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Schelling on the Unsayable

Abstract

Schelling's philosophy can be seen as perpetrating the philosophical fallacy known as the Myth of the Given, in that it takes rational activity to be affected by an experience which is not conceptually mediated. This is supported by Schelling's repeated claim that there is an experience which is indescribable, and which forces us to silence. In the first part of the paper it will be shown how different readings of Schelling result in this fallacy. In the second and third parts an alternative reading will be developed which avoids the fallacy while still making room for unsayable experience. Finally, the proposed interpretation will enable us to interpret Schelling's claim that expressing the unsayable, conveying it to another, is possible after all.

»The wish for intelligibility is a terrible one. It means that we are willing to reveal ourselves through the self's betrayal of itself.«

(Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*)

1. Silence and the Myth of the Given

In recent decades, a certain tradition of neo-Hegelianism has grown dominant. This tradition, inspired by the work of Wilfrid Sellars, has put forth, in various ways, an interpretation of Hegel as a philosopher whose main goal and achievement is a theory of rationality that avoids the so-called ›Myth of the Given‹. That term, coined by Sellars, refers to an alleged philosophical myth: that information can be simply ›given‹ to us – by perception or other means – with no conceptual capacities already in place. In other words, the myth suggests that one may know something about the world without this

knowledge being mediated by concepts. Concepts are understood in terms of norms to which we bind ourselves. This act of self-binding manifests itself in our rational activity as the ability to give and ask for reasons for actions and judgments; an activity that takes place in what is commonly called ›the space of reasons‹. The requirement for conceptual mediation, then, amounts to the requirement that any move within the space of reasons can be incorporated in conceptual activities such as justification, inference, refutations and so on. Thus, it is intelligible for any sort of judgment (empirical, practical, etc.) to be challenged, demanded reasons for, or serve as a reason for other judgments. What is mythically given is thought to be independent of such activities, so that, while making rational contribution, it itself is not amenable to different forms of reasoning.

According to this variant of neo-Hegelianism, the domain of the rational – the space of reasons – is *sui generis* and cannot be conceived as grounded in anything irrational or extra-rational since this would undermine the rationality of the entire domain. Thus, this domain is taken to be ›unbounded‹ and is not seen as operating on, or applied to, any essentially non-conceptual domain. Perhaps the most well-known rejection of this form of the myth is Donald Davidson's ›On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme‹. Davidson famously claims that the idea of conceptuality as imposed or ›fitted‹ to an extra-conceptual reality amounts to nonsense and is a dogma philosophy must leave behind.¹ Conceptuality, it is argued, is not something *added* to reality, nature, or experience, but rather inheres in it. This, in turn, means that there could be no such thing as ineffable content or experience, since conceptuality is internal to experience, i.e., they are not accidentally combined (as if at one point they can combine and at another they can't).

Where does this leave Schelling? It is odd that while such a reading has proven to be so productive in the case of Hegel, it has not gained the same popularity among readers of Schelling. This is perhaps because Schelling appears to offer the most exemplary case of the Myth of the Given to be found in German Idealism.² His talk of an unconscious, natural, irrational element which somehow grounds

1 Cf. Davidson 1973.

2 For ›Myth of the Given‹-type charges against Schelling, cf. Pinkard 2016, 15–35 and Pippin 2005, 70. .

rationality itself may be understood as an argument against the *sui generis* nature of rationality, which locates its source in something outside the rational. The stipulation of two domains – rational and irrational, conceptual and nonconceptual – which must be somehow reconciled seems guilty of the very mistake Davidson wishes to expose and correct.

There is strong evidence of Schelling's support for such mythical givenness in the form of ineffable experience. For example, in the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion*, Schelling describes those who have had the experience of the so-called »Absolute« as »those who have experienced that evidence – which lies in and only in the idea of the Absolute and which any human language is too weak to describe.«³ Later, towards the end of Schelling's life, in the *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, we find: »That which just – that which only – exists is precisely that which crushes everything that may derive from thought, before which thought becomes silent, and before which reason itself bows down.«⁴ Remarks such as these, which are spread throughout Schelling's oeuvre, have led commentators to view Schelling as advocating the limitedness of reason, conceived as the realm of conceptual activity or normativity.

