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Absolute Affirmation and Conditions of Meaning

Logical-Ontological Paradoxes of
F.W.J. Schelling’s “Identity Philosophy”

The article focuses on Schelling’s first version of identity philosophy as it is developed in his essay “Presentation of My System of Philosophy.” The author interprets it as a response to unsolved problems of Kant’s theory of the transcendental ideal. The most challenging is the question of: how it is possible to let the specific possibilities arise from the single unconditional principle grounded in transcendental affirmation? The author finds the answer to this question in Schelling’s concept of absolute identity, which must be understood as a condition of the meaningfulness of every proposition, which is determined through the form of predication.

In my previous works devoted to the early writings of Schelling and his connections with Kant’s legacy, I tried to show that Schelling’s overall philosophical strategy is defined by an orientation toward a genetic reading of Kant’s doctrine of the transcendental ideal.¹ The attempt

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undertaken in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) to realize this strategy consistently required interpreting the transcendental affirmation, which serves as an unconditional prerequisite for the conceivability of all content, as a specific act having a self-repeating structure. The conception advanced in the treatise that intellectual contemplation is objectified in artistic contemplation became the embodiment of this idea, which also served as the basis for Schelling's view of art as "the organon and document of all genuine philosophy," a view unprecedented in the history of philosophy. However the proposed conception of the unconditional generated new difficulties for the system.

To put it concisely, these difficulties amount to the following concern. If an act that legitimizes philosophical thinking is not itself a philosophical act, this raises the question: how does the philosopher ascertain that intellectual contemplation is truly replicated in esthetic contemplation? After all, the act of genius, which displays a unity of the conscious and the unconscious, is not immediately accessible. Seeing the objectivization of intellectual contemplation in its product would require a special procedure of interpretation, which alone allows comprehending the connection between esthetic experience and the unconditional. Thus, for the link to the artistic act to appear in philosophical reason as evidence of its wholeness, the act itself must, first of all, be philosophically mediated—in this case artistic contemplation forms only the last step along the path to completion of the system; true completion is not art, but philosophy (of art). If, as Schelling asserts, "art alone can make universally objective that which philosophy is capable only of envisaging subjectively,"² then genuine knowledge of the unconditional as the ground for the determinacy of any reality is generally accessible only to the artistic genius, while there is nothing at the disposal of the philosopher that would allow him to discern in the act of genius that same unconditional that prefaced the act of philosophical reconstruction as a postulate.³

In *System of Transcendental Idealism* this paradox remains unresolved. After examining it in the context of the offered interpretation of transcendental idealism as a genetic development of the transcendental ideal, we see that there is a fundamental logical-ontological problem underlying it that caused Schelling, once he became aware of it a year after the publication of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, to reject the theory of art as the sole organon and document of philosophy and never again return to it.

The initial problem for Schelling was the conditions of possibility of

the architectonic unity of reason. According to Kant's logic, the ladder of predication has two boundaries. In the regressive series of logical conditions for a given predication, the boundary is the representation [*Vorstellung*—Ed.] of *omnitude realitatis*, the primary eternal substratum that, being the sum-total of all that is possible, can be conceived of only as singular. Insofar as together with the representation of *omnitude realitatis* there is posited the principle of the thorough determinability of all objective content, in a progressive series of predication the boundary of determination also turns out to be something that is singular, specifically the representation of the comprehensively determined individual thing. A paradoxical situation arises: we wind up with *two* representations, each of which has the inherent property of being absolutely *singular*.

Now let us ask ourselves a question: are these two representations identical or different? If they are identical, then a position is at least conceivable from which their indiscernibility is perceived immediately; only given such a position can all predicative forms be interpreted as [different] ways of relating the unconditional to itself. This position is not found in *System of Transcendental Idealism*: in order to make his own intellectual contemplation an object, the philosopher needs the help of the artistic genius who, in turn, assures the identity of the conscious and the unconscious without knowing that he is merely reintroducing the identity that serves as the foundation of consciousness in general. If, on the other hand, the two representations are different, insofar as all possibilities for predicative determination lie between these two boundaries, their relationship to one another within the predicative form is already impossible to describe. Therefore: in asserting their difference, it is impossible to point to any substantive, real difference.⁴ This raises the question of how this nonlogical, nonconceptual difference can possibly be stated. The *System of Transcendental Idealism* does not offer a coherent answer to this question either.

As I will attempt to demonstrate in this article, it is exactly this alternative that determines the further development of Schelling's philosophy. It is decisive in formulating the concept of the Absolute: either the absolute itself has a self-repeating structure (in which case it entirely and completely moves into a process of self-mediation and becomes the immanent of the history of self-consciousness), or between any figure of repetition and the absolute there remains a gap (again raising the urgent question of the extent to which it is possible to represent the Absolute in philosophical discourse). A vast body of [Schelling's] writings, con-

ventionally called texts on the identity philosophy, has been devoted to seeking a convincing solution to this dilemma.

Identity, essence, and form

The initial sketching out of what is generally known within Schelling studies as “identity philosophy” is found in “Presentation of My System of Philosophy,” which Schelling published in 1801 in the second volume of his *Journal for Speculative Physics*.⁵ This work became a turning point in the development of logic-ontological themes. As we will see, despite a very strongly expressed tendency to use the terminology of traditional speculative metaphysics, here, Schelling nevertheless remains oriented toward Kant’s subject matter.

Already in the Preface, Schelling makes clear that the goal of the new treatise is to clarify the meaning of the parallelism between *Naturphilosophie* [philosophy of nature] and transcendental idealism and eliminate systematic difficulties: “For many years I sought to present the one philosophy that I know to be true from two wholly different sides—[both] as philosophy of nature and as transcendental philosophy. Now I find myself driven by the present situation of science to bring forward publicly, sooner than I wish, the system that for me was the foundation of these different presentations, and to make everyone interested in this matter acquainted with views which until now were merely my own concern, or perhaps shared with a few others . . . the system that appears here for the first time in its fully characteristic shape is the same one that I always had in view in the different [earlier] presentations, which I constantly used as my personal guide-star in both transcendental philosophy and *Naturphilosophie*.”⁶ Therefore, at least in terms of intention, the treatise is a direct continuation of the program set forth in earlier works.

