

## Ecstasy of Reason, Crisis of Reason: Schelling and Absolute Difference

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The error of all efforts to determine the transcendental as consciousness is that they think of the transcendental in the image of, and in resemblance to, that which it is supposed to ground.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Deleuze's references to Schelling are occasional, yet largely appreciative. In *Difference and Repetition*, we find Deleuze remarking Schelling's superiority over Hegel, his achievement being to '[bring] difference out of the night of the Identical'.<sup>2</sup> In *The Logic of Sense*, he mentions Schelling's 'extraordinary' treatment of the *Ungrund* (*Sans-fond*).<sup>3</sup> And in his earliest work devoted to Bergson, Deleuze claims Schelling as a forerunner of Bergsonism.<sup>4</sup> Yet these remarks have to be set against other, less positive comments: for example, Schelling's Absolute 'cannot sustain difference',<sup>5</sup> and lies beyond familiar forms of transcendence such as the Self as an abyssal 'nothing',<sup>6</sup> an 'unknown identity of contraries' of a kind that Deleuze associates with 'spiritualist and dolorist philosophy'.<sup>7</sup>

My aim here is to justify this dual Deleuzean evaluation of Schelling, by extracting from an overview of Schelling's work two tendencies of thought, which are manifested as essentially connected, yet contending, modes of *philia* towards the Absolute. In this fashion, the way in which Schelling both approaches and diverges from Deleuze's 'immanent thinking' will be clarified. This will also go some way toward proving the

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 128 [hereafter LS]; *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: Athlone, 1990), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1968), p. 246 [hereafter DR]; *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> LS 130/106.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, 'La conception de la difference chez Bergson', *Les Études Bergsoniennes* IV (1956), 77-112, at p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> DR 354/276.

<sup>6</sup> LS 130/107.

<sup>7</sup> LS 202/173.

affinity between certain 'minor' tendencies within German Idealism and Deleuze's use of the notion of absolute difference, thus tracing further the transverse line which Deleuze himself draws through Kant, Hölderlin, Kleist and the later Fichte.<sup>8</sup> I will end by sketching how Deleuze stands with respect to the relation between these two Schellingian tendencies, by contrasting the two thinkers' respective 'images of thought', i.e., the divergent ways in which they posit the Absolute as the non-objective 'object' of philosophy.

## I

Schelling's influence in France since his death in 1854, like his continuing influence in Germany, is principally linked to his critique of Hegel, although this line of descent is more subterranean among the French. The work of Jean Wahl exemplifies one strand of this French reception of Schelling, one that interprets his thought as a radical form of empiricism.<sup>9</sup> Of interest to Wahl was, above all, Schelling's late, so-called 'positive' philosophy. This period of Schelling's career, which is usually seen as beginning sometime in the 1820s,<sup>10</sup> sees him reaffirming his earlier conception of the Absolute in 1800-1804 as a unity that is in-itself neither subject nor object, and is known through a variety of non-rational intuition. Hence it is also this period of Schelling's thought that marks him most decisively as a figure whose notion of the Absolute is, for some commentators, a forerunner of Heidegger's treatment of a non-rational, primordial 'openness' to Being.<sup>11</sup> However, it is possible to find the elements of this treatment of the Absolute being developed throughout all the stages of Schelling's career, from his earliest quarrel with Fichte onward. The focus of this dispute was Schelling's gradual

<sup>8</sup> On Kant and Hölderlin, see DR 116-18/85-7; on Kleist, see *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp. 439-40; *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), pp. 355-56; on Fichte, see 'L'immanence: une vie ...', *Philosophie* 47 (September 1995), 3-7, at p. 4; 'Immanence: A Life ...', trans. Nick Millet, *Theory, Culture and Society* 14(2) (1997), 3-7, at p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Wahl, *Vers le concret* (Paris: Vrin, 1932).

<sup>10</sup> The delineation of early, middle, and late periods of Schelling's work is inexact. The demarcation point between 'middle' and 'late' may be as early as 1820-21, the period Schelling spent in Erlangen; see Andrew Bowie, 'Translator's Introduction', in Schelling, *Lectures on the History of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-37, esp. p. 25 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 53, 64, and Sonya Sikka, 'Heidegger's Appropriation of Schelling', *Southern Journal Of Philosophy*, 32(4) (1994), 421-448, esp. p. 428 ff.

turning away from transcendental philosophy of consciousness to ontology, which is first apparent in his use of the concept of Life in his anti-Fichtean philosophy of nature. Paying attention to the relation between this ontological orientation and the postulate of an absolute unity will enable us to trace, within Schelling's work, the two aforementioned tendencies. The conflict of these tendencies becomes most marked in the 'middle period' of Schelling's philosophy, which takes in the *Treatise on Human Freedom* (1809) and the *Ages of the World* (c. 1811-20). In this turbulent and notoriously obscure period, Schelling wrestles with epistemological and methodological problems that are decisive for his later philosophy. However, the later philosophy actually regresses from the insights achieved in this middle period.<sup>12</sup> The proto-Heideggerian idea of a pre-rational unity with the Being of beings, foreshadowed in both the earlier and the later periods of Schelling's career, is displaced in the middle period by a way of thinking the conditions of experience that anticipates instead Deleuze's positing of immanence as the radical incommensurability of these conditions with that which they condition. Schelling's subsequent 'regression' was provoked by this displacement, for it threatened the coherence of his essentially foundationalist project.