For example, Markus Gabriel, in a discussion on Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*, claims that there is a kind of being such that »this being cannot be presented in any thought, since all thought is always already predicatively mediated sense, in the sense determined by the logical concept of being.«⁵ This being is simply that which is selected by a demonstrative in a judgment. In the context of the whole judgment, Gabriel maintains that this being is to be predicated, and therefore determined in a particular way, by the use of concepts. However, outside this context, the being is ineffable.⁶ As it stands, this claim is a form of the dogma rejected by Davidson, according to which conceptuality ›arranges‹ or ›forms‹ some non-conceptual, ›unknown‹ matter. Gabriel's reasoning appears to rely on the mistaken presupposition that concepts, or conceptual

3 Schelling 2010, 16 / AA I,14, 287.

4 Schelling 2007, 202 / SW XIII, 161.

5 Gabriel 2011, 70.

6 Cf. Rush 2014 for a similar reading.

activities such as judgments more broadly, are essentially general.⁷ Thus, a judgment involving any sort of indexical would be seen as divided into a conceptual and a non-conceptual part. But no form of neo-Hegelian conceptualism entails anything of the sort. On the contrary, explaining singular terms and demonstratives is one of its main goals.

Another mythical reading of Schelling can be found in Sebastian Gardner's interpretation of the *Freiheitsschrift*. There, he argues that »the boundary of the space of reasons does not determine the limit of what we are acquainted with as having reality.«⁸ Gardner believes that one must limit the space of reasons in order to allow for the reality of evil, and, thereby, to make room for a conception of action or choice which is not normatively guided. Yet the idea that choice can be made independently of the space of reasons, so that what guides originates from *outside* that space entails that it is nothing but a mythical given.

Gabriel and Gardner serve as examples of Schelling readers who picture him as a sort of dualist, for whom there are two domains: the space of reasons or conceptuality and that which lies outside it. In other words, it seems to these readers that although Schelling accepts a certain notion of conceptuality, he believes that it is not exhaustive.

A final mythical reading of Schelling more closely resembles what will be suggested in this paper. According to Schelling, that which cannot be stated or described is, in some sense, the Whole, also known as the Absolute. Since statements are always limitations within that whole, determinations relative to something else, they cannot represent the whole as such. This finds evidence in Schelling's claim that

If we want to give expression to any being whatsoever, then we have to go to work in a piecemeal fashion, analyzing it into its components and thereby giving up on its unity and wholeness, while sacrificing the interiority (*Innigkeit*) of intuition.⁹

Such a reading is mythical if it states that the impossibility of expressing the Whole or the Absolute is a matter of different forms:

7 A presupposition that John McDowell, for example, jettisons. Cf. McDowell 1996, 105–107.

8 Gardner 2017, 151.

9 Schelling 2019, 188 / WA II, 206.

there is a reality bearing on our conceptual activity which is itself of a different form than this activity. Much in Schelling suggests that this is the case: the difference between acts of knowledge or representation and the Whole are differences between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, or the limited and the unlimited. It is no surprise, then, that only a special act can provide for the cognition of that Whole: the act of so-called ›intellectual intuition‹ which is allegedly sacrificed in piecemeal expression. The idea of any explication of the Whole then becomes nonsensical, and philosophy cannot be concerned with gaining this sort of knowledge. Accordingly, Frederick Beiser claims that »Although Schelling did hold that absolute knowledge is indemonstrable and esoteric, he still believed that he had to justify its possibility. To prove its *reality* was one thing; but to establish its *possibility* another.«¹⁰ The point is not that there is knowledge which we cannot prove, which is consistent with it being an act in the space of reasons. Rather, Beiser's Schelling is claiming that there is knowledge which cannot be *demonstrated*, and so cannot be challenged or supported. In that sense, it is not incorporated into the space of reasons. This claim can be found in Schelling, but much depends on how ›knowledge‹ is understood.

The air of myth in these considerations is a result of the thought that the Absolute is unknowable content, or at least accessible only by special, non-conceptual means, so that knowledge as we ordinarily understand it, is somehow limited. Yet, it is possible that Schelling's claim is not that the Absolute cannot be incorporated into the space of reasons, but rather that it is not even a candidate for such incorporation. When I state that there is a red cube in front of me, I might be asked ›how do you know?‹ I would answer that I know because I see it. In normal circumstances, the question ›how do you know that you see it?‹ would be illegitimate, or a piece of nonsense. Gabriel suggests something along these lines, claiming that the Absolute is not a thing *in* the world, and so cannot be a candidate for knowledge.¹¹ This, Gabriel claims, produces an antinomy: »the infinite as condition of the *search for knowledge* is

10 Beiser 2002, 577.

11 Cf. also Grant 2013 and Jason M. Wirth's introduction to Schelling 2000 for similar views.

necessarily lost as soon as one sets out to *secure knowledge* of it.«¹² The infinite, or the Absolute, is the condition for this search as it comprises the criteria for the intelligibility of scientific inquiry. Thus, the antinomy is a result of the fact that

