

# Existence Within and Beyond the Bounds of Mere Reason: The Confrontation Between Schelling and Hegel

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In the multi-faceted trajectory of post-Kantian thought, Schelling—both the person and his philosophy—has always been a controversial figure. Popular historical accounts focus on his precocious interventions as part of the ‘Jena set’, initially building on Fichte’s philosophy of the ‘I’, but quickly coming to challenge his predecessor’s philosophical dominance. In the crucial period of the late 1790s, Schelling’s most notable intervention was to develop a philosophy of nature alongside the Kantian and Fichtean theories of transcendental subjectivity, which caught the attention of Goethe and led to his appointment, at the age of twenty-three, as professor of philosophy at the University of Jena. But Schelling’s life and philosophical work continued well beyond this well-documented period, culminating in a late system in which he developed key ideas surrounding freedom, existence, modality and the history of human consciousness that all revolved around a distinction between what he called negative and positive philosophy. This distinction, and his insistence on the need for the development of the latter mode of philosophy, came to challenge some of the core assumptions of the largely rationalist German idealist project and it remains, to this day, perhaps the most powerful alternative to the Hegelian system that rose to dominance already within Schelling’s own lifetime, but also well beyond it.

The aim of Peter Dews’s erudite, comprehensive and compelling new book is to showcase and defend, as the title suggests, Schelling’s late philosophy in direct confrontation with Hegel. This is no easy task, because in order even to enter the confrontation, one must already be well versed in the twists and turns of the development of post-Kantian philosophy, including many details of the writings of Reinhold, Kant, Fichte and Hegel. However, Dews masterfully distils what is at stake in this confrontation by posing a series of fundamental questions and considering how Hegel and Schelling diverge in their answers to them. How are human agency and freedom connected with the natural world? How are we to understand the pervasiveness of religious consciousness, especially within the context of the development of scientific and enlightened worldviews? What is the relation between freedom and history, and what are the ontological preconditions of

human freedom? What are the powers and limits of philosophical truth conceived as a system, and what, if any, is its connection to the interest in the future of human emancipation? And the question that showcases what is perhaps the deepest divergence between Hegel and Schelling: Is there any scope ‘within modernity, for a reasoned defence of sources of meaning and validation other than reason itself?’ (11)

This idea of a reasoned defence of sources of meaning and validation other than reason itself is the paradoxical thought that, despite the oft-mentioned protean nature of his work, drives Schelling’s philosophy from the 1790s into his late system, where he attempts to develop a positive philosophy beyond the limits of a purely rational, *a priori*, construction. This thought is paradoxical because to give a *reasoned* defence of what is other than or outside of reason as a source of meaning is to show that it is not entirely other to reason after all. It shows both that what is other to reason has a rational place in the universe, in the history of human consciousness, and in an individual human existence, *and* that what is other to reason turns out to be at least partially rationally articulable as part of a coherent philosophical system. But rather than turning away from or seeking to resolve this paradox, Schelling’s philosophy dwells within it, inviting us to see it as the condition of the emergence of a distinctive kind of freedom that lies within the potentiality of being itself. Moreover, explicating this paradox in a consistent way will require the development of new philosophical methods beyond modes of rational reconstruction that proceed through a necessary unfolding of reason’s own forms. Without giving up its claim to systematicity, philosophy must become abductive, empirical, hermeneutic and genealogical, unveiling the ultimately contingent yet narratively coherent emergence of human self-consciousness and freedom within nature and history, along with its open possibilities for the future. This need for a philosophical mode of explication beyond the *a priori* lies at the core of Schelling’s philosophical dispute with Hegel: although the ‘absolute method’ of Hegel’s logic can provide us with reason’s necessary forms that indeed reflect the essential structure of reality, what absolute method cannot explain, capture or articulate is the sheer contingent fact of existence itself. This sheer fact of existence—the ungroundable but necessary contingency of there being something rather than nothing—is the ultimate other of reason of which Schelling seeks to give a reasoned defence. It marks the ‘limit’ of negative philosophy and generates the need for a positive philosophy; it also represents the highest failing of Hegel’s rationalist system, the blind spot that poses a challenge to its absolute pretensions.

This sets the stage for the confrontation between Hegel and Schelling, and in what follows, I will take up Dew’s attempt to defend Schelling by addressing two questions that frame their dispute.

- (i) Why, according to Schelling, is his earlier philosophical strategy—demonstrating the reciprocity between freedom and the associated

powers of transcendental subjectivity on the one hand, and the natural world on the other, culminating in an ‘identity philosophy’—insufficient for building a philosophical system grounded in freedom?

- (ii) In what way is modality, and especially *potentiality*, bound up with being at its core, both the thought of being-ness itself and the necessary facticity of contingent existence?

In both cases, my answer will depart somewhat from Dews’s treatment of similar questions and will take both a defensive and offensive approach from Hegel’s perspective. Addressing these two questions will also allow us to consider the distinction between negative and positive philosophy, along with Hegel’s understanding of the relation between logic and *Realphilosophie*. If I were to state the key difference between Hegel and Schelling in a programmatic (and inevitably incomplete) way, it would be that whereas Schelling’s philosophical approach dwells in the paradoxical relation between reason and its other in order to grasp the potentialities of freedom within contingent existence, Hegel treats the problem of finding, comprehending and enacting reason and freedom in the world dialectically. Sometimes, this leads only to minor differences, but in Schelling’s late work, a gulf opens up between these two approaches that, to his mind, requires a new method of philosophizing altogether.