Schelling's work has to be understood against the background of Kant's desire to distinguish dogmatic from genuinely philosophical uses of reason. With this in mind, Schelling had from 1795 to 1800 envisaged a dual system of the conditions of experience, embracing two viewpoints. The second of these perspectives followed Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* in trying to understand our conscious experience of objects as originating from the activity of consciousness itself. However, the first perspective that Schelling adopted was that of the natural object. He intended to show that it was possible to account for the possibility of conscious experience with reference to evolutionary tendencies within nature itself. Neither system would have priority over the other: the philosophy of nature would provide regulative principles for natural science, whereas the philosophy of spirit would ground ethics. This would have the advantage of respecting the Kantian antinomy of necessity and freedom, and thus establishing a non-dogmatic philosophical account of the conditions of experience, one which refused to regard the unity of these conditions as a possible object of experience.

Nevertheless, this duality of perspectives had itself to be accounted for. The postulated condition of the possibility of this duality, argued

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 38-39.

Schelling, had to be a substantial, monistic Absolute that in-itself would be neither nature nor consciousness, but the 'absolute indifference' of both. I want to focus now on two features of this Absolute, which determine Schelling's subsequent work. Firstly, the criteria that inform this definition of the Absolute, and secondly, the problems this definition creates when we try to explain how difference and duality emerges out of the Absolute understood as a pure, self-abiding point of indifference.

By defining the Absolute as neither subject nor object, Schelling aligned himself with the ontological approach taken by Jacobi and Hölderlin, against Fichte's concept of the absolute, transcendental subject. Fichte's definition of the Absolute as a subjective activity of self-positing was meant to explain the possibility of any experience of the difference between subject and object with reference to the subject itself. The Fichtean transcendental subject was thus a hypostasised, self-producing version of the finite Kantian subject. This eminent subject, it is argued, knows itself immediately, for its self-knowing is also its self-production. However, given Fichte's view that the difference between subject and object is a condition of the existence of *our* self-consciousness, a problem arises. The self-consciousness of the absolute subject, being immediate rather than mediated by a relation to itself in which it posits itself as an object, must therefore be unconscious. In what sense is this then knowledge, and moreover, in what sense is this Absolute a subject, if subjectivity, identified with self-consciousness, has to be conditioned by a relation to an object in order to *be* subjectivity at all?

For Jacobi, Hölderlin and Schelling, Fichte's postulated Absolute subject relies on a circular argument. It is an attempt to explain the emergence of the distinction between subject and object with reference to one of the conditioned sides of this distinction, and thus explains nothing. In other words, Fichte's explanation of the possibility of experience simply presupposes the pre-existing possibility of what it is meant to explain, positing it as being implicit in an absolute unity. The identity of the absolute subject and the relative subject is posited by analogy: the Absolute is supposedly a subject although it is unconscious, and it supposedly knows itself even though its structure rules out self-knowledge. Hence this Absolute is simply assumed to resemble what it conditions, and is thus itself conditioned and therefore cannot be absolute.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Fichte himself accepted in 1797,<sup>14</sup> philosophy begins

<sup>13</sup> This self-contradictory ground-relation is the main target of Hegel's sustained attack on foundationalism in the *Science of Logic*; see *Wissenschaft der Logik II*

with faith, a faith that can only be motivated by a moral inclination to accept the metaphysical priority of human freedom over nature. In order to be more than faith, this assumption would have to be proven, but this would require that the entire content of the Absolute be brought to consciousness, a project that would demand the realisation of the Absolute, both in theoretical cognition and in practical action. The only proof that would suffice would be the creation of a kingdom of ends, the final conquest of recalcitrant nature by the moral will.

Schelling's definition of the Absolute as absolute Indifference is an attempt to overcome the Fichtean circle: it is neither subject nor object, and so all reflexive conceptual distinctions, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*, are unified in it. Later, this resulted in Fichte accusing Schelling of lapsing back into dogmatic realism. However, Schelling's argument here in no way exceeds the limits of transcendental argument, for it merely seeks to establish the conditions for the possibility of our familiar experience.

If, as Fichte had argued, following Reinhold, the reflexive distinction between subject and object is a basic constitutive condition of our experience, then the question of the possibility of this distinction remains. Fichte's circular claim that the condition of this distinction is the subject itself produced a postulate whose only justification was a purely subjective analogy. Schelling, on the other hand, followed Jacobi and Hölderlin in arguing that the possibility of any reflexive distinction, including that between subject and object, could only be explained with reference to a ground that was itself non-reflexive, neither subject nor object.<sup>15</sup>

Schelling's move is also problematic, however, as defining the necessary conditions of knowledge is not enough. This would, for Schelling, have left Kant's project unfinished, for the concept of Absolute Indifference serves as a universal but merely formal condition of the possibility of experience. To realise philosophy as genuine *a priori*

(Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 96-112; *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1989), pp. 456-69.

<sup>14</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J.H. Fichte (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), I, pp. 432-33; *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Bowie, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-35; Manfred Frank, *Der Unendliche Mangel am Sein* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 60, and 'Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism', in Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma, eds., *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 65-86, esp. pp. 66-68.

synthetic knowledge, that is, knowledge of the totality of necessary forms of experience in relation to their unconditional ground, requires more than this. In addition to establishing the Absolute as a negatively unconditional, formal principle, it is necessary to demonstrate its sufficiency as a ground of experience: the true means of distinguishing dogmatism from critical philosophy is a self-grounding system of the conditions of experience, derived from the Absolute.