[i]t is impossible that empirical evidence could speak for or against any particular concept of the world without a concept of the world being anteriorly at play according to whose criteriology empirical data would be arranged such that they might speak for or against this or that concept of the world.¹³

This entails that knowledge cannot secure the conditions of its intelligibility. So, in a sense, it is incomplete. In a similar vein, Gabriel argues that

Schelling thus replaces the classical ontology of completeness, which opposes the world as the completely determinate domain of things to mind as the fallible excess over what is the case, with an ontology of incompleteness.¹⁴

Supposedly, this leads to an adoption of a *docta ignorantia*: an acknowledgment of the inevitability of the antinomy of knowledge and, thus, of the incompleteness of our knowledge. Moreover, Gabriel claims that this antinomy itself is the very content of the Absolute, which has being only as the limitation of knowledge and the endless striving for absolute grounding.

A problem with Gabriel's argument is that the force of the antinomy seems to depend on knowledge needing to complete itself by knowing the Absolute. But if the Absolute is not a possible object of knowledge, how can the attempt to know it be anything other than a confusion or a category mistake? Otherwise, it would appear that a question like ›how do you know that you see it?‹ deserves an answer, but one which we will never be able to supply. This is either a variant of Cartesian skepticism or the Myth of the Given, insofar as it implies a kind of evidence which cannot be brought to act as a reason – which cannot be challenged, for example. It is easy to see why imposing silence on a subject would be an impossible task for knowledge. For Schelling, silence is associated with the impossibility,

12 Gabriel 2011, 14.

13 Gabriel 2011, 8.

14 Gabriel 2011, 17.

or at the least great difficulty, of finding words. But if the antinomy is illusory, given that it is based on a category mistake, one is led to silence here just as one is when one tries to say what color Wednesday is or to say a chair. This is not really a case of speechlessness in the sense of bafflement or disorientation. There is nothing that one fails or chooses not to express. Rather, there is something that one does not know how to respond to.

2. The Unknowable as Shared Attunement

In a recent article, G. Anthony Bruno brings together Schelling and Stanley Cavell around the issue of skepticism. Bruno begins with a lengthy discussion of the difference between Cavell's and McDowell's treatment of an

antinomy of knowledge in which absolutely conclusive evidence that, say, the world exists is either dogmatically asserted, perhaps by raising one's hand, or skeptically denied, perhaps by suspecting one is dreaming. Theses in the antinomy jointly err by appealing to evidence that lies beyond its condition of possibility, namely, beyond our shared attunement.¹⁵

Unlike Gabriel, both Cavell and McDowell believe that the antinomy is void and find the premise that knowledge is in need of this sort of evidence senseless. The legitimacy of our claims does not derive from absolute evidence, but rather from »our common ›routes of interest‹, ›modes of response‹, and ›senses of humour and of significance‹, i.e., on our shared attunement.«¹⁶ According to Cavell, these provide us with the ability to go on applying rules – that is, concepts – across various circumstances, given that there is no rule in place determining their application. But the lack of a rule for their application does not mean that one cannot answer why she has proceeded as she did. Instead, it means that this question cannot be made sense of, which, in turn, means that the grounds for action are not a possible object for knowledge.

Here, the Myth of the Given is avoided because there is no demand for essentially non-conceptual evidence. While the sort of

¹⁵ Bruno 2021, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

ground supplied by shared attunement is not an object of knowledge, this does not mean that knowledge is lacking. The idea that communal practices serve as grounds for knowledge can be taken to entail a problematic relativism which would undermine the objectivity of knowledge. After all, the validity of these practices, along with their ability to afford access to objective reality, remains unknown. In different ways, both McDowell and Cavell claim that this asks something of knowledge that knowledge itself is not meant to give: that it close the gap between us and reality. For McDowell and Cavell alike, our common acts of knowledge are enough, as long as there is no apparent reason to doubt them. We cannot, then, doubt a judgment anytime, anywhere, regardless of the occasion on which it is made. For the most part, under normal circumstances, our judgments are good enough and require no further certification. Thus, the references to community are not supposed to close an epistemic gap which never really existed, but only to remind us that there is no standard for certainty or propriety higher than that which we set ourselves. We simply do not understand what we are being asked for if we are asked to validate *that*. In general, this view does not stipulate any non-conceptual content that affects conceptual activity from the outside. Rather, that which cannot become an object of knowledge is an essential part of the conceptual mechanism itself. It is that aspect of the concept which makes its application possible, something which cannot itself be conceptualized. To repeat: this is not because of its non-conceptual nature, but because of its unique role in conceptual activity.