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Although not formally divided as such, Dews’s book can be read as proceeding through three thematic parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first three chapters concisely present Schelling’s work from the late 1790s to the 1820s, focusing on the interrelated themes of nature, agency and freedom. Dews brings us from Schelling’s early departure from Kant and Fichte’s merely subjective solutions to the subject–object problem in various guises, through Schelling’s identity philosophy and the *Freiheitsschrift* and *Weltalter* of the middle period, up to the Erlangen Lectures of the 1820s. While this covers a vast amount of both work and time within Schelling’s corpus and life, Dews’s arguments and narrative in the first three chapters are tightly unified by questions such as the relation between freedom and nature, how to understand the ontological preconditions of freedom, attempts to resolve Kant’s paradox of autonomy, and how the individual experience of human freedom can be reconciled with our philosophical accounts of the same.

Having set the stage for approaching Schelling’s late philosophy, the next three chapters present the main argument of the book, showing how Schelling’s development of the distinction between negative and positive philosophy poses a fundamental challenge to Hegel’s tripartite system consisting of a science of logic, a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of *Geist*. Each chapter poses

challenges to Hegel's philosophy of the 'Idea' from various perspectives. Chapter 4 takes up the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*, arguing that his treatment of the being/nothing dialectic is unable to accommodate an important distinction between not-being or nothing on the one hand, and non-being on the other. The latter is significant because non-being, in denying *actual* being, still denotes the potentiality of any determinate mode of being while being itself devoid of any determinations. For Dews, Hegel's occlusion of this distinction raises both ontological and methodological problems for his science of logic. Chapter 5 presents what is perhaps the most important argument in the book, showing that there is a need to go beyond Hegel's logical Idea and hence, a need to transition from a purely *a priori*, negative philosophy to positive philosophy. Here, Dews challenges Hegel's understanding of the relation between logic and *Realphilosophie* and argues that the logical Idea cannot ground the 'groundlessly necessary existence' that is outside of and nonderivable from the operations of *a priori* reason, but which serves as its ontological precondition. In explicating and defending Schelling's notion of 'un-pre-thinkable being' (*das unvordenkliche Seyn*), Dews takes up a number of Hegel scholars who have addressed related questions (Theunissen, Höhle, Horstmann, and especially Kreines) and shows that none of these accounts are able to withstand Schelling's challenge. Chapter 6 continues to explicate the idea of un-pre-thinkable being by drawing comparisons with Sartre, taking up the differences in Hegel and Schelling's treatment of the ontological argument, and returns to the issue of the transition from logic to *Realphilosophie*. Dews also returns to the question of freedom and agency within nature, now under the guise of the beginning of positive philosophy, drawing on the work of Helen Steward. Although this treatment is illuminating, it raises the question of whether there are substantive rather than merely procedural differences at play between Hegel and Schelling on this issue and further, whether the transition to positive philosophy in fact brings substantive insights Schelling (and Hegel) had not previously reached regarding the emergence of freedom within nature.

The final three chapters of Dews's book take up Schelling's positive philosophy directly, the bulk of which consists in what we can call Schelling's philosophy of religion. In providing an abductive, *a posteriori*, hermeneutical and genealogical account of the history of human consciousness with the aim of showcasing the contingent but coherent emergence of freedom, Schelling turns primarily to forms of religious consciousness, from ancient Greek forms of mythological consciousness to the 'Philosophy of Revelation', which is an extended interpretation of Christianity in detail. Dews does an admirable job of distilling the key philosophical moves made by Schelling in these lectures and texts as well as highlighting how Schelling and Hegel differ in their approaches to religious consciousness in general and Christianity in particular. Two differences between the thinkers stand out in Dews's account. First, whereas Hegel aims to show that religion is based on the

capacity for human thought, expressing reason in an incomplete, ‘representational’ mode, Schelling reserves a role for revelation in opposition to reason and argues that our explanations and historical narratives concerning religious consciousness cannot be captured in a purely conceptual mode. As Dews rightly notes, Hegel’s account of religion paves the way for the radical critiques of religion in figures such as Feuerbach, Bauer and Marx, whereas Schelling understands religious consciousness as involving a genuine relation with the transcendent posited as God (for Schelling, human self-consciousness is essentially ‘God-positing’).