The problem with this, however, is that the Absolute, being neither subject nor object, has to be thought of as determining itself and thus grounding experience, without thinking this process in terms of the forms of ground-relation that we posit as determining the merely conditioned features of our experience. In other words, if we have to posit the Absolute as genuinely *unconditioned*, neither subject nor object, we cannot posit it as being externally determined as if it were a natural object, nor can we posit it as a self-positing conscious subject. Hence the emergence of difference out of Absolute Indifference is neither a mechanistic, objective process nor a voluntaristic, subjective one.

A successful account of the relation between the postulate of Absolute Indifference and our experience would have to show, then, why an original unity, abiding with itself from eternity, would delimit itself as nature and as consciousness, when in itself it is neither. Schelling's philosophy of nature fails to address this question adequately. However, it does provide an account of *how* the Absolute determines itself as nature, which decisively influenced his later thought. In 1799, Schelling writes that Absolute Indifference considered in its natural aspect, as the in-itself of nature, that is, as the supra-temporal, non-conscious, ontological condition of our experience of natural objects, is somewhat like Spinoza's *natura naturans*, being an ontological unity which Schelling calls 'absolute productivity' or primordial Life. For actual experience of external nature to be possible for us, however, this productivity would have to be checked somehow, for otherwise it would present itself as 'a becoming that occurs with infinite speed, through which nothing real emerges for intuition'.<sup>16</sup>

This condition cannot be thought of as externally imposed, as this would imply that the primordial Life is not itself absolute.<sup>17</sup> Instead, argues Schelling, primordial productivity has to limit itself, and must

<sup>16</sup> Schelling, 'Einleitung zu seinem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie' (1799) [hereafter EE], *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: Biederstien, 1946), 3, p. 287.

<sup>17</sup> EE 287.

therefore be in-itself primordial ‘duplicity’ at the same time as unity. This attempt to think the Absolute as being simultaneously unity and duplicity is the key to understanding Schelling’s subsequent intellectual development. The primordial duplicity within absolute nature consists of ‘opposed tendencies’ of productivity, one expansive and one contractive.<sup>18</sup> These different tendencies emerge via the self-differentiation of the primordial Life, which nevertheless remains eternally one with itself in the background, continually active within the consequent conflict of these opposed tendencies as a ground of their identity. It is this regulated conflict of the tendencies that produces the differentiated universe, and eventually, beings that experience this universe consciously.

At this stage of his career, Schelling proposes that, for determinate difference to emerge out of unity, it is necessary for the primordial unity of absolute nature to be sublated (*aufgehoben werden*).<sup>19</sup> This has the familiar Hegelian sense of cancelling yet preserving the unity in the opposing tendencies that issue from it. The implication is that, as well as the primordial Life being the logically necessary formal condition of experience, the self-inhibition of this productivity, as the material ground of experience, is equally logically necessary. Eventually, this would prove unacceptable to Schelling as an account of the relation between Absolute and relative, for reasons that emerge out of the development in the years 1800-1804 of what became known as the ‘Philosophy of Identity’.

## II

With the culmination of the Philosophy of Identity in the so-called ‘Würzburg System’ of 1804, Schelling made several advances over the earlier philosophy of nature, without fully overcoming the problem of how to describe the process through which the Absolute can be posited as distinguishing itself from itself. This problem persists in the same form as in Fichte’s work, i.e., as a circular argument based on the assumption that the Absolute can be defined in resemblance to conditioned elements of experience.

In the Würzburg System, Schelling has utterly abandoned his earlier dual viewpoint. Instead of a system of nature and one of spirit, there is now only one system, which begins from a single postulate, the concept

<sup>18</sup> EE 288, 306.

<sup>19</sup> EE 288.

of the Absolute as Absolute Identity. The reasons for this shift of perspective are complex. Central among them, however, may have been the insight that a purely *transcendental* argument regarding nature-in-itself as an ontological condition is viciously circular. If we begin by asking how an external nature, as presented to us in intuition, is possible, then any subsequent account of the evolution of natural forms out of the Absolute presupposes our familiar experience as a *telos*. The self-inhibition of the primordial Life is thus explained by means of this concrete end, supposedly inhering in nature's primordial productivity as an internal cause that enables it to first achieve determinate forms of organisation. Hence the formal, transcendental argument back to the Absolute as the ultimate condition for the possibility of experience has to be accompanied by the assumption that the Absolute is a substantial image of the familiar forms of our actual experience. This approach assumes that the possible forms of the Absolute's self-determination can be defined solely in terms of pre-given determinations. The content of the Absolute is thus not derived from the Absolute itself, but is the reflection in an eminent medium of our ungrounded prejudices about our experience.

As previously noted, however, the Philosophy of Identity does not successfully address this problem either. Schelling conceives the Absolute now as an explicitly onto-theological, transcendent unity, whose self-determination as Nature, and later as Spirit emerging from Nature, is a necessary, dialectical process. The emergence of difference within the eternally self-abiding Absolute is now depicted as the self-revelation of God, such that natural and human history are driven by the *telos* of God's becoming-conscious of himself, in which our theoretical and practical reason is the most differentiated stage.