As Bruno convincingly argues, while McDowell takes this notion of shared attunement, or of a form of life, to resolve the antinomy of knowledge *and* address our concern that we might really not be attuned to it at all, Cavell finds this concern ineliminable. Thus, while Cavell takes the *epistemic* worry about certainty and absolute evidence to be unfounded, he believes that attunement is not merely given to us: we may, at any moment, fall out of it. Bruno claims that this is because Cavell believes that nothing secures our mutual attunement, or our capacity to make sense to one another, because there could be no *a priori* criteria for meaning. Accordingly, there could be no final judgment about whether an expression does or does not make sense or is meaningful.

In the second part of the article, Bruno analogizes the difference between Cavell and McDowell with that between Schelling and Hegel, respectively. He claims that Schelling, like Cavell, is also concerned with shared attunement (in terms of the precedence of the practical to the theoretical) and believes that there is no way to demonstrate this attunement's necessity, leaving it contingent. Hegel, on the other hand, seeks to ensure shared attunement with his speculative method, leading to the conclusion that the I completely depends on the community for its intelligibility. This view is epitomized in the slogan ›the I that is We, We that is I.‹ Thus, Bruno writes that ›Schelling and Cavell converge on the idea that if knowledge has a non-epistemic ground in shared, mutual attunement, I can no more claim to know that I is We than I can guarantee my own recognition.«¹⁷ That is, my coherence with my community is not guaranteed.

The notion of shared attunement as ground can help us understand the limitation imposed by the piecemeal nature of language and knowledge. Our ability to intelligibly go on using our words in new contexts and to follow rules, with no universal beyond these instances of use which precedes and determines them, means that what brings these instances together and unifies them cannot be found anywhere outside them. In other words, the form of belonging together that is proper to the parts is internal to the parts themselves, rather than applied to them. This is what Schelling calls, in various places, organic unity. For example, nothing serves as a procedure for recognizing colors and distinguishing them from sounds. Accordingly, our use of the word ›color‹ is consistent only because the instances of use themselves show themselves to belong together. These unities are simply meanings, that determine the use of a word, and correspondingly, essences, that determine what something is. Saying what this unity consists in, just why these parts come together, would abstract the unity from its parts. To do so would be to suggest that the parts are, indeed, detachable. It would falsely suggest the existence of an identifiable rule, formula, or other generality which organizes the parts into a unity. This is no more mysterious than our inability to define what color *is* other than by pointing to particular instances.

17 Bruno 2021, 37.

Here, the piecemeal representation of the world by language is not problematic on account of the distinction between a particular determination and the Whole. Rather, it is so on account of its inability to reproduce the relevant kind of unity at stake. In speaking, we always mention this or that. This is not a problem because we cannot mention *everything*, but because we cannot mention how this and that are related unless we mention a relation. But an internal relation is shown through the parts themselves, rather than stated or named as an entity beyond the relata.

Consider, for example, teaching the names of colors to a child. With time, the child learns the names of different colors. But at what point does she learn how they belong together? Could she, perhaps, make the mistake of thinking that a sound, a shape, a day of the week, or a feeling are also colors? Or, alternatively, could she fail to perceive that blue and red have something in common? If she could, she would not really know what blue and red are: she would have failed to learn the meaning of their names, because in learning them she must know what I am pointing *at*, and by knowing this she already knows that I am not pointing at the shape but at the color. This means that while the names for colors have been taught gradually through a series of instructions, learning what color *is* could not be a part of that series. Rather, that learning underlies the possibility of the series itself and of the intelligibility of these instructions. Although it is not given in advance of them, it cannot be found in any particular instruction. Furthermore, it cannot be grasped from this series alone: it requires a background of practices, such as instructing, pointing, asking, answering, being corrected, and so on. It is in this sense that Schelling writes, in the *Philosophy of Art*, that »Within the inner structure of language itself all individual elements are determined by the whole. There is not one form or one individual unit of speech that does not require the whole«. ¹⁸

