosed universes, makes this impossible.

Recalling that our general orientation here is to view ideas in terms of a theory of meaning, we could phrase the question as being about the possible combination of ideas—that is, as being about the demarcation of sense from nonsense. For example, the human world contains logical forms, such as intention or thought, which supposedly do not apply to nature. This seems to assume that such an application, while denied, is nevertheless intelligible as something negated. Yet, based on Wittgenstein’s understanding of objects, which informs our interpretation of ideas, such attempts are untenable. Objects are *internally* related to other objects within a structure and do not exist outside a possible structure. Thus, they cannot maintain their identity or being within purported attempts to fit them into “impossible” structures. In other words, there are no impossible structures.

This view aligns with the so-called “resolute” reading of the *Tractatus*, according to which “There is no such thing as substantial nonsense, i.e., nonsense that arises when meaningful words are combined in a way that transgresses the bounds of significant discourse, as those bounds have been demarcated in accordance with the terms of a particular theory of what can and cannot be said.”[[52]](#footnote-52) This is the point, as I understand it, of Schelling’s rejection of qualitative difference. There are no metaphysical differences between categories. More generally, there is no set of criteria, explicable or not, that could determine what would make sense in advance of our utterances (where these utterances could be real or imagined).[[53]](#footnote-53) This is, in fact, what Schelling takes language to manifest when he describes it as “the ultimate symbol of chaos.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Language, for Schelling, is the symbol or the essential expression of the fact that no limit or boundary within being is foundational or irresolvable to a higher identity.

If meaning were a matter of either fixed rules or mere agreement, it would be possible to know it from an external position. It is possible, for example, to know what a community agrees on without also agreeing with them and without being a part of that community. That there is no such possibility means that the meaningfulness of a proposition can be settled only from *within*. For the resolute reading, this means that I must come to see how the words making up the proposition are *used*. In other words, nonsense occurs where words are uttered but not used in any recognizable way. This process does not involve bringing them under pragmatic conventions or laws. Rather, in making sense of what we say, we must find how our words harmonize with our active engagement with the world, or in simpler terms, with our lives. This is implied by Wittgenstein’s claim that “Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Translating these claims into Schellingian terms, we could say that the unity of ideas is intelligible only if we accept that they are intelligible as unified. There is no sense in talking about permissible and impermissible combinations, and therefore no rule or standard that can be transgressed in an illicit combination. There is no way, then, to truly intuit an idea outside its place in the whole. In other words, an idea cannot be viewed as an independent entity. This does not mean that it is not self-sufficient, but only that its self-sufficiency is properly recognized on the proper background of language, or the world, as such. Furthermore, the unity of ideas cannot be proven or known as if it were an objective fact. Instead, one must perceive this unity oneself, rather than accepting it as true based on external mediation.

That Schelling holds such a view is clear enough. Philosophy, for example, cannot be taught. It is not a knowledge that can be transmitted in the way one is taught the rules of a game or the names of objects. Instead, it is a knowledge that must be experienced first-hand. Thus, the object of philosophical investigation cannot be treated as external to oneself. Just as meaning is grasped only from “within,” so is the absolute. The knowledge of the absolute, then, is a form of self-knowledge—a first-person knowledge of an object that cannot be externalized or abstracted from our knowledge of it. The absolute is something in which we must, in some sense, partake. “The absolute kind of cognition,” Schelling writes,

like the truth that subsists within it, has no true opposite outside itself. And if it cannot be proved to someone, just as light cannot {be shown} those born blind, or space to someone who lacks spatial intuition (were it possible that an intelligent being lacked it).[[56]](#footnote-56)

Discussing intellectual intuition as the form in which the absolute is known, Schelling makes the somewhat confusing claim that “an intuition can never be called intellectual intuition in which something of the empirical subject, or of the I in some sense other than that in which it is universal form (or pure subject-object) remains outside this form.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Schelling goes on to clarify that intellectual intuition requires that the subject would not locate herself outside the object of knowledge, stating that in intellectual intuition, “what intuits and what is intuited are identical.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

A proper understanding of the unity of ideas hinges upon this point. That is, only with a proper conception of the relation between the first-person and the absolute can we make sense of a unity that is not explicable in terms of a common element or standard and that maintains the self-sufficiency of its elements. Such a conception is articulated in terms of the unity of idealism and realism, the first being a system centered around the subject and the second around the world. How Schelling deals with the relationship between the absolute and the subject in the identity system has been criticized by some commentators, who have claimed that Schelling’s absolute does not leave room for a subject in any recognizable sense.[[59]](#footnote-59) Indeed, Schelling speaks of the self-knowledge of the absolute as the knowledge of an “absolute selfhood,” one that is not available to an “I” that in some sense distinguishes itself from the world or from others. But the point might not be a denial of the possibility of the real individual to know the absolute, but rather the claim, matched in the *Tractatus*, that the subject cannot be localized—that it cannot be seen as this rather than that, me rather than you—but is fully comprehended only when seen as contained within the meaningful totality of the world. This claim cannot be properly explained and defended in the scope of the present paper. We shall leave it as a suggestion, captured best by a remark made by Wittgenstein in his notebooks from the time of the *Tractatus*:

