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Schelling *contra* Fichte: The Thesis on Being before and after 1806

Schelling contra Fichte: la tesis sobre el Ser antes y después de 1806

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Abstract

Schelling's 1806 essay against Fichte is important for two reasons: it discusses (1) the impossibility of idealism to grasp the real and objective status of Being and, therefore, the need for a metaphysical grounding of reflection situated outside of consciousness itself; (2) the discovery of the irreversibility of nature in God, which sheds new light on Schelling's speculations about the relation between the ideal and the real ground of philosophy. Schelling changed the stance first presented in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800 to one according to which there is a non-derivative relation between nature and God: both are independent beings; at the same time, he makes God, as in classical metaphysics, a being that transcends nature. This allows Schelling to overcome the problem of the idealist distinction between logical and real movement, although it destroys the possibility of a single system of philosophy in the years after 1806.

Keywords: Schelling; Fichte; idealism; Being; reflection; system.

Resumen

El ensayo de 1806 de Schelling contra Fichte es importante por dos motivos: discute (1) la imposibilidad del idealismo de captar el estatuto real y objetivo del Ser y, por tanto, la necesidad de una fundamentación metafísica de la reflexión que se sitúe fuera de la propia conciencia; (2) el descubrimiento de la irreversibilidad de la naturaleza en Dios, que arroja nueva luz sobre las especulaciones de Schelling acerca de la relación entre el fundamento ideal y el real de la filosofía. Schelling cambió la posición iniciada en el *Sistema del idealismo trascendental* de 1800 hacia una según la cual hay una relación no derivativa entre la naturaleza y Dios: ambos son seres independientes; al mismo tiempo, hace de nuevo de Dios, como en la metafísica clásica, un ser que trasciende la naturaleza. Esto permite a Schelling superar el problema de la distinción idealista entre movimiento lógico y movimiento real, aunque destruye la posibilidad de un único sistema de la filosofía en los años posteriores a 1806.

Palabras clave: Schelling; Fichte; idealismo; Ser; reflexión; sistema.

Schelling's philosophy from 1806 onwards

We would first like to briefly situate the reader temporally and spatially in relation to Schelling's philosophy to better demonstrate the originality of this paper. Some authors, especially Theunissen (1965) and Oser (1997), have pointed out the central importance and special character of Schelling's reflections between 1806 and 1811. Theunissen referred to it as the "anthropological period", since in it the human being, as opposed to the purely gnoseological subject, became ever more central. Oser established a discontinuity in this period, both in terms of the primacy of reason in general in Schelling's youth until 1804, and in terms of its rejection in the late philosophy of the 1830s and 1840s. It was only in the period from 1806 to 1811 that Schelling was no longer concerned with the facticity of reason, as in his later philosophy, but above all with the facticity of the individual, which led to his claim that man and freedom are beings independent of God and nature. This period thus forms—as M. Frank (1975 & 1985) and A. Bowie (1993) have shown—the origin of Kierkegaardian existentialism as well as the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre.

Our position coincides with and complements Oser's, while at the same time elaborating the grounds for the emergence of this philosophy of the individual, which lies already in the disintegration of the system of identity of 1801-1804. Let us briefly address both points. Like Oser, we maintain the centrality and specificity of the period 1804-1811 for the thinking of the factual and individual domain, while, at the same time, we see a continuity between the middle and late Schelling in the definition of the factual in general, which escapes the rationality of the concept or the purely *a priori* construction in philosophy. This continuity *within* a discontinuity is the first point we want to emphasise in our remarks. In contrast to Theunissen and Oser and following Beiser (2002) and Lauth (1975)—who, however, did not elaborate further on the topic—we locate the origin of Schelling's middle metaphysics, which revolves around the concepts of finitude, evil, and human freedom, in the disintegration of the idealist identity system. This occurred because it became increasingly difficult for Schelling to think through what we have called the "existence of the finite as such" (Rodríguez, 2023b & 2024) in a system conceived according to the categories of identity and unity.

Since the finite as such cannot exist in a mere system of thought, but we are aware of its factual existence, this contradiction can only be resolved by accepting the factual evidence of the finite and trying to incorporate it into a new system that contains two parts and thus is no longer a unified system: that which follows from existence, or Negative philosophy, and that which follows from ground or nature and leads to Positive philosophy.¹

Due to the systematic complexity of the period at hand, we would like to dwell deeper into the question of the originality and the philosophical stance of this paper.