18 Schelling 1989, 101 / AA II,6, 206.

3. Meaning Beyond Shared Attunement

The obvious fact that we successfully learn what colors are suggests that the piecemeal fashion in which language represents *does* allow for internal unities to be grasped, even if this grasp is not itself a step in that piecemeal progression. In other words, these unities are in a sense unsayable, but they show through the things we say. But this is not yet the whole story. There are two ways in which falling out of attunement can be understood. According to the first, it is a form of misrecognition and disorientation, where, like the skeptic, one comes to use words in way in which they cannot be given their ordinary sense, while relying on them having that sense. According to the second, it is a form of insight and originality or creativity. Here the meaning of words is taken to extend beyond their ordinary use. It is the second way, I believe, that McDowell fails to do justice to, as opposed to Cavell. This is a consequence of the possible breakdown of shared attunement: nothing *a priori* sets the boundaries of meaning and sense.¹⁹ A word's ordinary context is one in which the word can be taught—we can provide an ordinary instance of its use as an example of what it means. It is given because we receive it as children, as part of our initiation into our mother tongue. Yet, once this initiation is complete, it is conceivable, even quite common, that we take words beyond those contexts in which they can be taught.²⁰ For example, consider poetic language: if a line of poetry strikes me as meaningful, this is not only because I understand the language that the poem is written in, and, so, master the use of the words appearing in that line. There must also be something unexpected about the bit of language I am reading, something that I myself could not have imagined in advance, which shows that these words belong together. Thus, unusual combinations may appear as sensible, and so the appropriate context for the usage of specific words expands. Now, if I try and explain to someone what exactly works for me in a certain poetic line, I might find no way to do so. Here, the internal unity of the parts is not revealed simply

19 This view can be found in Schelling's conception of language as chaotic in the *Philosophy of Art*. Here, chaos means that all finite determinations are inessential. I take this to mean that there are no *a priori* limitations on sense. Cf. Schelling 1989, § 73, 99 / AA II,6, 206.

20 Cf. Cavell 1979, chapter 8, 191–234.

by bringing them together. There is no way evident way to teach the other that this is the right way to go on with the words.

»The world of spirit«, Schelling claims, »is God's poetry [...]. That other world contains everything that we find in this world, only in a poetic, i.e., spiritual form.«²¹ I take this to mean that the sort of unity found in a poetic line is found in the spiritual world, which is nothing but our world, the totality of being, seen *sub specie aeternitatis* – as a meaningful unity.²² Now, Schelling claims that both the poet and the philosopher can attain some insight into that world, but while the poet has poetic means for giving it objective expression, the philosopher does not. In the 1811 draft of the *Ages of the World* Schelling writes that

philosophers too have their raptures (*Entzückungen*), not poets alone: even so, they are a private matter and do not belong to the world as a whole. [...] But if we try to speak directly out of such vision, we lose the necessary sense of measure: at that point, we are no long masters of our own thoughts. In the vain struggle to express the inexpressible, we lose the reliability of skillful speech.²³

Schelling is here describing philosophy as a science defined by the requirement to express an unsayable experience, that of the meaningful, poetic, unity of being. A task which cannot be achieved ›directly‹, which is to say, by description. The belief that expression is nevertheless possible can be found in Schelling's *Clara*, where Clara is characterized as follows:

A wonderful depth of feeling that could enter right into her way of thinking betrayed itself in some conversations; however, what she lacked was the ability to unpack her thoughts and thereby clarify them. I know what an agreeable effect ordering one's own thoughts into a precise framework has; the soul is happy when it can have what it felt inwardly, as if by inspiration or through some divine thought [*Anschauung*], expressly worked out in the understanding, too, as if looking in a mirror. Profound souls shy away from this development, which they see as one in which they have to come out of themselves. They always want

21 Schelling 1994, 240 / AA II,8, 178.

22 This obviously alludes to Schelling's conception of intellectual intuition and Schelling's Spinozistic, rather than Fichtean, take on it.

23 Schelling 2019, 189 / WA II, 206f.

to go back into their own depths (*ihre eigne Tiefe*) and to continue to enjoy the bliss of the center.²⁴

The idea that the clarification involved requires inspiration or divine intuition reveals the experience as one of an internally unified Whole: for Schelling, divine intuition is precisely the ability to see the whole in the parts, viewing them in their unity with each other. Clara vaguely grasps something she feels as deep, but she cannot find the words to make it explicit, yet such explication does appear to be a real possibility.²⁵ It is not only suggested that such expression is possible, but that this expression is desired as a source of both happiness and self-knowledge, which suggests that it is only as a private experience that such feeling remains incomplete and problematic. Thus, it is not only that such experiences *can* be expressed, but that they *ought* to be.