Second, and returning to a central theme of his book, Dews criticizes Hegel’s conception of freedom in objective spirit on account of its essential conservatism and its elimination of a genuine practical standpoint for individual agents, arguing for the superiority of Schelling’s account which emphasizes the potentiality to be (to actualize oneself in a determinate way) *and* not to be (to refrain from, to resist and to free oneself of determinations that are oppressive or unduly constraining that impose themselves as necessities and therefore, to maintain the power of potentiality by *not* being at home in the world). Dews concludes his book by suggesting that we understand Schelling’s positive philosophy as an ‘affirmative’ and not merely critical genealogy, one that uncovers the origins and history of human consciousness—its contingent progress and its regressions—while affirming its essential value and leaving open possibilities for the yet-to-be-determined future. Whereas in the second part of the book, the systematic distinction between negative and positive philosophy carries the argumentative burden against the Hegelian system, in the third part, the divergences between Hegel and Schelling do not appear to hinge on this systematic distinction at all, even though these topics are discussed by Schelling under the heading of positive philosophy. That is to say: while Dews clearly demonstrates the differences, for example, between Hegel and Schelling’s interpretations of religion and Christianity, and their differences in approaching the consciousness of freedom in history, *these* differences, to my mind, do not essentially depend on the distinction between negative and positive philosophy as such, and would stand independent of positing any such distinction. This raises the general question of the register at which we are to adjudicate their confrontation, as well as how questions of system and method hang together with substantive philosophical questions about freedom or the interpretation of religion.

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As should be clear, Dews’s book provides a comprehensive interpretation and defence of Schelling’s philosophy, emphasizing his late system in particular as superior to Hegel’s. I turn now to addressing the first question: (i) why, according to Schelling, was his earlier philosophical system inadequate, requiring him to posit a distinction between negative and positive philosophy in the first place? The

framing and title of Dews's first chapter, 'Toward Nature', invites another way of posing the question. In attempting to provide a solution to the subject–object problem (the problem of how subject and object are related and distinct in the constitution of experience and knowledge) that moved beyond considerations on the side of transcendental subjectivity, Schelling's earliest innovation was to construct a philosophy of nature that allowed us to understand the potentiality for and emergence of intelligence and freedom within nature. Rather than a blind manifold or a crude chaotic aggregate that, within itself, contained no potentiality for unity or form that could render it either intelligible or self-active, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* attempted to show how nature's processes expressed the activity and structure of self-consciousness in an unconscious form, thereby enabling a reciprocity between self-conscious subjects and objects of knowledge. In presenting a structural homology between cognitive and natural processes, Schelling offered a new way of conceiving critical idealism that shifted away from Kant and Fichte's merely subjective and generally anti-naturalist approaches. As Dews puts it succinctly: 'knowledge *articulates* reality; but the necessary structure of knowledge is grounded in the reality which it articulates' (33).<sup>1</sup> As part of a larger philosophical system which includes a transcendental account of self-consciousness, the philosophy of nature is thus as much about nature as it is about the conditions of self-conscious knowing and agency. Organic, self-organizing nature is both an ontological and conceptual condition of self-consciousness: there must *exist* organic, living forms for self-conscious cognition to be possible; moreover, the unity, organization and form of living organisms articulates the shape of intelligibility, making possible the conceptual articulation of reality and a system of knowledge founded on freedom.

This approach to idealism, what Dews calls 'turning transcendental consciousness inside out', was deeply influential for Hegel, not only in his early writings in which there was direct collaboration with Schelling, but all the way through to the development of his mature system consisting of a science of logic, a philosophy of nature, and a philosophy of spirit (40). The importance of organic unity and form is so important for Hegel that at the conclusion of the *Science of Logic*, he presents life as the immediate form of the logical Idea, expressive of the primitive form of truth as the processual unity of concept and reality. The question, then, is why Schelling came to view his own move 'toward nature' to be insufficient. The first thing to note is that Schelling's project in the philosophy of nature is much more ambitious than the above characterization initially suggests: although living nature as self-producing activity is an ontological *and* conceptual condition for self-consciousness, Schelling's early *Naturphilosophie* does not proceed by way of a transcendental argument that lays out such conditions. Instead, it 'seeks to construct or "create" nature out of a recursive interplay of basic opposed forces' (46). In abstracting from the transcendental 'principle of self-construction'—

namely, the self-positing I from which transcendental philosophy proceeds—Schelling seeks to show that this ‘self-positing structure’ exists ‘below’ self-consciousness, and that it is only through the progression of various stages of nature that the structure eventually attains to a self-conscious level (48–49). This raises a difficult methodological question as to the philosophical perspective from which nature is ‘constructed’, especially since Schelling eventually comes to view *Naturphilosophie* as primary and transcendental philosophy as derived from it (49). These methodological questions, along with an instability in how Schelling ultimately understands the relation between transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of nature, leads Schelling to develop the philosophy of identity (*Identitätsphilosophie*), which seeks a higher, absolute standpoint of reason as the ‘point of indifference (*Indifferenzpunkt*) between the subjective and the objective’, or between structures of consciousness and material nature (75, 76; see also 55 and 71–78). As Dews rightly notes, the philosophy of identity provides an entry point into Hegel’s own system, where this is developed as a ‘dialectical theory [...] based on a logic of contradiction’ (78). Given that Hegel saw the general approach of identity philosophy, with some important adjustments, to be so fruitful, why did Schelling become dissatisfied with this early system, leading him to view it as merely ‘negative’ philosophy?