This is in fact primarily a historic-hermeneutical text on Schelling's philosophy and its periodisation. While Oser and Theunissen situate the beginning of intermediate metaphysics around 1806, precisely in the text against Fichte, or in the emergence of the anthropological moment in 1809 and 1810, we identify its commencement, and thus that of the theory of the freedom of the finite and of human freedom, in the 1802-1804 period marked by the concepts of finitude, fall and freedom. In this sense, and as it was well seen by Beiser and Lauth, we defend the idea that Schelling is primarily concerned with the issue of finitude and the independence of the finite within the absolute idealist system of identity. Now, while Lauth regards this concern as evidence that Schelling's system cannot stand as such, and thus pales in comparison with Fichte's ethical idealism, we read this split between absolute and finitude positively and not as evidence of a flaw in Schelling's system, but of the beginning of a new "extra-systematic" or even "contra-systematic" philosophy.

¹ This claim requires further clarification, as "existence" is used here in two distinct senses. In the context of the distinction between ground and existence, existence refers—following Heidegger—to "that which lies before the eyes," meaning what can be rationally grasped as *Was* (the "what" of essence), or pure essence. This conception of existence is associated with light, clarity, and full intelligibility by the understanding. In contrast, the notion of existence in later Positive philosophy does not pertain to what is visible and rationally ascertainable but rather to pure *Dass* (the bare "that"), the brute fact of pre-rational, pre-conceptual being. This second sense of existence aligns with the concept of ground as an indivisible remainder that can never be fully elucidated by understanding. It belongs to what lies in darkness and night, thus linking it to the domain of Positive philosophy, understood as a non-conceptual or pre-conceptual mode of thought.

Precisely what we must point out in connection with our historical thesis is the following: the duality introduced by Schelling in his intermediate philosophy is first implicitly and then explicitly lost in the negative interpretation of duality, and thus in those who try to decode Schelling's philosophy from the systematic point of view of Fichte or Hegel. In other words, if we claim that Schelling's system fails because, in discovering the problem of the finite, he cannot maintain a strong position of unity between the absolute and the world, we thereby lose sight of the fact that a positive and speculative result of this failure entails the discovery of the fundamental metaphysical-ontological necessity of rejecting *any* all-encompassing rational system. For in any system based on the notions of identity and unity, all independent and proper existence of the finite, and with it of finite freedom, is abolished.

The originality of this paper is then twofold: on the one hand, historical-hermeneutical; on the other, systematic. As far as its historical originality is concerned, our aim is to present the nuances in the different positions that Schelling assumed towards Fichte, and towards idealism in general, to show the relevance of this evolution in a multifaceted and complex way. In this sense, our paper is also original from the thematic point of view, since, in general, both periods of Fichte's critique (1801 and 1806) are neither related nor brought into play in the overall framework of the metaphysics of German idealism. To be more specific about the hermeneutic point, it should be noted that we assume Oser's proposal about the evolution of Schelling's thought in this period around 1806, referring to the discovery of the irreversibility of nature in God and, consequently, the emergence of the ontological problem of the finite, but we go further than Oser in that we extend his claim, concentrating on the period 1801-1804 and, specifically, on the appearance already in that period of the relevance of individuality and its irreducibility to the concept of system. We have shown in other articles the distinction drawn in Schelling's philosophy around 1802-1804 between the finite *in* the infinite or the infinitely finite, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a new, purely finite conception that considers the finite as such and that operates here as a background to the thesis on Being in 1806.

From a systematic point of view, we present an argument consistent with the above-mentioned historical thesis. Presenting Schelling's shift towards irreversibility between God and nature already in 1806 in a way that refutes the monist-immanent system of 1801, we infer the impossibility of a complete system, insofar as its point of arrival can no

longer coincide, as full ideality, with its point of departure, and thus an unbridgeable gap opens up between the original absolute and the historical becoming of God through the real-ideal. This systematic thesis allows us to make an additional but central consideration, namely, that Schelling's thesis on Being, like the position on Being as pronominal being in Hölderlin, constitutes the deepest metaphysical basis of Schelling's critique of Fichte's passive and negative notion of nature. In this sense, our historical thesis permits us to elucidate a metaphysical problem key even to the contemporary debate on the origin and ultimate status of reality.