This line of thought could be interpreted as a relapse to the mythical if such non-conventional meaning were seen as given independently of our conceptual capacities or, more broadly, independently of ordinary language. But is it conceivable, for example, that an animal perceives something as meaningful or significant? Only a language user can perceive or understand meaning. On this view, our failure to express ourselves, or to make ourselves understood to others, is as much a product of language as our ability to speak.

This position might be seen to be in tension with the view of language as primarily descriptive, essentially concerned with stating facts and giving and asking for reasons. These facts needn't necessarily be empirical. They may, for example, be about value, as in ›John is worthy of praise‹ or ›this is a tasty pie‹. Yet even such statements are about how things are in the world. Failure to express oneself, then, would suggest an ineffable fact, a mythical given. However, an important aspect of the mutual attunement thesis is that the sense of such statements, and of the facts that they state, is contingent on our ability to share something other than information, namely, a form-of-life. For someone focused on the descriptive aspect of language,

24 Schelling 2002, 31 / SW IX, 40.

25 More conclusive evidence can be found elsewhere in *Clara* in the claim that »Through clear concepts [...] in which what was known in an indivisible way is taken to pieces or separated and then made into a unity again. « (Schelling 2002, 33 / SW IX, 43) This shows the possibility of expressing that which is ruined by a piecemeal treatment, i.e., by language.

silence would simply indicate a choice not to speak. Taking language to be more than a vehicle for information, but rather a medium in which we find meaningful harmony in a linguistic community or a form-of-life, allows us to conceive of silence altogether differently. However, doing so demands that we also avoid conceiving of that intuited, non-conventional meaning in terms of discovering something new about the world. We do not, in that light, find something – a new fact, perhaps – to be described. Rather, we notice how a set of facts or thoughts or whatever else which is describable hangs together, their internal unity and harmony with one another. This is not another fact: it is rather the possibility for any fact to mean anything. In other words, we find something which, we feel, should be part of our shared attunement, rather than part of what this attunement grounds—our movement in the space of reasons.

The claim that the possibility of this sort of silence is contingent on our already being initiated into language entails that, with regards to meaning, the private does not precede the public. That is, we must be capable of participating in a shared practice of using words to convey meanings to one another before we can strike out on our own and recognize meanings which are not shared that way. It is only within the context of the form-of-life into which we have been initiated that we can become distant from each other and find ourselves reduced to silence. This is what the so-called ›profound soul‹ denies. For her, society and language are limitations which fail to apply to her inner experience – a variant of the Myth of the Given.

Consequently, the possibility of such distance means that it is allowed by our form of life, that is, that our inherited conventions are sufficiently malleable to allow for such fissures in attunement. By extending our ordinary conventions in unexpected directions, we do not simply leave these conventions behind, replacing them with new ones. Instead, we reveal a potential that was latent in them all along (a revelation which can be found in the feeling that now we *really* know what X is, or that we now *truly* understand what ›X‹ means). Extending the use of a word in a poem, for example, does not amount to the word being used in a new way, or not meaning what it does in ordinary circumstances. Rather, it shows that the word *can* be so extended, which is itself proof that there is something about it

that we did not fully recognize.²⁶ If our form of life and our language have such internal potential, then communicating one's experience of meaning means bringing the other to see that potential.

4. Conversation and Ideal Language

The idea that everyday language contains something yet to be revealed, a potential which awaits actualization, can be found in *Clara*.²⁷ Discussing the artificiality of philosophical language, and the importance of spoken, natural language for philosophy, Clara says:

The deepest, I feel, must also be the clearest; just as what is clearest, e.g., a crystal, by virtue of being such, doesn't seem to get closer to me, but instead seems to withdraw and to become more obscure, and just as I can look into a drop of water as if into an abyss.²⁸

Thus, everyday language is both transparent *and* obscure, suggesting that there is depth in it which is yet revealed to us. Although we have the most direct and immediate access to it, and in that sense it is transparent, it withdraws from us. Clara's interlocutor adds:

Depth behaves like what appears to be its opposite, the sublime, in that it has all the greater effect if it is clothed in the simplest words that even working people and craftsmen can understand. The language of the people is as if it were from eternity; the artificial language of the schools is that of yesterday. Anything that is eternal will always try to bring that eternity to expression.²⁹

26 It should be noted that the thought that the content of concepts is not simply given, but somehow develops, is not foreign to the aforementioned neo-Hegelianism. Both Robert Brandom and Terry Pinkard, in different ways, propose readings of Hegel along such lines. Yet, for them, as for Hegel, shared attunement remains intact: any apparent fracturing of attunement is revealed, in retrospect, to be a result of misrecognition. In other words, falling out of attunement will always turn out to be a result of error or confusion, rather than, as it is for Schelling, a possible expression of the highest form of knowledge.