Dews’s answer is that Schelling thinks there is an important explanatory gap between philosophical system building and individual experience that cannot be bridged by *a priori* reasoning alone. The worry appears to be that the *rational necessity* of the system itself conflicts with, obliterates, and renders superfluous, the individual experience and spontaneity of human freedom that the system is meant to ground. In other words, if freedom is simply guaranteed or rationally necessitated by the subject–object theory articulated in the *Identitätsphilosophie* (it is rationally necessary *a priori* that nature is self-active and self-producing; it is rationally necessary *a priori* that the self-positing I posits itself as self-determining), then the individual experience of human freedom as a power of choice free from all necessitation becomes an illusion. He writes:

[Schelling comes to] a dawning realization that the indexicalized perspectives on the world of individual experiencing subjects cannot be derived seamlessly from universal rational structures. There is an explanatory gap which, it seems, cannot be bridged. (80)

There is no unbroken train of philosophical argument which leads from the *a priori* rationalism of the *Identitätsphilosophie* to the world as experienced by the individual human subject [...]. The result is a world which cannot be knitted together by reason [...]. [Schelling struggles] to reconcile the need of



reason for comprehensive system with his new sense of the central and irreducible role of individual human freedom. (85)<sup>2</sup>

In identifying an ‘explanatory gap’ between the philosophical system building of *a priori* reason and individual human experience, Dewes is primarily concerned with the problem of human agency and freedom, but the philosophical issue is broad: we cannot derive, by means of *a priori* philosophical reasoning alone, the world as it is experienced by individual human agents. We can add a corollary here that will become the central motivation of Schelling’s late philosophy: we cannot derive, by means *a priori* philosophical reasoning alone, the sheer contingent fact of there existing anything at all. Although these could be viewed as obvious truths that only philosophers would be tempted to forget, it becomes especially pertinent when considering the individual experience of one’s own freedom. The rational necessity of a complete philosophical system, like the one represented by *Identitätsphilosophie*, threatens to render illusory human freedom at the level of individual experience. This gap ought to be particularly troubling for philosophers interested in building a philosophical system *founded* on freedom, which accounts for Fichte’s emphasis on the self-positing I and Schelling’s emphasis on self-producing nature alike. Thus, although the philosophy of nature and the requisite philosophy of identity were interventions that attempted to overcome the one-sided approach of transcendental philosophy, Schelling’s eventual self-assessment is that *Identitätsphilosophie* is one-sided in its own way, for it fails to account for the gap between the *a priori* constructions of reason and the experiences and contingent existence—especially of freedom—which necessarily lie beyond it (122–23).

In this tangle of philosophical problems, one can raise a number of concerns about Schelling’s chosen path that leads him to regard the philosophy of identity as merely ‘negative’ philosophy, which ‘elaborates an *a priori* theory of the structures of being’, in contrast with ‘positive’ philosophy, which ‘confront[s] the bare fact of the world’s existence [...] operating abductively to frame the most comprehensive explanation it can for the inner dynamic of nature and the evolving history of human consciousness’ (117). The first is the way that Schelling deploys a stark contrast between *a priori* theory and experience or the bare fact of existence, which, even by his own lights, stand in a more complicated relation than this distinction suggests.<sup>3</sup> Given that negative philosophy includes not only Schelling’s theory of potentialities but also a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of spirit, whose equivalent in Hegel would therefore include both logic and *Realphilosophie*, it is simply inaccurate to characterize *all* of this as a purely *a priori* theory of the structures of being. The example of *Naturphilosophie* illustrates the problem well (one could provide many more examples from the work of both thinkers).<sup>4</sup> In describing the project of Schelling’s philosophy of nature *qua* negative philosophy (philosophy of nature will also show up again at the beginning of positive philosophy), Dewes



notes that if it is to be conceptually coherent, it ‘should converge with the results of scientific observation and experiment’, and conform to ‘our everyday experience’ (46; see also 73). He helpfully describes this theoretical enterprise in terms of ‘reflective equilibrium’, stressing however that the connection to our everyday experience of nature makes the approach even more complex (46). Dews also refers to Schelling’s claim that when faced with the living form of an organism, we are *compelled* and *constrained* to apprehend it as purposively organized in connection with Kant’s conception of reflective judgment (41, 43). To describe this method of approaching nature as merely negative philosophy that proceeds through *a priori* rational construction alone, seems to me a mischaracterization. One could say, then, that Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy requires him to underappreciate the methodological complexity of the former and to overstate the methodological innovations of the latter. Indeed, later on, Dews uses the same idea of ‘reflective equilibrium’ to describe Schelling’s *positive* philosophy and its approach to the history of religious consciousness (247). If reflective equilibrium is essential for both negative and positive philosophy, then it is difficult to see what is at stake drawing the distinction. It also shows that Schelling’s attempt to clearly divide ‘a priori theory’ from the ‘bare fact of existence’ and the experience thereof is based on a misunderstanding—of his own philosophy, of Hegel and of how philosophical reflection and judgement operate to generate knowledge about ourselves and the world. If Schelling’s rejection of his own identity philosophy as merely ‘negative’ is based on a misunderstanding of that project and its methodological potential, then Hegel’s appropriation and transformation of the philosophy of identity is indeed a viable alternative.