Our knowledge of this process is grounded in the unity of our reason with the Absolute Identity, which is presupposed by all experience. In other words, for consciousness of any reflexive distinction, such as that between subject and object, to be possible, there must be in addition a more primordial, non-reflexive form of knowing that is an experience of sheer *being*, of absolute unity:<sup>20</sup>

[...] there exists neither a subject as subject nor an object as object, but that what knows and what is known are one and the same, and consequently no more subjective than objective.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Frank, 1995, pp. 67, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Schelling, 'System der Philosophie überhaupt [...]' (1804) [hereafter SP], *Sämtliche*

In this mode of experience, there could be no knowledge of distinction, and so it would not be the Fichtean subject's supposedly primordial experience of itself as a subject rather than an object. This knowing would be in effect a kind of ecstasy of reason, a mystical *unknowing*, which serves as the inspiration for a non-transcendental reconstruction of the Absolute's real determinations.<sup>22</sup> It is because of this that Schelling's Philosophy of Identity could be interpreted as proto-Heideggerian: the ecstatic unity of reason and Absolute has been compared with Heidegger's notion of a pre-ontological understanding of Being, a primordial openness to the Being of beings that makes the disclosure of Being possible for us.<sup>23</sup>

However, the resurgence of circularity in this argument is evident. Schelling's definition of this non-reflexive mode of knowing is as ambiguous as Fichte's account of unconditioned 'self-consciousness'. Human reason, in its authentic, speculative mode, is identified with the Absolute in that it is literally beyond itself, utterly dispersed in pure being. However, by assuming that it is therefore possible to 'construct' from the concept of the Absolute the natural and spiritual forms in which it necessarily reveals itself, the unity of reason and Absolute is assumed to be itself rational. This means that there are in fact two Absolutes here: on the one hand, the Absolute as the distinctionless ontological unity of itself and reason, and on the other, the Absolute as the inherently rational ontological unity of reason and Absolute. This latter definition presupposes the reflexive opposition between necessary relations in general and contingent, irrational juxtapositions. It thus remains a conditioned definition.

Like Fichte, Schelling presupposes the possibility of our familiar experience by positing an Absolute that reflects what we take to be its constitutive features. On the one hand, the Absolute is postulated as the unity of all reflexive oppositions. On the other, it is also postulated as the foundation of knowledge, the means of justifying the proposition that real, i.e., absolute, knowledge exists. This latter requirement means that

*Werke* 6, p. 138; 'System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular', trans. Thomas Pfau, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 139-194, at p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Schelling, 'Philosophie der Offenbarung' (1841-2), *Sämtliche Werke*, Sechster Ergänzungsband, pp. 162-63: '[...] die Vernunft ist daher in diesem Setzen außer sich gesetzt, absolut ekstatisch'.

<sup>23</sup> Ryosuke Ohashi, *Ekstase und Gelassenheit: zu Schelling und Heidegger* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1975), esp. pp. 29-30, 37.

the non-reflexive, ecstatic unity of the Absolute with reason has somehow to be predominantly rational.

Despite this re-emergence of circularity in the Philosophy of Identity, positive developments regarding the unconditioned production of difference also appear. Although the overall process of the Absolute's self-revelation is regarded as teleologically necessary, there is a persistence of irrationality at the heart of the process. The dialectic of self-revelation is thought of as always already enfolded in the Absolute from eternity, as a totality of possibilities. However, the emergence of real difference in the Absolute requires an actual, rather than merely possible process of differentiation.

Schelling's description of this actual differentiation has often been regarded as the basis of his account of human freedom, and thus as the complement of natural necessity. Certainly, it determines the relation between Absolute and relative as other than simply causal: the actual process has to begin with a free act, through which, as it were, the Absolute decrees a dialectical law for itself. What is particularly interesting about this act, however, is the way that Schelling describes it without turning it into a Fichtean self-positing, which would imply that the Absolute is a self-conscious subject which reveals itself by limiting or partially negating itself.

Schelling is careful to represent the Absolute's relation to itself as one of pure affirmation without self-reflection and without negation.<sup>24</sup> The Absolute, being absolute, can paradoxically only be divided from itself through its self-affirmation. The act which introduces actual difference into the Absolute is not one which posits explicitly an implicit, negative difference,<sup>25</sup> but one of absolute positing, being simply the Absolute's reiterated affirmation of its own existence.<sup>26</sup> Everything finite has its positive being only through this affirmative activity of the Absolute, and in this sense, the being of all finite things is identical or univocal.<sup>27</sup> The significance of this idea is that the Absolute is no longer thought of as being inherently negative, a unity which is sublated in the act through which difference is posited. Instead, it persists as it is in-itself in all things and is affirmed in them as their positive ground.

This free, but non-subjective positing activity is a key feature of Schelling's work after 1804. As an explanation of the emergence of

<sup>24</sup> SP 145-46/146.

<sup>25</sup> SP 171/163.

<sup>26</sup> SP 174/165.

<sup>27</sup> SP 187/174-5.

difference, though, it is problematic: how can an act of absolute positing, through which the Absolute affirms its own unity, be at the same time the positing of actual difference? In other words, how can there be difference without negation?