Yet from the very start, “Presentation of My System of Philosophy” methodically unfolds on the meta-level, as opposed to all previous [theoretical] constructions: it represents a new “perspective,” specifically the position from which the rootedness of *Naturphilosophie* and transcendental idealism within a single unconditional is viewed without reference to the structural parallelism that exists between them. Schelling formulates this claim in the following manner: “I have always represented what I called philosophy of nature and transcendental philosophy as the opposite poles of philosophical activity. With the present exposition I

situate myself at the indifference-point [between them]; only if one has previously constructed [philosophy] from completely antithetical directions can one correctly and confidently place oneself there.”⁷

Schelling asserts that both in works on *Naturphilosophie* and in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, he had already “constructed” the “indifference point,” albeit “from the two opposing directions.” Clearly, it is the figure of repetition that played the role of constructive scheme here. As we remember, the systematic completeness and fullness of each of the two main philosophical disciplines has been attested to by the fact that in each of them, the principle appeared twice. At the same time, the structural parallelism of both disciplines indicated that both have one and the same principle. This link is, actually, the preliminary construction of the “indifference-point.” Initially Schelling thought that a direct positioning of this viewpoint was impossible and developed subtle strategies to indirectly thematize the unconditional, something that we already saw above. However this gave rise to methodological problems, as we discovered through analysis of *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Therefore, in “Presentation of My System of Philosophy,” Schelling undertakes a new, even bolder experiment. Discourse of the unconditional must now be developed “from the top down,” starting from the unconditional itself.

Schelling again uses Spinoza’s *Ethics* as a model for constructing such a discourse. It is from here that the specific “geometrized” form of explication comes, significantly complicating interpretation of the treatise. However, it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion based on this outwardly “dogmatic” form that Schelling has completely left the domain of the transcendental-philosophical investigation. As we will see, in “Presentation of My System of Philosophy,” transcendental-logical problems still comprise the nucleus of Schelling’s project of a philosophical system. Understanding this requires a rather painstaking analysis of the first forty paragraphs of the treatise. It is here that we find an explication of the main principles for constructing the system.

The treatise opens with a definition of reason in §1:

Definition. I call *reason* absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective. . . . [T]o conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking. . . . Reason, therefore, becomes the true *in-itself* through this abstraction, which is located precisely in the indifference-point of the subjective and the objective.⁸

Schelling's contemporaries had already reacted to this introduction with bewilderment and perplexity. What was the status of this definition? On the one hand, the turn of speech "I call reason" draws attention to its purely nominal nature. On the other, elaborations on this definition clearly indicate that it serves both as a postulate and an operational definition: it contains the *requirement* to conceive of reason in the established sense and *instructions* on how to achieve this. All of this lends a certain duality to what follows. If we see the definition of reason as nominal, then the entire presentation acquires the form of a hypothetical construction: if reason is taken in the sense stipulated here, then it is possible to express certain propositions about it. If, on the other hand, the definition is thetic or positive in nature, then it must be asked what right Schelling has to pose it as an out-and-out requirement, openly declaring that "it is not the place here to justify this turn of speech."⁹

Of course, in Schelling's requirement to abstract from "the one who thinks," it is not hard to discern a reformulation of the definition of intellectual contemplation that he offered in the work *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy*. In order to understand why such an abstraction is essential to the correct usage of the term "reason," the following consideration must be taken into account. Recall that in Kant reason is defined as a faculty that assigns principles, in other words that defines the reference points of conceptual coherence of the endlessly vast number of utterances based on the principle of sufficient reason. This means that everything that can be intelligently expressed is subordinate to the principles of reason, insofar as its competence consists specifically in establishing what it signifies "to have meaning." From here, however, it is not hard to grasp that such competence cannot be explained by reference to an external faculty, insofar as it is this competence that first creates the possibility of referring to anything as a reason. This is why it is impossible to gain an adequate understanding of the competence of reason if we see this competence as conditioned by the relationship to its bearer or possessor ("the one who thinks").¹⁰

This consideration serves to immediately elucidate the meaning of §2, which states: "Outside reason is nothing, and in it is everything."¹¹ It is understood that reason as the sum-total of conditions of meaning turns out to be the sum-total of reality in general. If the task of philosophy is to articulate the conditions of any meaning, then within it one can proceed only from a principle that covers all individual cases of meaning and establishes the status of meaningfulness as a single status, common to them all. This is why, in a remark on this theorem Schelling decisively

states: “There is no philosophy except from the standpoint of the absolute. Throughout this presentation, no hesitation on this matter will be entertained: reason is the absolute to the extent that it is thought, just as we defined it (§1).”¹² Reason, therefore, is the Absolute—that same Absolute that appears in the final pages of *System of Transcendental Idealism* as a common foundation for both primary philosophical disciplines.

What can be positively stated in regard to an Absolute thus defined? Insofar as together with abstraction from the one who thinks there inevitably occurs an abstraction from any relationship and distinction, the closest definition of the Absolute is unity. This leads to formulation §3: “*Reason is simply one and simply self-identical.*”¹³ The first half of this formulation does not cause particular difficulty; proving it is generally analogous to Spinoza’s proof of the unity of substance (it must simply be born in mind that Schelling’s Absolute, in accordance with his original orientation toward the transcendental framing of the question, is not thingness, but conceptual structure). The second half is another matter. What precisely is meant by the idea that reason is “self-identical” becomes clear only through a proof “by contradiction”: if reason is not self-identical, then “that in virtue of which it is different from itself must still be posited in it . . . [and] must therefore express the essence of reason. Since, moreover, everything is *in-itself* only in virtue of its capacity to express the essence of reason (§1), this other factor too, considered in itself or in reference to reason, would again be equal to reason, one with it.”¹⁴ In the context of our proposed interpretation of §1 this is entirely understandable. After all, the “having of meaning” is absolutely monosemantic; consequently, that which makes it possible to discern meaning in the first place is not only numerically single, but indivisible within itself. Thus, the thesis that reason is identical to itself establishes its performative nature.¹⁵