Regarding the gap and relation between *a priori* theory and contingent existence, we can raise a further concern with Schelling’s claim that *Naturphilosophie* seeks to ‘construct’ or ‘create’ nature. In my view, this is not what Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie* seeks to do.<sup>5</sup> If we abandon this overly ambitious and highly questionable approach in which *a priori* theory seeks to construct or create what exists, then Schelling’s worry would never appear in the form in which he presents it in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

The second issue concerns the explanatory gap identified by Schelling between philosophical system building and the first-personal experience of the world in general and of our own freedom in particular. For Dews, this issue is key for understanding the progression of Schelling’s thought into his late system, and Chapter 9 provides an extensive critique of Hegel on account of his presenting the practical standpoint of individual agents ultimately as an illusion (261–63).<sup>7</sup> This is a highly complex philosophical problem involving questions about agency and the philosophy of history that I cannot address here; instead I will again raise some doubts about Schelling’s methodological diagnosis of the problem. In identifying an explanatory gap, Schelling’s self-criticism is that *Identitätsphilosophie* had

tackled the opposition between mind and nature but not the ‘higher’ and ‘genuine’ opposition between necessity and freedom (87). On the one hand, this is an odd diagnosis, since one of the aims of *Naturphilosophie* is to show how necessity (lawfulness) and self-producing activity (the form of freedom) are present in natural processes and can develop into self-conscious mind. On the other hand, Schelling’s diagnosis can be understood at a higher register: in so far as *Identitätsphilosophie* (including its claims about the unity of nature and mind) is rationally necessary as a closed, complete system, freedom as a ‘beginning without need of a ground’ stands opposed to and cannot be encompassed by it (88).<sup>8</sup> That is, freedom cannot be confined to being merely an object of investigation *within* the system (as in the claim that freedom emerges within nature), but is the very condition *of* the system, an unconditioned, groundless act of the will without which philosophical system building could not begin. As Dews discusses in detail, reconciling these two approaches to freedom is the aim of Schelling’s *Freiheitschrift*. However, it is important to note that the ‘gap’ identified by Schelling—between the freedom presupposed by the system and our philosophical account of freedom within the system—is not original to him, but also fully visible to both Fichte and Hegel, though they address it in different ways. Whereas Fichte presents entry into the system as a quasi-existential choice between dogmatism and criticism, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* tackles the problem of how to reach the standpoint of philosophical science (*Wissenschaft*) from a phenomenological, social and historical perspective. For Hegel, the freedom presupposed by the system is not just a metaphysical problem about how to grasp beginning without need of a ground, but a social and historical achievement of self-conscious self-comprehension that can be given both a phenomenological/experiential and philosophical presentation.<sup>9</sup> Dews does not address Hegel’s strategy for providing a ‘beginning’ or introduction to philosophical science, and it is far beyond the scope of the present paper to assess this strategy. It is only important to point out that just as Schelling can characterize identity philosophy as merely negative by underestimating the complexity of its method, here he fails to appreciate that there are different paths to reconciling phenomenological and philosophical standpoints pertaining to freedom that allow us to approach and develop, rather than abandon, *Identitätsphilosophie*.

Finally, although Schelling officially leaves behind the philosophy of identity in favour of a distinction between negative and positive philosophy, there is the systematically awkward result that many of its insights concerning nature, spirit, art and religion are repeated within this new methodological orientation. As I mentioned above, a clear example of this concerns the philosophy of nature and how we are to understand agency as emergent within natural processes (197ff). Drawing on the work of Helen Steward, Dews describes our ‘experience of the natural world as pervaded by agency’ (199). I am deeply sympathetic to this idea

which can clearly be traced back to both the early Schelling as well as Hegel. But if different methods lead to the same (or very similar) results, how are we to assess the significance of the methodological intervention? My suggestions here have been that in various ways, Schelling's self-criticism, along with his understanding of the methodological issues, are somewhat misplaced, and that Hegel has good reason to develop Schelling's identity philosophy in his own, unique direction.

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Another major divergence between Hegel and Schelling concerns their treatment of modality which brings us to the second question I raised above: (ii) In what way is modality, and especially *potentiality*, bound up with being at its core, both the thought of being-ness itself and the necessary facticity of contingent existence? Although this question has many different levels and brings us deep into Schelling's theory of potentialities, the critique of Hegel that underlies this question is familiar, namely, that Hegel's philosophy is, at bottom, necessitarian, from his treatment of logic to his philosophy of history. In downplaying or perhaps eradicating *significant* contingency in the progression of reason, Hegel closes off the potentiality for freedom and openness toward the future that would *oppose* the necessary force of reason, which, in the domain of objective spirit in particular, can become oppressive. Simplifying somewhat, the problem can be seen most clearly in Hegel's *Doppelsatz*, which identifies the rational and actual, leaving no room for either facticity or freedom that would fall outside of or stand opposed to reason's dialectic.

Without being able to evaluate Schelling's highly complex theory of potentialities here (Dews's book provides an excellent and detailed account), I will take up two issues concerning modality in the confrontation between Hegel and Schelling. The first concerns the beginning of the *Logic*; the second concerns the 'contingently necessary existing-ness' (*das zufällig nothwendiges Existieren*) that marks the 'limit' of negative philosophy and brings about the need for positive philosophy.