Schelling's answer is to present the self-differentiation of the Absolute as 'an infinite raising to a power [*Potenzierung*] of the identity of identity'.<sup>28</sup> The differences that are constitutive of the universe are thus powers or potencies of the Absolute, through which the Absolute itself is posited, but in a relation of difference to itself that is constituted only through its affirmation of itself.<sup>29</sup> In the *Philosophy of Identity* and in Schelling's subsequent works, the potencies of the Absolute fulfil the same function as the contractive and expansive 'tendencies' in the earlier philosophy of nature. They are attributes of an Absolute which is still understood as an ontological, non-subjective and non-objective ground or primordial Life.

The progressive self-revelation of the Absolute in nature is an ongoing dialectic between the contending expansive and contractive powers, or as Schelling calls them in the Würzburg System, the 'affirming' and the 'affirmed'. The ground of this movement is the repeated positive *Potenzierung* of the Absolute.<sup>30</sup> Negative relations of opposition subsist between the potencies, once they are independently active, but these relations only arise because each potency strives to express the full power of the Absolute, which each wholly affirms. Their becoming opposed to each other is resolved in the synthesis of products which do not in the first place express a negation of difference, but a still higher power of the Absolute. In this way, Schelling conceptualises the inner basis of the differentiated universe as an infinite chain of affirmations. As he would later put it in the 'Stuttgart Private Lectures' from 1810, the relation between the Absolute and the universe is not a 'cancellation' of the Absolute Identity, but a 'doubling' [*Doublirung*] or 'intensification' [*Zunehmung*] of it.<sup>31</sup> Only this schema can, for Schelling, adequately express the activity of an ontological Absolute, an unconditioned Life.

<sup>28</sup> Detlev von Uslar, 'Die innere Bewegung der absoluten Identität bei Schelling', *Studium Generale* 21 (1968), 503-14, at p. 507.

<sup>29</sup> SP 210/191.

<sup>30</sup> See Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 84-85 on the differences between an Hegelian *Aufhebungsdialektik*, driven by negation, and Schelling's *Erzeugungsdialektik* ('dialectic of production', Beach's own term).

<sup>31</sup> Schelling, 'Stuttgart Privatvorlesungen', SW 7, pp. 424-5; 'Stuttgart Seminars', trans. Thomas Pfau, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory*, p. 200.

The rational dialectic of the Absolute's possible determinations is thus thought of as actualised within this actual, affirmative differentiation. However, this effectively means that there are two Absolutes in the Philosophy of Identity. One is the Absolute that is irreducible to the conditioned elements of our experience, which differentiates itself through self-affirmation and is thus genuinely unconditioned. The other is the Absolute whose process of self-revelation is driven by a teleology of self-knowing. In order to make a system of absolute knowledge and thereby the distinction between dogmatism and critical philosophy viable, this duality of principles must be shown to be illusory. In fact, Schelling simply elides it, assuming that the self-affirmation of the Absolute, as the presupposition of all conditional knowledge of experience, is also an eternal, immediate relation of self-knowledge.<sup>32</sup> This elision simply reinforces the ambiguity I mentioned earlier regarding the nature of the Absolute Identity that philosophy has to posit as the unconditional condition of experience.

We should recall that this ambiguity emerges because Schelling proposes that the Absolute cannot simply be the image of conditioned elements of experience, and yet is still the foundation *of* experience. The relation between the non-rational, 'neither-nor' Absolute unity and the universe it expresses itself in is posited as one of pure affirmation. On the other hand though, philosophy has to presuppose that the Absolute is inherently rational, and posits the universe out of teleological necessity, in order to eventually produce experience as it is familiar to us. Above all, the unity of these two Absolutes has to be presupposed, but the stress falls on the second, rational definition. As with Fichte, immediate self-knowing is posited as the essence of the Absolute. This emphasis on the primordially of a relation of knowing determines the Absolute as a metaphor for our *conviction* that our habitual claims about the structure of experience constitute real knowledge. To affirm the primacy of this rational Absolute implies a tacit faith in philosophy's capacity to distinguish false from genuine modes of knowing. We shall return to the consequences of this need for faith in section IV.

### III

The tension between the two definitions of the Absolute haunts Schelling's work between 1809 and 1821. In fact, both are necessary for his Kantian goal: to distinguish real knowledge from dogmatism. The

<sup>32</sup> SP 150-51/149-50.

Absolute can only posit actual difference by affirming itself, while only teleology can ground the necessary emergence of familiar modes of experience. The obscurity of the works from Schelling's middle period arises out of the requirement to think the Absolute in both these forms simultaneously.

In the *Treatise on Human Freedom* and in the various drafts of the *Ages of the World*, Schelling no longer employs the quasi-Spinozistic deductive method he used in the *Philosophy of Identity*. Instead, he composes esoteric, mythological narratives concerning the genesis of the universe. The formal apparatus of a deductive philosophical system is no longer suited to a perspective that acknowledges the centrality of a non-rational grounding relation. The emergence of actual difference is groundless or unconditioned: it can only be explained as the free but blind act of the Absolute, which is without a more primordial cause, whether external or internal to the Absolute.

