Translator's Introduction

REASSESSING SCHELLING

The reputation of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) in the English-speaking world has depended almost exclusively upon his early work, which influenced both the English Romantics and other philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic currents in the first half of the nineteenth century. The work of the later Schelling has, in contrast, been largely ignored by philosophers and has been seen as of interest mainly to theologians, with the result that its specifically philosophical import has not been appreciated. In the light of the recent growth of interest in German Idealism and its links to the rest of modern philosophy, it is important that some of the work of the later Schelling should become available to an English-speaking public, particularly in view of recent enthusiastic reassessments of Hegel. The best text through which such an audience can approach the work of the later Schelling is the lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, translated here for the first time, which contain the most extended of Schelling's critiques of Hegel. The Lectures (as I shall refer to them) are one of the most significant works of nineteenth-century German philosophy, and their influence has yet to be adequately appreciated.

Because the Lectures deal with figures such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, who are already familiar to those in both the analytical and European traditions, they enable one to gain an idea of Schelling's own philosophical perspective in his later period. The date of the Lectures has not been finally established. They were for a long time assumed to have been given in 1827, but this cannot be the case, given the access we now have to notes taken at Schelling's lectures at the University of Munich in that year (Schelling 1990). The probable date is 1833–4, but there is also evidence to suggest 1836–7. Parts of the text of the Lectures, particularly those relating to Hegel, were adopted almost verbatim in the lectures Schelling gave under the title *The Philosophy of Revelation* in 1841–2 at the University of Berlin, when he took over what had, until 1831, been Hegel's chair

of philosophy. Towards the end of the 1830s Schelling did reduce the role in his system given to the historical review of philosophy that makes up the Lectures (see Fuhrmans' introduction to Schelling 1972), but the Lectures can still be regarded as an integral part of the late work. The real importance of the Lectures lies in their critique of Hegel in the light of the later Schelling's understanding of the history of philosophy since Descartes. In this introduction I shall describe Schelling's perspective on the history of modern philosophy by outlining certain aspects of his work as a whole, in order to suggest why the later Schelling deserves our renewed attention.[1]

The recent revival of interest in German Idealism has been fuelled by the widespread rejection of philosophies which entail a subject–object duality and a notion of cognition which depends upon assuming a mind separate from the rest of the world. The suspicion that the mechanistic, objectifying forms of explanation that came to dominate natural science and philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century are seriously inadequate has led to a reconsideration of some of the major philosophical positions of the early nineteenth century. German Idealism has a somewhat paradoxical status in this respect. On the one hand, it is seen as a form of totalising metaphysics that merely conjured away, rather than overcoming, the modern problem of the relationship between thought and being that was revealed by Kant's critique of previous metaphysics. On the other hand, German Idealism is seen as that strand of modern philosophy which began to develop a methodologically defensible way of overcoming the split between consciousness and the world. This latter perspective offers most for a reassessment of the work of Schelling.

The overlapping stages of Schelling's philosophy began with his enthusiasm, in the mid-1790s, for Fichte's attempts to revise Kant's transcendental philosophy, which had given the primary role to the activity of consciousness in the constitution of the knowable world. Along with this went the beginning of Schelling's lifelong preoccupation with Spinoza. Towards the end of the century Schelling developed his *Naturphilosophie*, or philosophy of nature, which extended Fichte's notion of the activity of the subject into the idea of all of nature as "productivity". The *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800 considered art to be the medium in which the activity of thought and the productivity of nature could be understood as ultimately the same. The "identity philosophy", Schelling's attempt at a complete system which would demonstrate that "subject" and "object", the

[1] I have elsewhere given a much more detailed account of these issues, relating them to contemporary concerns (see Bowie 1993). I refer those who want more historical detail to Xavier Tilliette's monumental *Schelling. Une philosophie en devenir* (Tilliette 1970).