Based on this formulation it is evident that the conceptual structure of “self-identity” is the condition of possibility of any specific, particular meaning identical to itself. It is this unconditional prerequisite for any meaningfulness that Schelling formulates in §4: “*The ultimate law for the being of reason, and, since there is nothing outside reason (§2), for all being (because it is comprehended within reason) is the law of identity, which with respect to all being is expressed by $A = A$.*”¹⁶ At first glance this purely formal definition is no help at all in understanding just what competence is guaranteed by this “ultimate law.” However the following two theorems clarify that it points to the connection between any meaning and the form of the predicative relationship.

The main concepts of the theory of predication are initially introduced in §5 through the nominal definition of terms figuring in the formula of the law of identity: “I call the A of the first position the subject, to differentiate it from that of the second, the predicate.”¹⁷ However in §6 this formal distinction “A of the first position” and “A of the second position” turns out to be completely irrelative to that unique [idea] that this law really expresses: “The proposition $A = A$, conceived universally, says neither that A on its own is, nor that it is as subject or predicate. Instead, *the unique being posited through this proposition is that of identity itself, which accordingly is posited in complete independence from A as subject and from A as predicate.*”¹⁸

If we take a closer look at these two formulations, it is easy to notice that the cognitive operation presented in them is paradoxical. On the one hand, in the unconditional prerequisite for any meaningfulness there must be the possibility of distinguishing the main structural elements of any meaning. In keeping with tradition, Schelling considers those elements subject and predicate, in other words that about which a certain definition is stated and that what is stated about it. On the other hand, insofar as the presence of these structural elements itself, in turn, must be *conditioned* by that in relation to which we distinguish them, in respect to that which serves as its condition, this distinction does not have any force. In manuscript remarks written into his personal copy of the second volume of the *Journal of Speculative Physics*, Schelling again clarifies, “This A in the subject position and the other in the predicate position is not what is really posited; what is posited is only the identity between the two.”¹⁹

In essence, at this stage it becomes clear that Schelling’s construction of absolute identity should elucidate the question of the meaning of the predicative relationship. The positing of absolute identity turns out to be, at the same time, positing of “the subject position” and the “predicate position”; however, the meaning of the distinction between both “positions” is clarified only insofar as the posited identity itself remains untouched by it. That which makes the predicative relationship possible cannot itself be comprehended *in* predicative form; however, as a condition of predicative form it is recognized only *out of* predicative form. Thus, form, on the one hand, necessarily belongs to absolute identity as a mode of its existence, however, on the other hand, the essence of absolute identity is not subject to this form.

Schelling formulates the relationship between the essence and form of

absolute identity in an corollary to §15. The main theorem put forth in the paragraph—“*Absolute identity is only under the form of the proposition $A = A$, or this form is immediately posited through its being. . . . [T]here is here no transition, no before and after, but absolute simultaneity of being and of form itself*”²⁰—is accompanied by the following important clarification:

Whatever is posited along with the form of the proposition $A = A$ is also immediately posited with the being of absolute identity itself, though it belongs not to its essence but only to the form or mode of its being. . . . The second part of the proposition is proved as follows: the form of the proposition $A = A$ is determined by the character of A as subject and A as object [predicate—Ed.]. But absolute identity is posited in this very proposition independently of A as subject and A as predicate (§6). So too, whatever is posited along with the form of this proposition belongs not to absolute identity itself, but merely to the mode or form of its being.²¹

From this corollary it is evident that Schelling understands the form of absolute identity to be the formal distinction between the “subject position” and the “predicate position.” But how are we to understand its essence?

An answer to this question contained in a corollary to §8 leaves no doubt that in absolute identity we have a new transcription of Kant’s ideal of pure reason: “Absolute identity cannot be thought except through the proposition $A = A$, yet it is posited through this proposition as *standing in being*. Therefore it *is* by virtue of being thought, and *it belongs to the essence of absolute identity to be*.”²² Insofar as the definition of the essence of absolute identity is word-for-word identical with Kant’s definition of transcendental affirmation, it is not surprising that in the following paragraph, §9, it turns out to be reason itself: “Reason is identical with absolute identity.”²³

As previously noted, Schelling uses the term “reason” here to refer to what in previous works he called intellectual contemplation. However, in “Presentation,” its transcendental-logical meaning is much more clearly articulated. It can be understood from the formulations cited above that use the “subject-predicate” terminology. Indeed, in order to think a particular content in predicate form, I must understand what it means that the predicate tells something about the subject. For this, I have to be able to distinguish affirmation and negation. However affirmation and negation themselves cannot be correlated with one another through affirmation and negation; thus, the meaning of affirmation in its distinction from nega-

tion is simple and irreducible to anything else. It is the immediate grasp of this meaning that constitutes the competence of reason: as absolute identity it is pure affirmation, the positing of the presence of meaning in general as such. Thus, from the transcendental-logical point of view, introducing the distinction between the essence and form of absolute identity elucidates the correlation between the meaning of affirmation and the structure of the predicative relationship. The predicate's telling something about the subject is only a "form or mode of being" of affirmation, but not its "essence"—after all, the meaning of affirmation must be known to me before and independent of the distinction between subject and predicate. It is a fundamental asymmetry in relation between essence and form that is of most importance here: essence exists only in form, however form is not essence itself.