In the *Treatise on Human Freedom* (1809), Schelling describes this groundless freedom as that of an Absolute Will, which has to be thought of as existing through itself from eternity. This state of the Absolute before time has, Schelling proposes, to be thought alongside the emergence of difference within it, also before time. This paradoxical, pre-temporal differentiation occurs 'within' the Absolute, but not through the Absolute's own conscious willing. Instead, Schelling characterises it as the awakening of a will which wills, yet is without object: this is will as *Sehnsucht*, literally, obsessive yearning.<sup>33</sup> It is thus neither fully conscious nor fully unconscious.<sup>34</sup> This is not yet the positing of actual difference, but it is its ground. The crucial aspect of Schelling's narrative, that is, that *Sehnsucht* emerges, as he would later put it in the *Ages of the World*, without the Absolute 'either helping or knowing',<sup>35</sup> marks the point where Schelling's earlier nascent Heideggerianism is explicitly opposed by a different tendency of his thought.

The *Sehnsucht* of the Absolute is, in relation to the eternal existence of the Absolute itself, what Schelling would later identify as an inherently

<sup>33</sup> Schelling, 'Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit' (1809) [hereafter UWF], SW 7, pp. 359-60; *Of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (New York: Open Court, 1936), pp. 33-34.

<sup>34</sup> Robert F. Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977), p. 141.

<sup>35</sup> Schelling, 'Die Weltalter' (1813), *Sämtliche Werke*, Nachlassband, p. 53; *The Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 136.

problematic non-being or, in Greek, *me on*,<sup>36</sup> the ‘incomprehensible basis of the existence of things’.<sup>37</sup> Hence the Absolute wants to absorb it, for it disrupts its unity. This desire to satisfy the problematic will is what drives the Absolute to posit itself as different from itself, to realise the separation that is at first only virtually present in it, through a process of *Potenzierung*. Schelling thus proposes that the universe exists because of a) a primordial dissonance within the Absolute, and b) an *unconscious* decision to affirm and posit this difference as actual, which, it is supposed, is guided by an implicit teleological urge toward self-manifestation. Once more, Schelling’s monism seems to conceal a troubling dualism. And once more, he attempts to dissolve the duality of primordial unity and primordial difference within a higher unity, the Absolute understood as divine Love, as a genuine unity over and above all the partial unities which may be realised in natural and human history.<sup>38</sup> This unity is once again posited as the *telos* of all existence: the Absolute has to separate itself from itself in order to become explicitly what it at first only implicitly is. The realisation of true unity is thus postulated as infinitely distant, as always-to-come. A teleological schema is thus reimposed on the Absolute, only this time, the *telos* is not self-knowledge but the realisation of the highest good, beyond mere human reason: the teleology is no longer exoteric or logically determinative, but esoteric and donative. In response to the difficulties of trying to think the Absolute as difference and as identity simultaneously, Schelling leaves philosophy behind for a theology of mystery.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV

The works of Schelling’s middle period contain what has to be understood, I want to argue, as a pronounced non-Heideggerian tendency, as well as one which is, as others have noted, proto-Heideggerian. Moreover, this former tendency is consistent with Schelling’s critique of Fichte, which argues that the Absolute, as that which all possible experience presupposes, cannot be defined as a reflection of conditioned elements of the structure of our experience.

The narrative accounts of the actual self-differentiation of the

<sup>36</sup> Schelling, ‘Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus’ (1836), SW 8, pp. 235-6.

<sup>37</sup> UWF 360/34.

<sup>38</sup> UWF 405-08/91-93.

<sup>39</sup> Regarding the influence of this move on 19th century Catholic theology, see Thomas F. O’Meara, *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling Among the Theologians* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), esp. Ch. 4.

Absolute given in the *Treatise of Human Freedom* and in subsequent works contain Schelling's most consistent attempts at thinking the unconditioned emergence of difference without falling into the same trap as Fichte did. Nevertheless they still eventually fail on their own (Kantian) terms, for reasons I will discuss. Firstly, though, it is necessary to focus on their accounts of unconditioned difference, for this will allow us to pinpoint the way in which Schelling is non-Heideggerian, and in fact announces the problematic of absolute difference in a way that resonates with Deleuze's work.

In order to explain the emergence of actual difference within the Absolute, Schelling requires both the idea of a groundless production of dissonance internal to it, and the theory of potencies, which continues this groundless production into the actual universe itself, via the infinitely repeated self-affirmative activity of the Absolute. In this way, the primordial relation between Absolute and relative is posited as, not one of identity, but one of incommensurability: the universe is produced only because the Absolute is infinitely different from itself, not because it is an eternally unmoved unity.

It has to be borne in mind that this proposition only arises because it is necessary to explain the possibility of experience, without resorting to a merely conditioned definition of the Absolute, as Fichte did. This incommensurability is, therefore, the necessary presupposition of philosophical reflection. But if this incommensurability must be presupposed by philosophy, then it renders the justification of philosophy, in the sense of genuine *a priori* knowledge, impossible. This is because, if such *a priori* knowledge is possible, then we in fact require two presuppositions: both that of the dissonance that makes experience in general possible, and that of a primordial, transcendent unity that will preserve the possibility of reconciliation within this primordial difference.

I will return to this issue of the impossibility of philosophy in a moment. Firstly, we should consider how this result is constitutive of a non-Heideggerian tendency within Schelling's thought. Schelling argues that, if philosophical reason is searching for a foundation of *a priori* knowledge, upon which a distinction between philosophy and dogmatism can be grounded, then it must presuppose that this foundation is a form of immediate, unconditional knowing. Further, it must be presupposed that this immediate unity is somehow capable of maintaining itself within the dissonance that comes to afflict it, that is, that it is a transcendent unity which somehow grounds the whole process of its self-revelation and is immanent in it.