Suffice this to clarify in this introduction how the origin of Schelling's later dualism and anti-rationalism is to be found in the immanent decomposition of his system of 1801-1804, and how this point obscures and calls into question the claim to unity of any possible philosophical system insofar as it must confront rationality with freedom (See Lauth, 1975; Laughland, 2007; Lauer, 2010).

Introduction to the essay against Fichte of 1806

The significance of the essay against Fichte of 1806 lies in two fundamental points. First and foremost, the doctrine of the real Absolute or counter-image as Schelling elaborated it since his *Philosophy and Religion* of 1804. Let us recall that, to exist externally or according to the real factor, the original or ideal Absolute must give way to the conceit of a second, real Absolute, characterised by the appearance of an externality with regard to the original ideal Absolute. The consequence of this, however, was that the real production could have no relation of derivation or resemblance to the original ideal so that the Absolute could only become real as another. Hence the relevance of the Christian myth of the Fall to explain the emergence of the real as a detachment from the Absolute (see *SW VI*, 38-42).

To this thesis, we must now add the discovery in 1806 which we have called the irreversibility of nature in God, and which sheds new light on Schelling's speculations on the relation between the two concepts, which our author had left untouched since the *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800. In this work, Schelling presented transcendental idealism and philosophy of nature as the two sciences that make up the absolute, or the system of philosophy, and explained their reversibility, i.e., that we can begin speculation with consciousness and arrive at nature, or conversely, derive consciousness from nature as the objective subject-

object (see SW III, 361-376). The later system of 1801 takes a similar stand about Spinoza, who, with his doctrine of *Deus sive natura*, declared that God is to be equated with the totality of nature. We can call this thesis “Spinoza’s monistic-immanent thesis”, which is echoed in Schelling’s system of identity between 1801 and 1804 (see Pluder, 2013, pp. 360-368).²

Around 1806, Schelling changed this position in the direction of a non-derivative relation between nature and God, which sees both as independent beings and at the same time makes God again, in accordance with classical metaphysics, a being that transcends nature (see White, 1983; Žižek, 2011). We call this position the thesis of the irreversibility of nature in God. According to this thesis, God expresses himself in nature because God, nature, and man, like all beings, are metaphysically chained to each other. However, nature is not God, because in nature, as in spirit, the determinations of personality and freedom, which correspond to the particular will of man, are not yet made effective.³ This shows not only that nature is separate from God—although not cut off from him—but also that the constituents of ideal philosophy or spirit, especially human freedom, are not circumscribed nor subject to the immanent circle of nature but stand outside and beyond it.

This further enables Schelling to overcome the problem of the idealist distinction between logical and real movement. Indeed, if the absolute contains everything and consequently Hegelian pantheism or panlogism would be valid, why should the *logos* go out of itself, or externalise itself? Movement and development are not only impossible, but also unnecessary.

The true system of identity is that of the undifferentiated Parmenidean being. This is noted by Schelling himself as early as 1801. If the principle contains everything, the real cannot be so. It cannot even be an appearance or an illusion, for even as such, whence would they come? But if the Absolute comes out of itself and is externalised in

² For further discussion on Schelling’s shift toward a strong concept of unity—similar to Spinoza’s—and his growing divergence from Fichte between 1801 and 1806, see Nectarios (2008, pp. 147, 152, 159–160, 162, 166–167, 169), Goudeli (2002, pp. 96–118), Sturma (2000, pp. 216–231), and Pluder (2013, pp. 382–385).

³ This contains a refutation of naturalism in the same direction as Gabriel (2015).

nature and spirit as in Hegel's system, the movement of exit and return cannot be real, as we have seen: it must be a purely logical-apparent development "in eternity". What is at the beginning and at the end must be logically the same: $A = A$. Even a psychological difference in the finite spirit cannot be justified, since it forces us to admit the ontological independence of something different from the Absolute.

Although the discovery of irreversibility between nature and God around 1806 suggests that Schelling's system could never be completed because there will always exist a difference in origin between the beginning and the future development of such system, it nevertheless succeeds in elucidating both the reality of effective movement as the prospect of a real development of the world and of man.