27 This thought is expressed differently across Schelling's oeuvre, but perhaps most famously in the *Freiheitsschrift*, where nature is claimed to hold an unfulfilled potential which is actualized in the Word.

28 Schelling 2002, 63 / SW IX, 87.

29 Schelling 2002, 63 / SW IX, 87.

The assertion that language *tries* to bring its eternity to expression is a form of saying that this eternity is not simply given to us. Eternal, as I understand it here, means the true essence of things.

How, then, is ordinary language most fitting for philosophy? We have seen that it can contain a potential to extend itself beyond given conventions and our common usage of it, but this seems to produce a fissure in attunement, rather than to overcome one. Yet philosophical language must be one in which philosophical experience, that of meaningfulness and unity, *can* be conveyed. In *Clara*, Schelling suggests that the model or exemplar for such language is friendly conversation, which implies that removing the obstacle to expression is not a matter of a new, unprecedented, language, but rather of recalling an aspect of language use which goes beyond transmission of meaning or stating of facts.

Clara, wishing that philosophical texts would reproduce actual conversations, suggests that philosophy ought to resemble the novel, because of the latter's representation of dialogue. The narrator replies that

in its very nature the novel contradicts the unity of time and action; whereas it seems to me that in philosophical discussions this unity is as essential as it is in tragedies, for here everything proceeds so completely internally and everything has to be decided on the spot, as it were, without moving away from the original location because of the narrow context of thought [*engen Gedankenzusammenhangs*].³⁰

What is a ›narrow context of thought‹? I do not think that Schelling means that the subject matter of the dialogue is limited or that its context is unusually specific. Rather, his point seems to be that the view the dialogue expresses and articulates is a unity of thoughts – *Gedankenzusammenhang* literally means the interrelation of thoughts – which loses its density or tightness (*enge*) if it is treated abstractly, outside of its articulation here and now. The narrator argues that the description of the communication of such unity is analogous to the tragic text, in which action is described as happening *now* – unfolding in time as it is described. This means that, in that context, communication is essentially tied to the occasion and the form in which it is performed. It cannot be described

30 Schelling 2002, 65 / SW IX, 90f.

without describing its actual unfolding, so the meaningfulness of what is said cannot be grasped apart from the actual speaking *then* and *there*. Clara goes on to emphasize this point in her reply to the narrator: »Without a doubt, she said with a smile, so that the context of thought resting on delicate, transitory, and often only momentary idioms doesn't fade away?«³¹

The risk of fading away, and the importance of the here and now, shed light on the preconditions for communicating such unsayable experiences of meaning. As has been argued, such meaning does not correspond to any convention on the basis of which its communication may be imagined in advance or compared to other instances. Therefore, when communicated successfully, the meaning will involve an element of surprise: it shows a piece of language to belong in an occasion where it could not have been expected.³² Under what conditions can such an occasion arise, or be seen as inviting an application of language which will make room for new meaning? Knowing the answer to questions like this one is no different from knowing when to pass the ball in soccer or when to play a certain tune in a jazz improvisation. None of these are cases of following antecedently given orders or norms. Rather, they depend on recognizing an opportunity to strike and to bring out a possibility which lies dormant in such norms. Our interlocutor, to whom we are trying to get, must somehow say something we recognize as opportune. In a harmonious conversation it becomes possible for me to find the words, and to find myself in the words of the other, so that a thought or a feeling can be given an expression, thus ›producing‹ an ephemeral form of shared attunement.

Two people becoming attuned through conversation, coming to share ›routes of interests‹, ›senses of humour and significance‹ and so on, is simply two people coming to feel close to one another, or learning to love one another. Thus, the conversation that philosophy must strive to imitate, according to *Clara*, is that between loving

31 Schelling 2002, 66 / SW IX, 91.

32 This point recurs throughout Schelling's work. Consider, for example, this passage from *Philosophy and Religion*: »It appears before the soul only at the moment when subjective activity joins the objective in unexpected harmony, which because it is unexpected has an advantage over free, desireless rational cognition to manifest itself as happiness, as illumination, or as revelation« (Schelling 2010, 9 / AA I,14, 281).

friends.³³ So, in a perfect world, there are no obstacles against the production of such a shared attunement:

There all taste must be good taste, every sound a good sound, language itself must be music, and with one word everything must be in complete harmony; and, in particular, the harmony that surpasses all others and that arises only when two hearts are in accord must be enjoyed more internally and purely.³⁴

Ideal language is said to be musical, rather than, say, unambiguous. It is not about perfect representation or about complete explication. Rather, it is meant to convey the fully harmonious mutuality as is found between two hearts in accord. In other words, the emphasis is on how we go on applying our concepts in speech – when and how we choose to say what we say – rather than on the content of our speech.