This presupposition of a primordial, non-discursive ontological unity

is, as previously noted, the point on which Schelling is often compared with Heidegger: the idea of a 'gift of Being', of the uniqueness of the relation between Being and human being, of a 'clearing of Being that unfolds itself *in* us but not *through* us',<sup>40</sup> seems to be already announced here. Yet Schelling has thought identity together with difference differently to Heidegger, and in doing has constantly reproduced the basic tension in his thinking. He has, on the one hand, argued that the Absolute cannot be thought in terms of reflexive distinction, yet has repeatedly defined it as a kind of eminent ontological Identity (as *opposed* to Difference), like and yet unlike the analytic and synthetic forms of identity that mark the limit of conscious experience.

On the other hand, the actual relation between the Absolute and its products *has* been thought in terms of difference. The difference being thought here is one achieved through an affirmative relation without negation and therefore is not derived from a pre-given, self-limiting identity. In his middle period, Schelling thinks the Absolute as somehow always already problematically differentiated, infected with an objectless will which the Absolute itself does not give rise to. It is this will which is affirmed in the subsequent process of *Potenzierung*, and which serves as the ground of the differentiated universe.

The simultaneity of identity and difference within the Absolute may suggest the later Heidegger's thought of the 'belonging-together' of identity and difference. But Schelling's thinking here remains inconsistent with itself: he ultimately treats the relation of identity and difference as if these were defined relative to each other, as the identity of contraries and the difference of opposed terms. But in fact, it is only the eminent concept of identity here that is relative - relative to experience, of which it is a reflected image. The concept of a difference that arises through affirmation is not defined in relation to identity, or to experience. It is thus the unconditioned, absolute or autonomous difference that is so central to Deleuze's work.

If philosophy has to presuppose that an original dissonance is Absolute, that is, arises through itself alone, then the presupposition that the Absolute is a transcendent identity is only a reflection of our conviction that knowledge, or, in Heidegger's terms, the disclosure of the real, is something essential to or definitive of our experience. In this way, it is clear that there is in Schelling's work a subterranean tendency whose consequences he is both impelled to draw out and to suppress. It is also

<sup>40</sup> Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 91.

clear that this tendency leads him to think the relation between Being and beings in a way that is not Heideggerian.

The reason why Schelling had to suppress this tendency, employing a theological frame for the narratives of his middle period, was the way in which it seemed to make impossible any distinction between genuine philosophy and dogmatism. From Fichte on, the fate of this distinction had been tied to the possibility of constructing an absolute system of the forms of experience. Schelling's critique of Fichte had, like Hegel's, noted the impossibility of this ever being achieved so long as the system began by presupposing the difference between an infinite Absolute and finite consciousness, for the adequate expression of the content of this Absolute in consciousness would be an infinite task. In the meantime, the distinction between dogmatism and philosophy would remain unsecured.

Schelling fails to escape this problem himself, however, precisely because he shows that reason must presuppose that the Absolute is simultaneously both absolute difference *and* an eminent identity. If absolute difference is the condition of there being experience at all, then the presupposition that the condition of this difference is some variety of eminent identity is simply a reflection of the assumption that our beliefs about experience are more than just beliefs. It assumes that the dissonance that makes experience possible is only relative to, and will ultimately be reconciled within, a superior identity - a benign apocalypse that never quite arrives. Given, then, that the presupposition of identity is relative to our prejudices about experience, the primordially of absolute difference appears to be the legitimate perspective to adopt as regards the unconditioned. But this means that philosophy cannot be distinguished from dogmatism by means of a foundation that secures genuine *a priori* knowledge. That the free act of the Absolute is ungrounded means that it 'might express its will in an indefinite number of ways, rationality being but one of them'.<sup>41</sup> There is no possible guarantee that any construction based upon the concept of a rational Absolute Identity expresses what is essential to this Absolute - there is only our *conviction* that this is the case.

The absolute legitimacy of philosophy, once the need for foundational principles has been accepted, can only be a matter of faith. This, in fact, became Schelling's own position in his later positive philosophy, as it had become Fichte's after 1797. Schelling affirms that the limit of an *a priori* philosophy based on a dialectical method of construction is the

<sup>41</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, *Kant, Schelling and Historicity*, ed. John Burbidge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 121.

acceptance that the ultimate condition of the validity of our beliefs about the structure of our experience is an inherently rational Absolute Identity. The only way to go beyond this 'negative' perspective is to accept as an article of faith that this Absolute Identity *exists* as the transcendent ground of difference. This, however, generates a dilemma, which signifies Schelling's final failure to secure philosophical foundations of knowledge, and which is implied by his own talk of the limit of *a priori* philosophy as a 'crisis of reason'.<sup>42</sup> If one affirms that the Absolute Identity, this higher unity, *in fact* exists (as one has to, in order to go beyond the perspective of *a priori* philosophy), then philosophy cannot be distinguished from dogmatism, for this assertion is simply believed, and could only be proven by the complete manifestation of this Absolute. But then, if one denies that the Absolute Identity exists, there is only relativism left, and a foundationalist variety of relativism at that, grounded in the self-refuting proposition that, given the essential nature of human reason, there is no absolutely valid *a priori* knowledge, and that no foundations exist for the distinction between philosophy and criticism.