"ideal" and the "real", are only different degrees or aspects of the Same, concerned him in the early 1800s (and in many ways for the rest of his life). During this period he broke with Fichte, whom he regarded as failing to move beyond the sphere of self-consciousness to that consciousness's ground in a nature of which it is only one aspect. In the 1809 *On the Essence of Human Freedom* (the last substantial text published by Schelling in his lifetime), and in the 1811–15 *Ages of the World*, Schelling renounced the tendency towards a balanced polar relationship of the "ideal" (mind, subject) and the "real" (matter, object) that had been present in much of his preceding work and became concerned with understanding the ground of which the antagonistic principles that constitute the world are the consequence. Schelling's late work attempted to establish what he termed a "positive philosophy", of which the Lectures formed a part. The late philosophy began to develop in the 1820s, and he continued to revise it for the rest of his life. Positive philosophy sought to move beyond "negative philosophy", exemplified in Hegel's *Logic*, which explicated the forms of pure thought that determine *what* things are. The goal of positive philosophy was to come to terms both with the fact *that* things are and with the contingencies of the historical emergence and development of thinking. The ultimate aim of positive philosophy was to derive a philosophically viable religion from a reinterpretation of the historical development of Christianity. It was not least Schelling's failure to achieve this latter aim that led to many of the valid aspects of the later philosophy being ignored.

The story generally told about the history of German Idealism is that it was initiated by Fichte's critique of Kant, carried on by Schelling's criticisms of Fichte in his *Naturphilosophie* and identity system, and brought to (an albeit temporary) end by Hegel's development of a complete system of philosophy, on the basis of the philosophical articulation of the identity of subject and object. It is this story that now needs correction if we are to do justice to Schelling. Although Schelling aimed at many of the same goals as Hegel, his work is important precisely because it shows that Hegel's attempt to reach a final resolution in philosophy could not succeed. The divided world with which Schelling's later work confronts us makes a major contribution to modern philosophy in ways which are only now beginning to be explored.

MIND AND NATURE

Only in recent years has the period of German Idealism begun to be understood in sufficient depth for more adequate philosophical

judgements about it to become possible. One vital aspect of the context in which German Idealism arose is the "Pantheism controversy", which began in 1783 (see Beiser 1987). This was a theological controversy, involving most of the major thinkers of the period, about the interpretation and significance of Spinoza's philosophy. "Pantheism" can be interpreted in many ways, as Schelling shows in the Lectures, but one version of it entails the idea that God and nature are identical. For Spinoza, God was that which is cause of itself and whose essence involves its existence. To the extent to which things are explicable, they are so because they embody the intelligibility of God: "All things, I repeat, are in God, and all things which come to pass, come to pass solely through the laws of the infinite nature of God, and follow . . . from the necessity of his existence" (Spinoza 1955 p. 59). All finite things are explicable in terms of their dependence upon their causal relations to other things, which are in turn dependent upon their relationships to other things, *ad infinitum*. God is this infinity, in that He is not conditioned like everything else: His nature is the totality of those conditions, and He is therefore the first cause. The vital fact about Spinoza's philosophy in relation to Schelling is that it need not be understood merely as a theology: the dominant image of the world in modern science relies upon the idea that the task of scientific investigation is to reveal the chain of conditions which explains a particular phenomenon in nature via the principle of sufficient reason.

In one of the most influential contributions to the Pantheism controversy, which plays a vital role in the genesis of German Idealism, F. H. Jacobi, whose later work Schelling criticises in the Lectures, raised the question of what happens if one tries to make the principle of sufficient reason the sole means of understanding the world. Jacobi suggests in relation to Spinoza that "we remain, as long as we grasp things conceptually (*begreifen*), in a chain of *conditioned conditions*" (cited in Sandkaulen-Bock 1990 p. 15). This chain blocks the route to that which has no condition, the *Unbedingte*, the Absolute, which Jacobi terms *Seyn*, "being". The hiatus between what can be explained causally and "being" is for Jacobi what allows him to sustain the notion of God, who is not, as in Pantheism, to be equated with nature's intelligibility, and who therefore cannot be known but only revealed. The problem which comes to concern Schelling and his contemporaries in the 1790s is precisely the relationship between a nature of causally related things in the knowable world and the Absolute. The Absolute need not be thought of as some strange, mystical entity: it is initially just the necessary correlate of the relative status of anything that can be explained causally.

The importance of Kant in this debate, and the main reason why he was attacked by Jacobi, lay in his denial that we can say anything positive about things in themselves. Kant argued that all knowledge is of "intuitions", which are organised by categories of the understanding. This meant we have no right to claim that we can *know* any more than the necessary connections of intuitions in the judgements of our understanding. The problem with this, as Jacobi suggested, is that it makes knowledge groundless. Kant, though, did not deny the *existence* of what was beyond the world of phenomena, in that the world "in itself" includes ourselves, who are free as noumena, even as we are determined as phenomena. The question that concerned German Idealism was how to understand the relationship of the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds.