It is this asymmetry that enables elucidation of the specific nature of the relationship between subject and predicate. After all, the meaning of predication resides in the fact that the predicate is not simply mechanically attached to or merges with the subject, but is thought as revealing of that which is essential in the subject itself. This is what is referred to in §16:

Between the A that is posited as subject in $A = A$ and the A posited as predicate (§ 5), no intrinsic opposition is possible. For as far as both subject and predicate are, they belong not to the essence but only to the being of absolute identity, but as far as they belong to the essence of absolute identity [or are absolute identity itself], they cannot be conceived as different. There is therefore no intrinsic opposition between the two.²⁴

Thus, understanding the meaning of the primary affirmation is at the same time understanding of the meaning of unity of subject and predicate. The entering of the predicate simultaneously posits and eliminates its difference from the subject.

By analogy with the methodology tested in *System of Transcendental Idealism*, it should be expected that the introduced distinction between essence and form will also be given an epistemological formulation. It is developed in §§17–22. Here, Schelling's argument is based upon an interpretation of absolute identity as transcendental affirmation. It is clear that cognition of the meaning of affirmation is, as stated in §7, "unique unconditioned cognition"²⁵—after all, the only cognition that can be truly unconditional is cognition of the means by which something is cognized in general, cognition of the very structure of the process of cognizing. This "original cognition of absolute identity," as it is formulated in §17,

“is posited immediately with the proposition $A = A$.”²⁶ However, cognition of absolute identity “does not immediately follow from its essence—from its essence it follows only that identity *is*. It [cognition of absolute identity—P.R.] must immediately follow from its being, therefore, and so belong to its form of being.”²⁷ Thus, form, which in its logical aspect articulates the relationship between subject and predicate, in its epistemological aspect represents the structure of cognition as such. This is the formulation we find in §18: “*Each thing that is considered absolutely and in itself, is in essence absolute identity, but in its form of being, it is a cognizing of absolute identity.*”²⁸

It should be noted that in the epistemological reformulation of the relationship between essence and form, the same asymmetry is preserved that we noted in the formulation we arrived at from analysis of the predicative relationship. On the one hand, there can be talk of cognition only where the position of he who cognizes [the knower—Ed.] and that which is cognized [the known—Ed.] are at least nominally distinguished; on the other hand, this distinction does not apply to the being of cognition itself. In the same way that the predicate’s telling something about its subject presupposes a primordial meaning of affirmation, cognition of any content presupposes a primordial identity of cognition itself. Everything that in a logical regard has the structure of predication, in regard to epistemology always represents the relationship of that which is cognized and he who cognizes, however this relationship in and of itself is possible only insofar as that the same thing is posited in the “position of the one who cognizes” and the “position of that which is cognized” (which is why, in the formula “cognition of absolute identity,” the genitive case should be simultaneously understood as the *genitivus subjektivus* and the *genitivus objektivus*). This original cognition does not have any object or content that is different from itself, but takes the form of “cognizing its self-identity.”²⁹ The summarizing formulation of the corollary to §19 states: “The entirety of what *is* is in itself, or considered in its essence, absolute identity; considered in its form of being, the whole is the self-cognizing of absolute identity in its identity.”³⁰

It is not difficult to surmise that there is correspondence here: what [in logic] was the form of the logical relationship between subject and predicate—the form of telling something about—is now the form of the cognitive relationship, specifically the relationship between subject and object. “*It is the same identical absolute identity,*” we read in §22, “*that, with respect to its form of being, if not with respect to its essence, is posited*

as *subject and object*.”³¹ Thus, cognition has a certain determined content only to the extent that he who cognizes and that which is cognized differs within it; this difference is the form of being of absolute identity.

Before turning to the question of how the subject–object structure and the structure of predication are linked to one another, we should note one important feature of the line of argument being examined. While distinguishing essence and form, Schelling, nevertheless, constantly emphasizes their inseparability. Essence exists only in form, therefore form undoubtedly makes essence accessible, opens it. But at the same time form is not essence itself, but only form; therefore, essence within it is not only opened up, but also concealed. The unconditional is comprehended as the unconditional specifically through that which is conditioned by it; however, conditioning is not the unconditional itself. On the epistemological plane this means: although access to being is only through the form of its cognizability, between the formal structure of cognition and the positive condition of its possibility, there is always a gap. Schelling clearly formulates this in his corollaries to §18. Corollary 1 states: “The original cognition of absolute identity is therefore also its *being* according to form, and, conversely, every being is in its formal aspect a cognizing [*Erkennen*—P.R.] (not a being-cognized—[*Erkanntwerden*—P.R.] of absolute identity.”³² Corollary 2 clarifies: “There is no primitive item cognized. Instead, cognizing is original *being* itself, considered in its form.” (In his personal copy, next to the words “item cognized,” Schelling wrote in his own hand, “apart from the one doing the cognizing.”³³)

Why does the configuration of any determined meaning turn out to be inseparably associated with the subject–object relationship? The answer to this question is prepared by a key lemma of the expository part of the “Presentation” in corollary 2 to §16, where the structural meaning of the relationship between essence and form is developed:

Absolute identity is only under the form of an identity of identity. This is so because absolute [identity] *is* only under the form of the proposition $A = A$ (§15), and this form is posited along with its being. In the proposition $A = A$, however, the same thing is equated with itself, i.e., an identity of identity is posited. So absolute identity *is* only as the identity of an identity, and this is the form of its being, inseparable from its being itself.³⁴

To understand the meaning of this rather difficult text it is helpful to take note of the following consideration. As absolute identity and primordial affirmation, reason simultaneously guarantees both the unity of meaningfulness and the diversity of configurations of meaning. All

specific forms of meaningfulness must be derived from it and be traceable back to it, and, accordingly, at least the possibility of these specific forms must be rooted in it. Where does the difference that underlies form come from if reason itself is absolute unity? Schelling provides an unexpected response: form is derived as a result of the fact that *identity is applied to itself and told about itself*. This is how the mysterious “identity of identity” should be understood. Reason determines the meaning of meaning itself, and in so doing tells something about itself; this telling about itself, being a mode of being of absolute premise, serves simultaneously as a formal matrix of any content.³⁵ One and the same thing is taken as *unity* and as *totality*, this is how it turns out to be possible to make a statement about something specific.