## V

The limit of Schelling's philosophical endeavours is thus represented by the proposition that, if philosophical reason is to be consistently self-critical, i.e., if it is to avoid illegitimate presuppositions about its own entitlements, it must avoid assuming in a Fichtean fashion that the Absolute can be posited as an eminent reflection of our familiar experience. It must presuppose instead that the Absolute is incommensurable with itself, and therefore also with that which it conditions. Therefore a consistently self-critical foundationalist method requires us to presuppose that it is *true* that there are no absolute foundations for knowledge, and hence no foundations for a distinction between criticism and dogmatism. This self-contradictory result marks the internal limit of foundationalism, the point at which it, as a method, self-destructs. Hence it also marks what could be called, in the terminology Deleuze and Guattari adopt from Gregory Bateson, an epistemological 'double-bind'.<sup>43</sup> I will close now with some remarks regarding the Deleuzian response to this result, which will indicate the basis on which Deleuze's thinking of difference can be distinguished

<sup>42</sup> *Sämtliche Werke*, 8, pp. 565, 569.

<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 94-95; *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Athlone, 1984), pp. 79-80.

from Schelling's.

Deleuze's critique of academic philosophy focuses on the practical presuppositions that provide philosophies with images of what it means to think, and draw the limits of a philosophy with respect to its object.<sup>44</sup> For Deleuze, the distinction between criticism and dogmatism has to be made between different images of thought, at a practical, non-conceptual level, rather than at the level of distinctions between good and bad foundations of knowledge. The difference between such foundations can only be determined with reference to theories about what makes for illegitimate theoretical presuppositions.

Hence Deleuze understands the practical level of thought as more primordial: theoretical reflection, no matter what its method, remains an individual practice of thought. Theoretical reflection, however, persists in claiming its own uniqueness, a claim that is circular. Theory supposes itself to be capable of showing that thought can demonstrate its essential unity with the real, thus showing that its essence is to know the real, to be a *theoros* or intellectual observer of it. This unique relation to the real, which would enable our individual beliefs about experience to be objectively assessed, can only be presupposed, however. To demonstrate its truth is, as Schelling has shown, finally impossible. This is because only a knowable foundation would justify the claim of theory. Yet, as Schelling shows, the ultimate condition of such claims, the rational Absolute, is only *posited*, by a practice of thinking that is guided by its basic faith in the possibility of knowledge of the real. He also demonstrates that the 'foundation' that is not only posited, but also *genuinely presupposed* by this practice of thought as its own genetic condition, is the non-rational Absolute that differentiates itself through its affirmative relation to itself, and which consequently *ungrounds* the claims of theory.

For Deleuze, philosophical double-binds have to be accounted for, not with reference to the nature of thought, or to the nature of being, but to specific components of a practice of thinking.<sup>45</sup> Schelling's methodological resolve leads him to think the Absolute as the only form of unity that can be genuinely foundational, an unconditioned 'neither-nor'. Yet precisely because it is this form of unity, it cannot be foundational for knowledge. Schellingian reason undermines its own claims through its rigorously foundationalist method, emerging as a

<sup>44</sup> DR 169-73/129-32.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Deleuze's account of the 'blockages' that afflict dogmatic images of thought: DR 20-25/11-15, 346-8/270-1.

nihilistic practice that devalues its own supposedly supreme value.

For Deleuze, such images of philosophical crisis are not necessarily determinative for the vocation of philosophy. The 'end of metaphysics', and the implied historical fatality behind it, are not to be borne heroically by an affirmation of philosophy that accepts its own suffering as representative of the destiny of thought. Schelling's thought depicts reason as undergoing a self-inflicted trauma that places it in an impasse. The prescription offered by Deleuze is a convalescence that affirms the trauma as the means to a new kind of health. In other words, the way to overcome the habitual orientations of a debilitating practice of thought is to renounce the most powerful of these habits, namely, the desire for the universally representative instance and for grounded *a priori* knowledge. Further, this renunciation of the universal and representative as the goal of thought can only be pursued by affirming the import of the subversive, 'minor' tendency of Schelling's work, that is, that the Absolute must be thought as incommensurable with itself.

In this way, the image of thought as guided by the universal, with knowledge as its mode of *philia* towards the Absolute, is displaced by an image of thought as creative, as guided only by the thought of an absolute difference within thinking itself. The legitimate entitlement of thought is thus not to an essential unity with the universal, but, paradoxically, to the constitutive lack of any transcendent essence: 'What thought claims by right, what it selects, is infinite movement or the movement of the infinite'.<sup>46</sup> For Deleuze, dogmatism is no longer defined as the resolve to ignore the demand that all truth-claims should be universally justifiable. Instead, it is the unquestioning acceptance of orientations of thinking which block the activity of a creative thought that, by affirming its internal difference from its own being, produces its own concepts and lines of analysis. Genuinely critical philosophical thought no longer expects to receive the universal from within itself, but instead seeks the inspiration for its creative activity from the irreconcilable, the different, the non-philosophical. The traps into which dogmatic thought falls, such as the Schellingian double-bind, are generated out of the presupposition that the lack of overall unity encountered in our reflections on our experience is relative to a higher unity. This dogmatic, foundationalist tendency, which rules Schelling's own thought, is diverted by Deleuze's affirmation of the lack of unity as itself the *Ungrund* or unconditional

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 40; *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), p. 37.

condition of experience. This perversely foundationalist gesture is meant to free the 'minor' tendency of Schellingian reason from the domination of its 'official' complement.