It was J. G. Fichte who suggested, in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 and subsequent texts, that our cognitive and our practical aspects must have a common source if Kant's philosophy is to provide what Kant intended, a grounding of the possibility of knowledge and ethics that did not have to rely on theological support. Fichte's key move was to radicalise Kant's question as to how knowledge can explain itself. He argued that consciousness could not be understood in the same way as any aspect of the object world. The real question was how the mind came to the act of reflection upon its own functioning at all. If the mind were really a mechanism, it would be inexplicable why it came to reflect upon itself, because there could be no *reason* for it to do so. Nothing in a chain of cause and effect can explain why that chain should come to the point of thinking about itself as itself. For consciousness to reflect upon itself it must have a subject–object structure, but that structure is not sufficient to explain consciousness, because one needs a third aspect that establishes the identity of reflecter and reflected. This ground must have an uncaused, absolute status, which Fichte attributes to the "I".

Subjectivity for Fichte, then, is a self-acting spontaneity which cannot be explained via a prior cause, because that would contradict its essential nature by putting it in a relationship of causal dependence. The structure of the world is, as it was for Kant, a product of the I: it does not, as had been thought in dogmatic metaphysics, depend upon the essence of things in themselves. Fichte, though, gives an account of the I which Kant could not and did not accept. Without such an account Fichte considers Kant's philosophy incomplete, in that its most fundamental aspect, self-consciousness, is unexplained. For Fichte, the I cannot be known as an object because it is itself the prior condition of objectivity. Access to this condition depends, therefore, upon an *action* of the I upon *itself*, in "intellectual intuition", where

the I as subject and the I as object are immediately identical. Kant thought that intuitions were what was *given* to the subject, and that there could be no intuition of the intelligible, or supersensible.

Schelling's initial philosophical enterprise can, somewhat reductively, be understood as an attempt to marry Fichte's I, which is the spontaneous cause of itself, to Spinoza's God, which is likewise *causa sui*. The reasons for attempting to do this derive from Schelling's understanding of the problems raised by Jacobi and Kant. Schelling wavers, in the work from 1795 to 1800, between a position very close to Fichte and a position closer to Spinoza, before clearly moving away from Fichte in 1801.

In this period Schelling's philosophy already has an ontological focus which is also vital in the Lectures. This focus is evident if one compares his approach to an issue that appears in two texts of 1795, *On the I as Principle of Philosophy or on the Absolute in Human Knowledge*, and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*. The issue is Kant's question as to how synthetic *a priori* judgements are possible. They were possible for Kant because of the synthetic activity of the subject in judgements of the understanding. Schelling maintains, however, that there is a more fundamental problem, that of why there is a realm of judgement, a world of appearances, at all. If judgement consists in syntheses of appearances, it must depend upon a prior *separation* of what is joined again in the judgement, otherwise there would be nothing that required synthesising. In *On the I*, Schelling reformulates Kant's question in Fichtean terms: "How is it that the absolute I goes out of itself and opposes a not-I to itself?" (I/1 p. 175). The absolute I, following Fichte, is that which is the subject and object of itself in the sense described earlier, which splits itself in order to know itself. For Fichte, we are aware of the demand to overcome the not-I via the dictates of Kant's moral law, understood as the demand to realise freedom, the essence of the I, in the world of objective nature. The apparent absurdity of Fichte's idea that the world should be understood as an absolute I can be tempered if one considers the difficulty of explaining the fact that we experience the resistance of the object world. Without that which can feel compelled, which Fichte regards as the freedom of the I manifest in practical reason, how could one assert that there is such a resistance? Freedom is thus necessarily prior to what opposes it. If there were no such priority, it would become impossible to know how the world becomes intelligible at all, because something that offered no resistance of any kind would be unknowable. What is revealed here at the level of individual consciousness, in the feeling of resistance of the world, is used by Schelling to explain how it is that the not-I, the world of conditioned natural objects, must also involve what is present in the conscious I.