Such accord, Schelling later adds, can only be found in this heavenly, ideal reality. Here on earth, full harmony can never be achieved because »here, related souls are separated by centuries, large distances, or by the intricacies of the world.«³⁵ This may seem arbitrary – why should that be the case? It also seems to imply that harmony is given after all, at least if we read it to imply that two related souls are somehow fit for each other in advance of their encounter. But this statement does not necessarily mean that there is some specific person, perhaps living somewhere long ago in a galaxy far away, who is my soul mate. It perhaps suggests that true harmony can be established only with one who shares absolutely nothing *given* with me – no common language, culture, sense of significance and humor, and so on.

Why? No matter how much I feel that you »get me«, this is always at risk of breaking down. This recalls the earlier idea that shared attunement is contingent and always at risk of falling apart. If our attunement does fall apart, it will indicate that we were never fully attuned, and that we had somewhat different conceptions of the subject. Owing to the piecemeal nature of language, dissonance is not immediately apparent in it: a unit of speech can never fully reveal the whole which it aims to express, even in the most harmonious of

33 Cf. Schelling 2002, 64 / SW IX, 88.

34 Schelling 2002, 72 / SW IX, 100.

35 Schelling 2002, 72 / SW IX, 100.

conversations. Souls who share no form of given attunement, who are absolutely different from one another in that respect, cannot find themselves falsely believing themselves to be attuned. This requires they have at least something in common.

Thus, trying to express one's experience of meaning means stepping out of the safety of one's interiority into an ambiguous medium. Doing so puts us at the mercy of the other and at a constant risk of losing the harmony of inner experience. It also demands a form of self-betrayal, as, by stepping outside herself, the subject puts her inner unified experience at risk. Thus, speaking of the process of making explicit the system of philosophy, Schelling asks »How many, however, have sufficient strength, capacity, and self-denial to deliver themselves over to the process? For not without a protracted inward struggle, not without constantly dividing oneself from oneself can the truth be won.«.³⁶

Schelling is claiming that truth *can* be won. But this does not mean that it can be *finally* won:

the [philosophical] system is in fact possible and even actual, but it is not something that can be shown and displayed, certainly not in an external fashion that anyone can take hold of and appropriate for themselves like any other knowledge, for this whole knowledge is only in a constant and never-ceasing process of creation (*Erzeugung*); it can thus never become a dead possession. It is the process of inwardly repeating and reproducing the monstrously great process of life itself, from its first silent beginning to the present, and yes, into the furthest future.³⁷

I take this to mean that the expression of philosophical insight is not the representation of a static truth. Rather, it is the never-ending process of harmonization with the other. Harmony is never settled once and for all: it must always be re-created *then* and *there*, just as attunement demands incessant re-creation. This process is guided by the heavenly ideal of related souls and of a pure language with which they communicate:

[I]t must be the true common language that is spoken in the spirit world, where only the fully released and free corporeality follows us and

36 Schelling 2019, 164 / WA I, 102.

37 Schelling 2019, 164 / WA I, 102.

where only those words can be heard that are one with the essentials or archetypes of things. For each thing carries within itself a living word, as a tie between vowel and consonant, that is that thing's heart and its inner being. There, however, language won't be requisite for communication as it is here, nor will it be a means of hiding rather than revealing its inner being.³⁸

This pure language, which sets the standard for all earthly attempts at harmonization, communication of meaningful experience, and philosophy itself, is free of the ambiguity which characterizes language for us mortals. Whereas, on earth, meaning does not simply reveal itself in the sign which expresses it, being thus at risk of being obscured or misunderstood, in heaven, meaning and sign are one. This allows for the immediate presentation of the essence of that which is named, which Schelling here calls an archetype (*Urbild*). It cannot be expounded here how this claim, that meaning can be given in full in the archetypal mode of pure language, can fit with the earlier claims that the meaning of a word – and so the essence of the thing – cannot be given or settled in advance, and that expansion or improvisation is always possible. Nevertheless, we may conclude by showing that the overcoming of silence is not a matter of better, more accurate representation, nor a matter of providing reasons which will be taken as adequate. On the contrary, it is a matter of doing away with the representational and conventional aspects of language, so that its music can be heard.

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38 Schelling 2002, 73 / SW IX, 101.

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