Finally, in §19 the relation between the transcendental-logical and epistemological meanings of form is articulated: “*Absolute identity is only under the form of cognizing its identity with itself.*”³⁶ The primordial affirmation, positing the unity of meaning, is cognizing by reason of its own unity, manifesting this unity through the sum-total of possible meanings, always interrelated to one another, always incorporated into a single architectonic. For such a manifestation to take place, there must be a subject–object relationship, within which various specific formations of meaning can find a place. From this follows §21: “*Absolute identity cannot cognize itself infinitely without infinitely positing itself as subject and object.*”³⁷ However, as becomes clear in §22, the difference between subject and object is exclusively formal, because essence posited in the position of the subject and in the position of the object is one and the same. The subject–object relationship and the predicative relationship appear as if being in superposition: the ladder of predication described by Kant in his concept of complete determination of [every] thing* unfolds *within* the subject–object structure and *together* with it.

This leads to a fundamentally important point that brings us to the most difficult (but at the same time methodically most important) aspect of the entire system’s construction. Insofar as any definite predication is possible only in conjunction with the positing of the subject–object relationship, the difference between the subject and the object can never be qualitative.

*Here the author refers to Kant’s principle of complete determination that he formulates in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The principle famously states: if all possible predicates of things be taken together with their contradictory opposites, then one of each pair must belong to it.—Ed.

For the subject and object it is impossible to point to either a common genus, a species of which they would be, or a particular species distinction that might serve as a basis for differentiation, since, as we recall, the same thing is posited as object and as subject. However there nevertheless must be a difference, otherwise the formation of meaning will be impossible. Based on this, Schelling draws an unexpected conclusion in §23, one that he retrospectively views later as one of the most important discoveries of his identity philosophy: “None other than quantitative difference is [at all] possible between subject and [object].”³⁸

What constitutes a “quantitative difference”? Schelling clarifies that it is “one that obtains with respect to the *amount* of being, such that the same identity is posited [as subject and object], but with a predominance of subjectivity [of cognizing] or objectivity [being].”³⁹ At first glance this claim appears more than puzzling. However what we have here is nothing short of an epistemological reworking of that same thesis of Kant’s: all specific contents can be derived from a primordial affirmation by means of limitation. But limitation is, in fact, quantitative differentiation. It is not surprising that Schelling returns again to the logical aspect of form in a lengthy explanation of this paragraph:

[S]ince the same A is posited in the predicate and in the subject position in the proposition $A = A$, without doubt there is posited between the two utterly no difference at all, but an indifference. In this situation, difference (consequently, the discriminability of two) would become possible only if either predominant subjectivity or predominant objectivity were posited, in which case $A = A$ would have changed into $A = B$. (B is assumed as a designation for objectivity.) Now either this factor or its opposite might be the predominant one, but in either case, difference sets in.⁴⁰

The key point in this argumentation is the revelation of an internal dynamic within the form expressed through the verb “change.” The form is not a static relationship between that which is differentiated, but a differentiation realized due to a change, a shift of balance that unfolds simple identity in the sum-total of its determinations. Through this internal structure, it is as if form is showing itself, explicating the general principle of the generation of meaning, but in so doing positing as well all the connections of all the contents that are subject to this principle. Schelling has good reason to attempt to explain his thinking by using analogies from the field of mathematics, borrowed from the works of A.K.A. von Eschenmayer.⁴¹ Form is the principle of sequence, a universal algorithm to which the procedure of full determination of any content

is subject. It is therefore transitive in nature; elements of form are not parts, but aspects of the construction.

For Schelling, form is the principle mediating the connection between one fundamental essence and the completely determined individual, because it is in form that a system of conceptual relationships unfolds within which there is a logical place for every completely determined individual. This is why in §26 Schelling recasts the relationship between essence and form using new terminology that is key to constructing the system as a whole: “*Absolute identity is absolute totality.*—Because it is itself everything that is, or it cannot be conceived as separated from everything that is (§2). It *is*, therefore, only as everything, that is, it is absolute totality.”⁴² In the definition that follows the theorem, Schelling, without further explanation, designates the term “universe” as absolute totality.⁴³

It is not hard to see that Schelling’s attempt to make logical form dynamic represents a new answer to that same key question of Kant’s doctrine of the transcendental ideal: by what means is a systematically articulated whole containing specific possibilities produced from a fundamental essence that contains the sum-total of possibility as nondifferentiated? What is of fundamental significance here is the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry in determining the transcendental-logical functions. The absolute incommensurability of transcendental affirmation and transcendental negation cannot be represented in any way other than as asymmetry of the relationship between subject and object (on the epistemological plane) and subject and predicate (on the logical plane); however, the relationship between these dimensions is paradoxical: the more fully identity is uncovered in form, the more differentiated form is; the difference is posited and retained through affirmation of ‘identity of identity.’

The formulation offered in §26 is central to the logical-ontological part of the “Presentation of My System.” Within it, that same procedure of self-application, telling directed toward itself that was articulated in the concept of the “identity of identity” is realized. Once one spends a little bit time pondering this formula, its paradoxical nature becomes clear: although absolute identity and absolute totality formally relate to one another as subject and predicate, the predicative relationship in the true sense of the word can have no place here. It is impossible to claim that all possible specific meanings are mere predicates of a single unified meaning—after all, then primordial identity would be divisible

(we should recall that Kant too, in the chapter about the ideal,* rejects the idea that specific possibilities can be derived from one fundamental possibility by means of limitation, i.e., division). The affirmation that the One is the Everything inevitably comes out from under the jurisdiction of predicative logic, because the relationship between the first and the second is a relationship of *change*.