In Schelling's view, knowledge itself is, as it was for Kant, the result of the necessary linking of phenomena expressed in judgements. What makes knowledge (and practical reason) possible, though, cannot itself be of the same conditioned status. This is one of the most important contentions of German Idealism. Schelling maintains, in line with Fichte, that the condition of knowledge, the "positing" of the I, must have a different status from what it posits: "nothing can be posited by itself as a thing, i.e. an absolute thing (*unbedingtes Ding*) is a contradiction" (I/1 p. 166). The argument depends upon a play on one of the words for "absolute", *unbedingt*. Things can be determinate only in relation to other objects, but they also depend upon what posits them *as* something, the subject. The subject is therefore *unbedingt*, un*thing*ed, "absolute". The requirement, taken over from Fichte, that the prior condition of objectivity is the subject, separates Schelling from Spinoza for most of his career. There is, though, a serious problem in understanding the Absolute in terms of subjectivity. In the *Philosophical Letters* Schelling reformulates the question he had asked in *On the I* as follows: "*How is it that I step at all out of the Absolute and move towards something opposed* (*auf ein Entgegengesetztes*)?" (I/1 p. 294).

Stepping out of the Absolute involves what must be conceived of as the undifferentiated One somehow ceasing to be One. This introduces relation into the Absolute, which seems to contradict its essence. The relations in scientific knowledge are understood in terms of the principle of sufficient reason, which makes links, in the form of statements of identity, between what appears opposed. Jacobi's point was that the "negative" dependence of particular things on other particular things for their determinacy meant that there must be a positive ground, which he termed "being", that could not be understood in the same way as those particular things were understood. Schelling's friend at the Tübingen seminary, Friedrich Hölderlin, realised that such an argument revealed a major problem in Fichte's idea that the Absolute should be understood as an absolute I. For it to be an absolute *I* it must entail consciousness. However, if the absolute I contained all reality, it could not have anything opposed to it as an object and therefore could not be conscious. Consequently, Hölderlin argued, one has to understand the structure of the relationship of subject to object in consciousness as grounded in "a whole of which subject and object are the parts", which he, in the manner of Jacobi, termed "being" (see Bowie 1990 p. 68). This meant that any attempt to explicate the Absolute in reflexive terms, as a cognitive relationship of subject to object, was doomed to failure. A development of this argument became the core of Schelling's objections to Hegel. Schelling's problem was to reconcile this view with his conviction that Fichte had shown the inherent fault in Spinozism, its failure to explain sub-

jectivity. Schelling was faced with sustaining a philosophy in which the spontaneity of the subject is central but which must also acknowledge the problem of the ground of the subject's relationship to the object. Spinoza's absolute object, the world of "conditioned conditions", fails to give any explanation as to why the world should involve the development of knowledge and freedom. Fichte's subject-object, the absolute I, seems to rely on the subjective side of a relation being absolute, thereby posing the problem of how it can be seen as absolute at all, in that an I requires relation to a not-I to be itself.

The tension in Schelling's early work is evident in its two most influential products, which Schelling discusses at some length in the Lectures: the *Naturphilosophie* which emerged in 1797 and developed in the succeeding years, and the *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800. Both oppose mechanistic views of nature by attempting to account for the fact of subjectivity, but both are faced with the problem of how to understand the emergence of a world of relation from an absolute ground. The key to the *Naturphilosophie* is the notion of productivity. What Schelling terms "productivity" should not be understood, as it often is, as a vitalist "life-force", because, Schelling insists, the notion of a force makes sense only in relation to another force which opposes it. It is productivity's opposing *itself* to itself that makes it manifest in "products", the world of appearing nature. How, though, are we aware of productivity, given that, as Kant had insisted, we have no access to things in themselves but only to appearances? Schelling does not think of productivity as something knowable in the manner of an object. It is rather the necessary ground of the dynamic processes of appearing nature: "As the object is never absolute (*unbedingt*), then something *per se* non-objective must be posited in nature; this absolutely non-objective postulate is precisely the original productivity of nature" (I/2 p. 284). Rather, therefore, than seeing the objects of empirical scientific investigation as the prior fact in nature, for Schelling the prior fact is productivity. If it were pure productivity, it would dissipate itself at infinite speed; it must, therefore, have "inhibited" itself, in that it manifests itself in transient products. To characterise the appearance of productivity as the forms of empirical nature, Schelling uses the metaphor of a stream, which forms eddies that can at least temporarily sustain their shape despite the continual replacement of the actual material of the eddy. Thus far the theory is essentially a dynamically modified Spinozism.