As I briefly mentioned above, Schelling challenges the opening dialectic of Hegel's *Logic* (being, nothing, becoming), along with his claim to be proceeding from a presuppositionless beginning. Schelling thus takes issue with Hegel not only for staying within negative philosophy (even in the case of his *Realphilosophie*), but also for the way he approaches the beginning of negative philosophy. Essentially, Schelling contends that Hegel's beginning both occludes and yet necessarily presupposes the potentiality of being-ness (*das Seyende*) itself that is the proper beginning of negative philosophy. Being-ness itself, or what Schelling sometimes calls the 'subject of being' (*das Subjekt des Seyns*), is the indeterminate potentiality of being presupposed by every determinate way of being. In Schelling's negative philosophy, he develops the 'potentialities of being' into natural kinds or fundamental forms, a process that 'generates the successive forms of

inorganic and organic nature, culminating in the emergence of human beings . . . [where] human existence is the re-emergence, in a finite form, of pure being-ness' (140–41). From Hegel's perspective, Schelling's idea of 'being-ness itself' is an abstraction reified, for as suggested in the opening dialectic of the *Logic*, pure, indeterminate, immediate being is at the same time pure nothingness. *Contra* Schelling, pure, indeterminate being-ness cannot be conceived of as potentiality *and* remain indeterminate. Schelling, however, argues that Hegel's dialectic obscures a distinction between *not-being* or *nothing* and *non-being*: whereas the former is simply nothingness (*das Nichts*), the latter as the contrary rather than contradictory negation of being (*das Nichtsein*) is the negation of some actual way of being while still denoting the potentiality to be in another way (128–29). Schelling is drawing on Aristotle's understanding of potentiality and actuality, in which we can negate the existence of certain properties in *actuality* while still maintaining their existence as *potentiality* (128). This is how being-ness itself can be indeterminate potentiality, something that Hegel obscures in his opening dialectic.

Dews acknowledges that Hegel has two replies to this. The first is that Hegel in fact *does* acknowledge that nothing can be non-being in the sense favoured by Schelling, but the result is the same, since non-being as both being and its negation is simply what Hegel calls *becoming*, the next thought-determination of his dialectic. The second is less conciliatory and accuses Schelling of importing a concept of 'potentiality' into his system that is simply unavailable at the presuppositionless beginning of pure science. Dews does not seem to have a reply to this second Hegelian rejoinder and instead turns to a methodological problem concerning abstraction that I will not discuss here (129–30). However, I would argue that there is a deeper problem with Schelling's understanding of the potentiality of 'being-ness' itself, which is that the concept of potentiality here is entirely indeterminate, and hence, impotent to generate further potentialities and fundamental forms. We can point to two developments later in the *Logic* that would suggest this. First, in the chapter on 'Actuality', Hegel criticizes an idea he calls 'formal possibility', which is the thought that anything that is not contradictory is possible. This sense of possibility is merely formal because it fails to tell us in any determinate way what is *actually* possible—that is, what is possible given a concrete set of conditions, given some actual situation, event, process or thing with a significant form. His claim is that real potentiality or power can only be ascertained in reference to such conditions, which requires a determinateness that the potentiality of being-ness lacks.

Second, in the Subjective Logic, Hegel associates what he calls (with Spinoza in mind) 'free power' with the concept or *der Begriff*. Far from indulging in a rationalist fantasy, Hegel is developing the thought that grasping potentiality and power is essentially connected to significant form, that to talk of potentiality as such *without* reference either to conditions or to significant form is entirely empty. Schelling

seems to understand the weight of this thought, since the actualization from the first potentiality (*das Seynkönnende*—that-which-has-the-capacity-to-be) to the second potentiality (*das Seynmüssende*—that-which-has-to-be) is a move in which ‘pure being-ness is *forced* to take on the form of form’ (140). The idea of the form of form, or what Hegel would call *form-activity* (*Formtätigkeit*), is what is meant by *the concept*.<sup>10</sup> Meaningful, determinate talk of potentiality, actuality, necessity and contingency, along with properties, powers and capacities, must make reference to a determinate form of being, and the concept is the basic unity or form of form that provides a concrete context of predication. So it is not only the idea of ‘being-ness’ that would be empty for Hegel, but also the idea of potentiality that Schelling employs as the starting point and motor of his system.