The universe and the individual

Only once form is assigned a transitive nature does it become possible to formulate, based on the concept of absolute identity, the concept of the individual thing. It should be noted that up to this point, there has been no talk whatsoever in Schelling's construction of individual things, only of relationships of meanings. The concept of the individual seems to be introduced in contrast with merely structures of meaning, and it furthermore serves specifically to elucidate the concept of absolute totality or universe. On the other hand, Schelling's substantiation of the concept of the individual thing appears rather strange, insofar as it is formulated negatively. In §27 it is stated, "*What exists outside totality I designate in this context an individual being or thing,*"⁴⁴ while in §28 it is explained that such an existence in and of itself outside totality is inconceivable: "*There is no individual being or individual thing in itself.* For the sole *in-itself* is absolute identity (§8). But this is only as totality (§26)."⁴⁵

It goes without saying that totality presupposes a relationship of mutuality between certain elements. However, Schelling demonstratively refuses to call them individual things, adhering the concept of the individual to that which exists "outside" totality. Understood in this way, clearly the individual can have only a nominal status, especially as in the very first paragraphs it was declared that nothing exists outside reason, outside meaning, and insofar as reason is absolute totality, nothing can exist "outside" totality. This brings us to the perplexing formulation § 28: "*There is no individual being or individual thing in itself.*"⁴⁶ In a remark, Schelling explains: "There is also nothing in itself outside totality, and if something is viewed outside the totality, this happens only by an arbitrary separation of the individual from the whole effected by reflection. But in

*This is the reference to Kant's section on transcendental ideal from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See: Kant, *Critique, Transcendental Dialectic*, bk. 2, ch. 3, sec. 2, A572/B599.—Ed.

itself this separation simply does not happen, since everything that *is* is one (§12), and within the totality is absolute identity itself (§26).⁴⁷

At first glance, the concept of the individual thing seems simply superfluous here. If the One is Everything, then it would seem nonsensical to talk about some sort of individual isolated from the totality. However if we refer to the results of our [early] analysis of the treatise *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy or on the Unconditional in Human Knowledge*,⁴⁸ published elsewhere, it becomes clear that here Schelling takes up and systematically develops a thought that was already formulated in his previous works where, as we can recall, the representation of “the thing in general” without further clarifications is interpreted as transcendental negation. Now Schelling is articulating this thesis in intentionally pointed form: the concept of the individual by its very nature is pure negation, insofar as in bare individuality it is not negation of some sorts of determined predicates that is conceived (then it would already contain at least a minimal universality), but negation of all determinacy as such. Therefore it is impossible to think of the individual in the full sense of the word; however, everything that can be thought has as its boundary this bare individuality. The individual is the border of meaning, that which provides any determined meaning with determinacy, while it itself remains absolutely indeterminate. Thus, the individual, being nothing in and of itself, ensures the determinacy of any reality specifically because of this.

This idea gives the difference between essence and form a new meaning: this difference is what constitutes the status of individuality. This is elucidated by the lengthy comment on §30, extending almost an entire page, that Schelling handwrote into his own copy of the work. It is this comment that spells out the link between the difference between essence and form, on the one hand, and the central problem of Kant’s doctrine of the ideal of pure reason, on the other—the problem of the full definition of the individual. Schelling writes:

I wish to pursue in greater detail the deduction that absolute identity is necessarily totality. It is based on the following propositions:

(1) The proposition $A = A$ expresses a being, that of absolute identity; this being, however, is inseparable from its form. So there is here a unity of being and form, and this unity is the supreme existence.

(2) The being that immediately follows from the essence of absolute identity can only *be* under the form $A = A$ or the form of subject–objectivity. This form, however, *is* not unless subjectivity and objectivity are posited together with [their] quantitative difference. For if both are

posited as equally infinite they are utterly indiscernible, since there is no *qualitative* opposition either. Form is destroyed *qua* form; what is both the one *and* the other [of two opposites] with equal infinitude coincides with what is neither one nor the other.

(3) The same also holds for the higher form of existence that is based on the absolute indifference of cognition and being. Only under this form can the absolute be posited as existing. But if this form is in fact indifference, there is no ability to discriminate [between cognizing and being] and this form is not posited as such.

(4) Hence the absolute does not exist in actuality unless, in addition to the difference between subjectivity and objectivity, there is also posited a difference with respect to that higher form—a difference between the ideal and the real.

(5) Yet this latter difference cannot be posited with respect to the *absolute itself*, since the absolute is inalterably determined as the total indifference of knowing and being, and of subjectivity and objectivity as well. Therefore difference can be posited only in the context of what is sundered from the absolute, and only to the degree that it is sundered. This is the individual. But immediately with the individual, the whole is posited as well. Hence the absolute is posited as absolute by means of being posited with quantitative difference in individuals, but with indifference in the whole. Therefore the absolute *is* only under the form of totality, and this phrase: “quantitative difference in individuals and indifference in the whole” [says] precisely the same thing that “identity of the finite and the infinite” does.⁴⁹

Let us take a closer look at this deduction while keeping our previous conclusions in view. From the standpoint of the Absolute, there is no difference between essence and form. In fact, any meaning, regardless of differences in content, is always meaning. Meaning as such, as we have seen, has an absolutely positive status and does not require a relationship with negation. This is not the case from the standpoint of form: after all, form itself (keeping in mind that the form in question is predicative form) is possible only as a result of the difference between affirmation and negation. This means that form, to the extent that it does not encompass the entirety of essence, requires an absolutely separate and therefore purely negatively determined correlate. Form’s noncoincidence with essence becomes clear through its relationship with this correlate. This correlate is the individual. Thus, the absolute totality, or universe, can be conceived only as a continuum of common definitions (predicates), each of which *can* be shown through the individual. It is important to emphasize: the concept of the individual is born here specifically out of

the fundamental noncoincidence of essence and form. The substantive entirety of fundamental essence can be manifested only in the form of the predicative relationship; however, fundamental essence itself is not subject to predicative definition. Therefore, while derived from fundamental essence, defined (finite) contents are related only to one another, forming totality, but, taking any of these finite definitions as a point of departure, we can organize all the rest around it in such a way that they will assemble themselves into a completely determined concept (*notio completa*), that is, into a series of predicates of a possible subject.