The new critique of Fichte and the old critique of idealism: the thesis on Being

Schelling's 1806 critique of Fichte must provisionally be understood as a continuation of Hegel's critique of Fichte and Kant in 1801 and 1802. This critique is essentially based on two themes. The first is concerned with the purely subjective character of the principle of philosophy. Since this principle must exclude nature or the objective and see it as something outside the system, the principle of philosophy does not coincide with the development of the system, and the philosophy of subjectivity disintegrates into an unintended dualism (see Hegel, *Werke* I, 52-115; II, 298).⁴

The second critical point concerns the self-grounding character of reflection *vis-à-vis* thinking and being, and thus revolves around the grounding principle of the system. Reflection is the capacity of consciousness to come back on itself to grasp with this act the existence of the bearer of thought itself, i.e., the I. According to Schelling and Hegel, however, reflection cannot be regarded as self-grounding since it is an abstracting activity that can only take place if the real ontological content on which reflection unfolds and doubles—Being—is already given or pre-exists the act of reflexion as such. In attempting to make reflection or the I the grounding principle of the system, idealism must exclude Being altogether and put in its place, as we know, the concept of being. But this is a reversal of the *ratio cognoscenti* into the *ratio*

⁴ See also Snow (2018, p. xxix).

essendi since a concept of being for consciousness can only arise *if* there is already a Being in-itself, which Schelling here, following Hölderlin, characterises as a trans-reflexive power.⁵

We should consider the following exposition of Schelling—based on the 1801 thesis of absolute identity—only from the limited, negative perspective of his critique of Fichte’s idealism, rather than as a comprehensive account of his position between 1806 and 1809. Instead, this critique of Fichte draws on themes from Hölderlin’s *Judgement and Being* (1795), specifically its thesis on Being and unity, which Schelling, as in *Bruno*, employs to illustrate the distinction between absolute and relative identity (see *SW IV*, 235-257). By this we mean that, if one wants to criticise the system of the subjective relative identity of thinking and being in Fichte, a position of absolute unity like Hölderlin’s is then necessary. But the totality of Schelling’s position—as it is expressed in his *Stuttgart Private Lectures* (see *SW VII*, 421-447 & 467-471)—comprises an integration of three points of view into one and the same systematic conception— even if we argue that there can be no articulation between the positions of absolute and relative unity, but that at least two systems must exist in Schelling’s thought. These are Hölderlin’s doctrine of Being, which corresponds to the original or ideal absolute or undifferentiated identity, and those of Fichte and Spinoza, which represent the subjective and objective relative identity of thinking and being, respectively. From a broad point of view, both Fichte and Spinoza are realists, in that they presuppose the differentiated existence of subject and object, of the ideal and the real. Strictly speaking, Fichte’s philosophy implies a relative idealism in which the ideal or the subject takes primacy before the object, while Spinoza’s philosophy implies a relative realism that situates the real or the object as the ground of the subject. It is not, then, as Fichte claims, that his philosophy includes Spinoza’s realism as a subordinate moment, but rather that both are unilateral and reversible systems in the face of the supreme science of Being discovered by Hölderlin and perfected later by Schelling.

This broad critique of Fichte from a trans-reflexive conception of Being is part of the Romantic criticism—originating not only from Hölderlin but also from Novalis—against Fichte’s idealism of reflection. Later, Hegel and Schelling extend this critique to Fichte’s notion of

⁵ See Frank (2018, pp. 128 & 131-132).

relative unity, which denies any pole of unity beyond consciousness, reducing all being to the relational structure between relative being and thinking. In this sense, Schelling was not directly influenced by Hölderlin's thesis on Being, as expressed in *Judgment and Being*; rather, both Schelling and the Jena Romantics, including Hölderlin and Novalis, can be seen as advancing a realist, meta-systematic critique of Fichte's idealism. This critique, in some respects, parallels contemporary realist arguments by Markus Gabriel and Quentin Meillassoux against the "correlationist" stance in phenomenology.

With these critiques from 1801-1802 in the background, we can now look in more detail at Schelling's new and old critiques of Fichte.