A second way in which problems of modality highlight the divergences between Hegel and Schelling concern the limits of negative philosophy and the need for a transition to positive philosophy. At issue here is not the indeterminate ‘subject of being’ that is the potentiality for any determinate way of being, but the sheer facticity of contingent existence that cannot be captured, deduced or necessitated by *a priori* reason, but serves as its ontological precondition. The limit of negative philosophy is captured by the question, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’: there must be something rather than nothing in order for reason’s forms to articulate reality, but reason’s forms cannot provide a ground, explanation or guarantee of that existence, without which they would be entirely empty. As Dews puts it, the contingently necessary existence that is the subject of positive philosophy is ‘being of a type whose necessity cannot be inferred from anything logically or conceptually prior to it, or taken to be identical with it’ (172); thus, it lies outside and beyond Hegel’s logical Idea by definition. Dews sums up the dispute here between Hegel and Schelling in the following way: ‘For both, reason is its own presupposition—although Schelling would add: *logically*, but not ontologically speaking’ (161). Instead, the sheer contingent fact of there existing anything at all is an ontological condition of reason that reason cannot encompass. Since it marks the limit of negative, *a priori* philosophy, what it brings about is the beginning of a new method of philosophizing altogether, one that is empirically sensitive, abductive, hermeneutical and genealogical. Rather than a theory of natural kinds or reason’s fundamental forms, positive philosophy tries to provide a comprehensive explanation of ‘the bare fact of the world’s existence’, a fact that cannot be grasped by reason alone.

I have already raised my doubts about Schelling’s way of demarcating the *a priori* theory and contingent existence, which not only artificially separates the two but misrepresents so-called negative philosophy in particular. The following passage from Schelling, quoted by Dews, is symptomatic of the mistaken way in which Schelling stipulates the problem: ‘The content of negative philosophy is being which can be comprehended *a priori*, that of positive philosophy is being which is

*a priori incomprehensible*, with the intention that it should become comprehensible *a posteriori*? (146).<sup>11</sup> Both sides of the dichotomy are problematic. On the first side, it is not evident that there is being that can be fully comprehended in a purely *a priori* manner. *Naturphilosophie*, as I discussed above, cannot be characterized this way, and although this is too complicated an issue to settle here, I do not think that this is the right way of characterizing Hegel's *Logic* either. The *Logic* provides the thought-determinations that render being intelligible, but, as a 'realm of shadows', it is dependent upon the reality which casts its shadows. Moreover, cognition of being in accordance with the thought-determinations of the *Logic* is possible only on account of further, non-*a priori* conditions presented in Hegel's Subjective Spirit. On the second side, Schelling has not proven that there is being that is entirely incomprehensible in the face of reason's forms. Especially once we abandon the more ambitious and, I think, implausible idea that the forms of reason aim to 'construct' or 'create' reality, it is not evident why it should be a problem that reason cannot necessitate the contingent fact of existence. The claim that reason cannot necessitate that existence (which is granted) is distinct from the claim that that existence is and must be incomprehensible to reason. Since Dewes stresses rightly and insightfully throughout that Schelling's positive philosophy is in no way a slide into irrationalism, and that its abductive method requires reflective equilibrium, reason's forms clearly remain operative, even if they are not fully self-sufficient.

The deeper and more difficult to adjudicate aspect of the dispute here is that on the Hegelian view, it is, quite simply, hard to grasp the force of the question that motivates positive philosophy: why is there something rather than nothing? Dewes himself acknowledges this in connection with his discussion of Rolf-Peter Horstmann's interpretation of the dispute:

[Horstmann suggests] that the existence of 'externality' (spatio-temporal reality) is a condition of possibility of Hegel's logical structures because [...] they would remain in some sense deficient, if not *also* instantiated in the worldly domain. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that what Hegel is proposing is a 'naturalized logic'. If we ask *why* there exists a spatio-temporal reality, the other of the Idea [...] Hegel's response would presumably be that the question does not make sense. For it to be intelligible, we would have to abstract in thought the being of the empirical world from every determinate feature of that world [...]. According to Hegel, then, there is no coherent distinction to be made between the being or not being of the world as a whole. Hence there can be no meaningful question of the kind trailed by Leibniz concerning why anything at all exists. (156)

This seems to me to capture Hegel's response to the motivating question of positive philosophy. Why-questions only make sense, and can only be answered, on the basis of determinate conditions, qualities, causes and forms of being. The 'something' and 'nothing' in the question, however, contain no determinateness whatsoever, referring to something existing as such or not existing as such. The question of why there is something rather than nothing is thus a pseudo-question, for it requires us to abstract from all determinateness as such, thereby taking away the ground from which any reasonable answer to the why-question could be given. For Schelling and Dews, however, Hegel's inability to grasp the significance of this question is fatal. It means that Hegel cannot grasp the limits of negative philosophy and the 'powerlessness' of reason; it leads Hegel to claim that an absolute form of reason (the absolute idea) 'grounds the existence of the world as a whole'; and most importantly, it eliminates what Schelling calls "'un-prethinkable being" (*das unvordenkliche Seyn*) [...], being which is neither identical with its concept nor derivable from it' (148).