In the same comment written by hand into his own copy of his treatise, Schelling illustrates this point using a remarkable example:

Example: the pure idea of a triangle. In it is neither an equiangular shape nor of one of unequal angles, neither of an equilateral shape nor of one of unequal sides; an idea of this sort is a quantitative differentiation of the idea of the triangle. But further, the very idea of the triangle can exist only in the totality of these forms, so that it is indeed always posited in individuals with difference, but with indifference in the whole.—To speak generally, quantitative difference is posited only in the context of separation and through the *act of separation* [*Absonderungsakt*].⁵⁰

Indeed, the meaning of triangularity becomes clear only from the fact that various types of triangularity are considered as variations of *a single form*, *a single construction*. I may be able to understand what constitutes the unity of the construction only by sorting through its variations, while the simple sum of variations of the triangular form will never give me the overall idea of triangularity. I will only be able to formulate this idea once I have a purely formal understanding of the identity underlying these variations. On the one hand, triangularity is the same in all triangles—whether equilateral, scalene, isosceles, and so forth. On the other, the identity of triangularity can be shown only by deploying the entire assortment of variations. To grasp the meaning of triangularity as it relates to identity, one must have both.

Here we have an articulation of the central idea of Schelling's project. In the complete *logical* definition, individual things are simply different logical projections of absolute identity, images of absolute totality (since *every* predicate is defined by its place in the continuum of all other predicates). Outside its relationship to the totality, the individual in and of itself is utterly inconceivable, and therefore illusory in principle. Thus, Schelling unexpectedly turns Kant's critique of rational theology inside out. According to Schelling's logic, transcendental illusion does

not consist in the fact that we conceive of fundamental essence as an individual thing that we are incapable, however, of imagining *in concreto*, as Kant posited. Transcendental illusion is born of the very attempt to *think of the individual as the individual*, to isolate it from the totality and take it as that to which predicates adjoin as external definitions. The transcendental illusion, thus, emerges not in relationship to fundamental essence but in relation to things! Let us again recall §28: “*There is no individual being or individual thing in itself.*” Schelling formulates this even more decisively in the Explanation of §30:

[I]f we could view everything that *is* in the totality, we would perceive in the whole a perfect quantitative balance of subjectivity and objectivity [of the real and the ideal], hence nothing else than a pure identity in which nothing is distinguishable, however much in the perspective of the individual a preponderance might occur on one side or the other. We would therefore perceive that even this quantitative difference is in no way posited *in itself*, but only in appearance.⁵¹

It should be noted that the concept of absolute totality allows us to see Kant’s principle of complete determination of the individual thing in a completely new light. For Kant, complete determination of the thing was closely tied to the idea of the architectonic of reason, in other words, to the idea of a hierarchical organization of the system of logically possible content. However, the foundation of this architectonic was the idea of the sum-total of the possible in which no hierarchical relationships are conceivable. Therefore the unfolding of specific possibilities out of the sum-total of the possible remained a mystery for Kant. It fell to Schelling’s conception of absolute totality to solve this problem. The proposition that absolute identity is absolute totality means that together with affirmation of unity of meaning, both the multiplicity of ways of positing meaning and their interconditionality are also simultaneously affirmed. Absolute totality contains specific possibilities, but entails their organic, and not hierarchical, interconnection to each other: all of the contents that are a part of it are determined out of one another in such a way that complete analysis of any content requires the involvement of all others, and, furthermore, it does not matter in what order such analysis is conducted. So long as we remain on the level of meaning “in and of itself,” no hierarchical mutual subordination of various conceptual configurations, including in terms of their degree of generalization, can be established. But as soon as an attempt is made to conceive of a separate individual in context of this totality, that is, to introduce transcendental negation,

this organic totality of meaning develops into a hierarchical ladder of predicates, each of which has above it and below it other strictly defined predicates. Thus, complete determination of the individual acquires meaning only through transcendental negation, although transcendental affirmation serves as a condition of its possibility.

As it pertains to transcendental logic, the radicalism of this step should not be underestimated. Insofar as the individuality of the individual occurs only in appearance, every individual, in terms of its form, is absolute totality taken in a particular aspect. It is thus true that as in totality, absolute identity also resides in the individual—otherwise it would be divided, that is, it would not be identity (recall Schelling’s example of the triangle). This means that any individual is determined *within itself* as a totality of its own properties. The structure of the individual is the same as the structure of reason itself: the essence of an individual thing appeared only in form (in the mutual correlation of predicates), but form is not essence itself.⁵² The difference is simply that in reason, or in the Absolute, essence is the fullness of affirmation, while in the individual it is empty negation. Accordingly, the complete determination of an individual thing is a modification of the sum-total of possibilities, but not its limitation. “*Each individual in relation to itself is a totality,*” Schelling formulates in §41.⁵³ We thus again encounter the figure of repetition: that which we call the individual thing is a *repetition* of totality. However totality taken in relation to the individual has an essentially different status than absolute totality; this is why in §42 Schelling calls it *relative totality*: “I shall designate a totality a relative one insofar as it displays [*darstellt*] the individual in relation to itself. I do so not because the totality could [be] anything but absolute in comparison to the individual, but because it is merely relative compared to absolute totality.”⁵⁴

The task of philosophy, as Schelling formulates it in “Presentation,” lies exactly in the task of constructing all possible modifications of totality. Philosophy is the *reconstruction* of the absolute totality originally uncovered in reason as the universal structure of meaning in a series of relative totalities. The *Naturphilosophie* part of the treatise that immediately follows the logical-ontological introduction is just such a reconstruction.

Notes

1. See P.V. Rezvykh, “Early Schelling and Kant: Searching for the Unconditional” [Rannii Shelling i Kant: poiski bezuslovnogo], in *Istoriko-filosofskii*

ezhegodnik (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), pp. 250–78, and “The Geneticization of the Transcendental Ideal in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*” [Genetizatsiia transtsendental’ nogo ideala v ‘Sisteme transtsendental’ nogo idealizma’ F.V.I. Shellinga], in M. Bykova and M. Solopova, ed., *Slovo i sushchnost’*. *Sbornik nauchnykh statei k iubileiu professor N.V. Motroshilova* (Moscow: Kanon+, 2009), pp. 379–403.