Idealism singles men out from the world as unique, solipsism singles me alone out, and at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*. In this way idealism leads to realism if it is strictly thought out.[[60]](#footnote-60)

University of Potsdam

1. This paper was written as part of a research supported by a Minerva Fellowship of the Minerva Stiftung Gesellschaft fuer die Forschung mbH. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adrian W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 170 and Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in “the Science of Logic”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018): 62-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert B. Pippin, "Logical and Natural Life," In *Hegel's Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences: A Critical Guide* eds. Wretzel, J., & Stein, S. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Sebastian Rödl, "Logic, Being and Nothing," *Hegel Bulletin*, 40 no. 1 (Cambridge University Press, April 2019) and Willem DeVries, "Hegel's logic and philosophy of mind," In *The Age of German Idealism: Routledge History of Philosophy Volume 6* eds. Higgins, K. and Solomon, R. C. (New York: Routledge, 2003) for variations on this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation of my system of philosophy' (1801)," trans. Michael G. Vater *Philosophical Forum* 32 no.4 (New York: Blackwell Publishing, December 2001): 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 361-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. F. W. J. Schelling, "Further presentations from the system of philosophy (1802)," *Philosophical Forum*, 32 no.4 (New York: Blackwell Publishing, December 2001): 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Schelling, "Presentation", 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Frederick C. Beiser, *German idealism: the struggle against subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002)ראש הטופס, 549 and Michael Vater's note in F. W. J. Schelling, *Bruno, or on the Natural and Divine Principle of Things*, trans. Michael G. Vater (New York: SUNY Press, 1984), 321 n. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. E.g. Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Schelling, *Bruno*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. David Pears & Brian McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.161-2.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My reading here is guided by Eli Friedlander, *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's* Tractatus (Cambridge: Harvad University Press, 2001), ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 2.0141. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 2.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. An example can be found in John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.2341. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 4.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019),136–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Irad Kimhi, *Thinking and Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The importance of the nonextensionalist understanding of possibility in Wittgenstein’s philosophy is the topic of Juliet Floyd, & Frederick Mühlhölzer, *Wittgenstein’s Annotations to Hardy's Course of Pure Mathematics* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), ch. 8, Jean-Phillipe Narboux, "Négation et totalité dans le Tractatus de Wittgenstein," In *Lire le Tractatus de Wittgenstein* ed. Christiane, C. (Paris: Vrin, 2009) and Jonathan Soen, "Death and the Variable," In *Early Analytic Philosophy: Origins and Transformations*, eds. Conant, J. and Nir, G. (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 442–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 2.062. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 4.211. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 2.05. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1953), §28–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Schelling, "Presentation", 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For my purposes I treat Schelling's identity philosophy as continuous with his philosophy of nature, the latter being a special case of the former. During the period of the identity philosophy, Schelling never rescinded his philosophy of nature and it continued to play an important role. While there are important discontinuities between the two systems and within the philosophy of nature itself, they do not affect the argument of this paper. See Michael Vater, "Bringing Nature to Light: Schelling’s Naturphilosophie in the Early System of Identity," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 5 (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Naomi Fisher, "Freedom as Productivity in Schelling's Philosophy of Nature," In *Schelling's Philosophy: Freedom, Nature, and Systematicity* ed. G. Anthony Bruno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Nassar shows this by comparing Schelling’s and Goethe’s notions of archetype and metamorphosis in Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Schelling, *Bruno,* 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Schelling, "Presentation", 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Daniel Whistler, *Schelling’s Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Alberto Toscano, "Philosophy and the Experience of Construction," in *The New Schelling* eds. Welchman, A., and Norman, J. (London, UK: Continuum, 2004), 122 and Benjamin

    Brewer, "The Unity that is Indivisibly Present in Each Thing, Reason, Activity, and Construction in Schelling’s Identity Philosophy," *Kabiri* 2 (May 2020), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art,* trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minnesota: U of Minnesota Press, 1989), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeil (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Schelling, "Further," 392 n.16. See also, in the context of the philosophy of art, “all things, viewed from the perspective of totality or as they are in themselves, are formed in absolute beauty, and that the archetypes of all things, just as they are absolutely true, are also absolutely beautiful.” Schelling, *Art*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Schelling, *Bruno*, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. . W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris & Peter Heath (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. James Conant & Silver Bronzo, "Resolute Readings of the Tractatus," In *A Companion to Wittgenstein* Eds. H.-J. Glock & J. Hyman (Chichester UK: Wiley, 2016), 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. It is interesting to compare this with Hegel’s view on nonsense as a product of a category mistake in the *Science of Logic*. Hegel (2010) 565. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Schelling, *Art*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.002. See also Friedlander, *Signs*, ch. 7–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Schelling, "Further", 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 249 and Beiser, *German Idealism*, 593-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 15.10.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)