In addressing this final issue, I think Schelling and Hegel cannot avoid talking past each other to some extent. Indeed, Schelling's starting point is that there *is* 'existing-ness' (*das Existieren*) that as such lies beyond reason's scope, whereas Hegel's claim is that this same idea cannot be coherently articulated. Contrary to Dews's characterization, I do not think that in denying that there is existence as such that lies beyond reason's scope, Hegel is claiming that reason or the absolute idea 'grounds the existence of the world as a whole'. Even in the *Doppelsatz*, what Hegel brings into dialectical interrelation is not reason and *existence*, but reason and actuality or *Wirklichkeit*. Unlike existence, *Wirklichkeit* is a highly demanding way of articulating a shape of reality in which some sense of necessity on account of an end can be discerned. Hegel always distinguishes what is actual from what merely exists, with the difference being that existence is merely contingent in a manner that is distinct from what we would call actual. While this is a complicated distinction, it leads to a more important point concerning Hegel's absolute idea, which, as he says, is a *method*. When Hegel claims that his method is 'absolute', what he means is that anything that can be rendered intelligible will be rendered intelligible on account of the system of thought-determinations presented in the *Science of Logic*. So there is no *in principle* remainder to absolute method (nothing that is absolutely outside of method as its alien, incommensurable other—any such absolute 'outside' would be nonsense). But this, in turn, does not mean that there can be no *simple* remainder (existence that has not yet or may never be rendered fully rational) or degrees of rationality (existence that is contingent in being what it is, by its very nature—this is why there is a distinction for Hegel between existence and actuality, not everything that *exists* is *actual*). The absoluteness of absolute method only entails that there is no *in principle* remainder to reason, which also just means that there are no things-in-themselves. It doesn't entail that reason or the absolute



idea generates or necessitates existence, nor that existence can be deduced from it, nor that there can't be existence that is not fully identical with its concept. In Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, there are lots of examples that illustrate this well. From his appreciation of the genuine contingency of nature's forms, to anthropological tendencies toward madness, to the contradictions of civil society that result in poverty, to the dysfunctions of public opinion that can lead to the destruction of the state, Hegel surely grasps that reason is not absolute in any straightforward, literal sense that would make us insensitive to contingency, alienation, dysfunction or even oppression. What he does resist is the idea that understanding all this requires that we grasp the limits of reason. Instead, we can say with Marx that reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form. As dynamic, alive and always evolving, reason—and not just that which stands opposed to it—contains potentiality for development and transformation that leads towards the same aims of freedom and universal emancipation embraced by Schelling.

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Dews's book sets a new standard for the interpretation of Schelling's late system and is likely the best and most comprehensive book yet to appear in English on Schelling's philosophy as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the doubts I've raised here do not concern Dews's interpretation of Schelling, but revolve around his and Schelling's understanding of Hegel's system, along with Schelling's claim that there is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between negative and positive philosophy. I have also raised doubts about the supposed superiority of Schelling's late system in contrast to his earlier system of identity philosophy, which I, like Hegel, find to be much more compelling. Given the comprehensive nature of Dews's book, however, there are many issues that I have not discussed, and the confrontation between Hegel and Schelling will surely continue. For anyone with interest in that confrontation or in the philosophy of German idealism more broadly, Dews's book is a must-read.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although Dews would likely disagree, this is an elegant way of stating how Hegel understands the relation between logic and *Realphilosophie*.

<sup>2</sup> See also 73–74, where Dews discusses the limits of *Naturphilosophie* to bring the practical standpoint into view in so far as freedom can only come into view from the 'first-person standpoint'.

Hegel, following Schelling's lead (even if Schelling himself does not view the matter this way), acknowledges this and incorporates a first-personal, phenomenological experience of life and living form into his account of self-consciousness and its struggle for freedom in chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>3</sup> Although Dews enlists Adorno as an ally of Schelling at several places, Adorno in fact sides with Hegel on this issue. For Adorno, it is a virtue of Hegel's method that he 'fully elaborated' the idea 'that the a priori is also the a posteriori', presenting a critique of both 'a grim empirical reality' and 'static priorism' (1993: 3). He also praises Hegel on account of his 'mediation of the a priori and the a posteriori' (1993: 48; see also 66–67). See Dews 2014 for his treatment of Schelling and Adorno.

<sup>4</sup> Even if one accepts the distinction as drawn by Schelling (which I am challenging here), it is clearly mistaken to classify Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, for example, as negative philosophy. Neuhouser argues that Hegel's project should be regarded as an 'empirical science', by which he means that 'it cannot fulfill its task *as a science* without appeal to experience—to the real constitution of the present world' (2021: 269, my emphasis). Dews has many substantive criticisms of the *Philosophy of Right* but to my mind none of them hinge on the methodological distinction Schelling wants to draw between negative and positive philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> See the introduction of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* where he considers the relation between the philosophy of nature and the empirical sciences. It is clear from the text that Hegel is not only attuned to problems of 'reflective equilibrium', but also takes up how thought can consider nature from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno's assessment of this issue also seems correct: 'Hegel resisted the dogmatic moment in Schelling's philosophy of nature through recourse to a Fichtean, and even Kantian, epistemological impulse' (1993: 3).

<sup>7</sup> For views that contest this, see Moyar 2011 and Alznauer 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Dews is using Heidegger's formulation here.

<sup>9</sup> It is also a metaphysical problem for Hegel but he addresses questions surrounding *causa sui* through the concepts of teleology and life.

<sup>10</sup> I have argued that Hegel's concept of the concept must be understood in connection with the concept of life, which is heavily influenced by Kant's approach to the self-organizing form of an organism or *Naturzweck* in the third *Critique*. See Ng 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Dews is quoting from Schelling's *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42*.

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