2. F.V.I. Shelling [F.W.J. Schelling], *Works [Sochineniia]*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Mysl’, 1987), p. 329.

3. It is quite surprising that the field of Schelling studies has never devoted sufficient attention to this paradox. Neither Dieter Jähnig nor Manfred Frank finds the Schelling completion of the system at all problematic. The first to point out the paradox was Thomas Kisser in his article, “Wie kann eine allgemeine Theorie der Wirklichkeit ihre eigene Wahrheit zeigen? Bemerkungen und Fragen zu Struktur und Funktion der Kunst in Schellings *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*,” in J. Jantzen, T. Kisser, and H. Traub, ed., *Grundlegung und Kritik. Der Briefwechsel zwischen Schelling und Fichte 1794–1802, Fichte-Studien*, vol. 25 (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005). See in particular pp. 142–50.

4. Here Leibniz’s principle of the identity of indiscernibles, which has fundamental importance in substantiating the architectonic unity of reason, is clearly inapplicable.

5. It is noteworthy that the 1801 “Presentation,” despite its key role in Schelling’s intellectual development, long remained at the periphery of scholarly attention. The majority of historical-philosophical works devoted to the so-called “identity philosophy” focus their attention on *Bruno or On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things* (1802), the Würzburg *System of the Whole of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Nature in Particular*” (1803–4), and *Aphorisms as an Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature*” (1806), while “Presentation” was, at best, viewed as a preliminary draft. This is in part due to the obvious unfinished quality of the work, which breaks off almost mid-word, in part due to the exceptionally difficult nature of the text, which tends toward the deductive form of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and in part due to the fact that the work is weighed down by a multitude of contexts (an epistolary fixing of boundaries with Fichte, an intensive exchange of ideas with K.A. Eschenmayer, and a reworking of H. Steffens’s essays on *Naturphilosophie* etc.).

6. F.W.J. Schelling, “Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie,” in F.W.J. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, im Auftrag der Schelling-Kommission der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Reihe I: Werke, vol. 10, ed. M. Durner (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2009), p. 109 [quoted from Michael G. Vater, “F.W.J. Schelling: Presentation of My System of Philosophy (1801),” *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 343–44].

7. *Ibid.*, p. 110 [344–45].

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17 [349].

9. *Ibid.*, p. 116 [349].

10. For analogous reasons, it turns out to be impossible to define language as a medium of communication, insofar as both one who communicates and what is communicated can exist only within language.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 117 [350].

12. *Ibid.*

13. Ibid., p. 118 [350].
14. Ibid.
15. Recall that in linguistics, speech acts that establish their own meaning are labeled performative. For example, in promising something or swearing an oath, the speaker is simultaneously committing an act and naming it; the name of the action and the action itself coincide.
16. Ibid., p. 118 [350].
17. Ibid. [351].
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., pp. 121–22 [353].
21. Ibid., p. 122 [353].
22. Ibid., p. 119 [351].
23. Ibid., p. 120 [352].
24. Ibid., p. 122 [354]. [Bracketed insertions are Vater’s.—Trans.]
25. Ibid., p. 119 [351].
26. Ibid., p. 123 [354].
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 124 [355].
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 123 [354] (inserted German—P.R.).
33. Ibid. It is not difficult to see that here Schelling is undertaking a reformulation of Kant’s notion of transcendental philosophy. No being exists that would not be given in the form of cognizance; it is not the case that reality first is, and then is cognized; rather, cognition is itself the mode of being of everything that is.
34. Ibid., p. 122 [354].
35. Such an understanding of transcendental affirmation differs fundamentally from the theory of the unity of two activities that Schelling formulates in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*. * [Predicative] self-addressing of absolute identity creates only the formal possibility of limiting the sum-totality, but does not realize a true limitation. Therefore a complete determination of a thing comes not from the essence of identity, but from form.
36. Ibid., p. 123 [355].
37. Ibid., p. 124 [355].
38. Ibid., p. 125 [355]. Vater uses the word “predicate” instead of “object.”
39. Ibid. [Bracketed insertions are Vater’s.—Trans.]
40. Ibid., pp. 125–26 [356].
41. On Eschenmayer’s conception of natural philosophy, including his use of mathematical analogies to substantiate the concept of potency, see R. Marks, *Konzeption einer dynamischen Naturphilosophie bei Schelling und Eschenmayer*

*Here the author refers to Schelling’s concept of the unity of the conscious and unconscious activities of the self. According to the philosopher, the conscious and the unconscious are unified by the productive activity of the self. See: Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, §3 C.—Ed.

(Munich, 1985) and J. Jantzen, "Adolf Karl August von Eschenmayer," in T. Bach and O. Breidbach, ed., *Naturphilosophie nach Schelling* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 2005) (Schellingiana 17), pp. 153–79.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 126 [357].

43. This term is obviously borrowed from Leibniz's *Monadology*, where he denotes the sum total of all possibilities, that is, the combination of the greatest number of compatible possibilities, within the framework of a single whole.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 127 [357].

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. See P.V. Rezvykh, "Early Schelling and Kant: Search for the Unconditional" [Rannii Shelling i Kant: poiski bezuslovnogo].

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28 [357–58]. [Bracketed insertions are Vater's.—Trans.]

50. *Ibid.*, p. 129 [358] (inserted German—P.R.)

51. *Ibid.*, p. 128–129 [358].

52. It is not hard to see that Schelling took such an understanding of the individual (individuum) from Leibniz's monadology. It is indicative that in later versions of the identity philosophy he uses not only the term "universum," but other specifically Leibnizian terms as well, speaking, for example, of "fulgurations."

53. *Ibid.*, p. 134 [362].

54. *Ibid.*, p. 135 [362] (inserted German—P.R.)

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