The next problem is to explain how it is that we are able to know nature at all, because, as Schelling maintains, "Spinoza could not make comprehensible how I could become conscious of this succession of representations" (I/2 p. 36) in the object world. Schelling is

concerned to avoid the Kantian division between things in themselves and appearing phenomena, in order to explain how the object world comes to think about itself. He does so by rethinking the question of reflection, the splitting of subject and object, mind and nature. In *Naturphilosophie,* "Nature is to be invisible mind, mind invisible nature. *Here,* therefore, in the absolute identity of the mind *in* us and the nature *outside* us, the problem of how a nature outside ourselves is possible must dissolve" (I/2 p. 39). If the split is between things in themselves and "representations", it becomes impossible to know how one could in any way affect the other. In some way, then, they must be identical:

> one can push as many transitory materials as one wants, which become finer and finer, between mind and matter, but sometime the point must come where mind and matter are One, or where the great leap that we so long wished to avoid becomes inevitable (I/2 p. 53).

Schelling, always a monist, thinks of the difference of mind and matter as only ever a relative difference within a totality which encompasses both.

Schelling's conception of nature, in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Judgement,* is of an organism: whilst the aspect of nature bound by causal laws can be accounted for by mechanical explanation, the development of organic life and mind cannot. On the mechanistic view we have no warrant for assuming that the different laws of nature have any status in common: we just have Jacobi's endless chain of conditioned conditions. This led Kant to introduce the notion of "reflective judgement", which considers nature as if it were purposive even though this cannot be proven. The idea of reflective judgement allowed Kant to try to understand how it is that organisms emerge and function according to principles which are not apparent in causal explanation. Schelling's addition, which Kant would not have countenanced, is to regard the emergence and development of mind itself as the *result* of an overall organic process. To do this Schelling develops a key idea of Fichte's: "what is included in a mechanism cannot step out of it and ask: how has the whole [system of my ideas] become possible?" (I/2 p. 17). The crucial contribution of the *Naturphilosophie* lies in its inclusion of ourselves as free, thinking subjects within nature, in a way the science which succeeded it in the nineteenth century failed to do. In the *Naturphilosophie,* everything that appears is only a result of productivity's inhibiting itself in the form of appearing objects. Productivity itself therefore cannot be known as itself, because it is not an object. As such, productivity is analogous to the conscious I, which, for the reasons we have seen, also cannot be objectified. The emer-

gence of thinking must therefore be understood in non-causal terms, as an act of freedom of the kind which is inherent in the very principle of dynamic nature. The implications of this position continually concerned Schelling in his later career, as is evident in the Lectures.

Schelling's attempt in the *Naturphilosophie* to provide an account of the genesis of self-consciousness was carried over into the *System of Transcendental Idealism,* the text for which he is probably best known. The *System* suffers from a defect, however, which is the result of Schelling's indecisiveness over his relationship to Fichte. Instead of seeing empirical nature and self-consciousness as having their common source in the productivity of the Absolute, consciousness, the absolute I, is given priority (see Frank 1985 pp. 71–103). This gives rise to the problem we saw earlier of using the same term for the subject which is relative to an object of knowledge as for the whole within which that relation is located. The point of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* is to make philosophy, probably for the first time, into a "history of self-consciousness", to retrace the path thought must have followed in order to arrive at the moment of reflection upon itself which led it to the need to give a retrospective account of its own history.[2]

Writing the history of the development of consciousness entails a significant problem: how does consciousness give an account of what it was before becoming itself as consciousness? Whatever preceded consciousness cannot *appear* as itself, since it would have to do so within consciousness, thereby losing its original non-conscious nature. In the *System,* Schelling asserts that what gave rise to self-consciousness was the progressing stages of the absolute I's self-limitation. Rather than remain an undifferentiated, infinite One, the I divided itself against itself in order to know itself. The process began with the emergence of a primal duplicity in the initially undifferentiated One, whereby the very beginnings of differentiation in nature became possible. This idea of polar opposition within the Same – such as the opposition between an expanding and a contracting force – that led to a manifest world is present in varying versions in all of Schelling's philosophy. A process was initiated by this opposition which moved, via the ever more complex differentiations manifest in inorganic and then organic nature, to the point of the emergence of consciousness.

Because each stage is a limit on what is itself unlimited – what the *Naturphilosophie* termed "productivity" – each stage, *qua* limitation, becomes the next object to be overcome by the absolute I, the subject

[2] I have looked in some detail at the *System* elsewhere (Bowie 1990 and 1993), so I restrict myself here to a brief outline intended to facilitate the understanding of Schelling's own account of it in the Lectures.