Schelling begins his analysis with a reference to Fichte's negative character of the concept of being (SW VII, 25). Being lies in the negation of the reflective activity of the I, which is the foundation of Fichte's philosophy, and can therefore only be a negative correlate of this fundamental activity. Before going further, we must mention that, insofar as, for idealism in general, being and nature correspond to the objective, i.e., the antithesis of the subject, which is regarded as the basis of philosophy, we can equate the concepts of objectivity, being, and nature = 0 in Fichte, and assert that Schelling's criticism of the abstract and lifeless character of the concept of nature in Fichte also applies to the concept of being—incidentally, talk of the concept of nature or being applies only to the fictive or *a priori* philosophy of idealism, whereas it does not apply to Schelling, who speaks to us of nature or Being in the proper sense (see Vater & Wood, 2012, pp. 15-18).⁶

One further clarification needs to be made. Some authors, including Snow (2018) and Lauth (1975), see the concept of nature at the centre of the polemic between Fichte and Schelling. However, we should not think, as we will see in this paper, that the difference lies in an adoption of the ordinary, i.e., empirical, concept of nature, and thus in a relapse into naïve realism. The difference between the two authors concerns, rather, the most fundamental concept of being, i.e., that objective instance which must precede and ground all thinking and all relative being, including nature. In this sense, Schelling's philosophy of nature should rather be called a philosophy of Being or of the existing.

⁶ For Fichte's attitude towards Schelling's conception of nature, see Fichte's letter to Schelling (15 November 1800) in Fichte & Schelling (2012, pp. 41-43).

The realist starting point of Schelling's reflections resembles the approach to unity elaborated by Hölderlin in *Judgment and Being*. According to Schelling, we must consider Being as primary and fundamental in relation to the concept, and thus avoid, as we have seen, replacing Being in the proper sense with the *concept* of Being:

A main proposition of Fichte's doctrine, not merely a thought thrown in passing, but a fundamental doctrine, was, as is well known, that the concept of being was a merely negative one, in that it expressed only the absolute negation of activity; likewise, that it must be completely banished from God and divine things (SW VII, 25).

According to the *Science of Knowledge* of 1794, then, there is an inherent contradiction between the absolute or the in-itself and the I, which is the basis of reality, since the former is supposed to be in the I and at the same time, as the in-itself, outside the I, which Fichte's own philosophy rejects (SW VII, 25-26; see Lauth, 1975, pp. 214-225). Fichte himself spoke later in his career of a principle of Being that he equates to God and had therefore partially replaced the absolute I with an absolute Being, just as he modified the primacy of thinking in favour of a conception of *seeing*—following a path opened by Schelling. But this change takes place in the *Science of knowledge* of 1801, 1804, and later versions that were not accessible to Schelling, who continued referring to the works of 1794-1795 and 1796-1797—the *Introductions to the Science of Knowledge* and the popular works of the period between 1805-1806. In any case, the shift in Fichte's conception of knowledge and Being is not widely respected by many Fichtean scholars who consider it a dogmatic turn in his critical or integral idealism insofar as it is not consistent with the theory of the I and of reflective abstraction posited in 1794/1795 (see Lauth, 1975; Acosta, 2014 & 2024).

On the identification of Being with God or the Absolute, Schelling states that God is essentially Being and that there is no Being outside God; this implies that there is no Being *of* God, but that God is itself Being: "God or the Absolute is essentially being, or rather, God himself is essentially being, and there is no being as precisely God; we cannot say: as the being of God. For the being of God would itself be God

because God is nothing else than being" (SW VII, 29).⁷ All being is therefore divine and absolute, eternally true, and positive. In contrast to the thesis of contraction as the beginning of all reality in 1810, our author argued in 1806 that God is the only effective being and that his essence fills the whole sphere of reality. In an earlier paper, we called this position of identifying God and Being the "fullness thesis of monistic-immanent metaphysics". To imagine something real outside of God is like imagining a reality outside of reality: "God, then, is the only real thing, as certainly as he is essentially being; or he alone and wholly fills the sphere of reality. To think something real apart from God is just as impossible as to think a reality apart from reality" (SW VII, 29). This still pantheistic identification of being, God, and reality prompts Schelling to advocate for the realist thesis of philosophy as the science of Being in itself (see Gabriel, 2013; Rang 2000, pp. 67-83), i.e., of the divine and real, which reason really intuit, since there can only be one intuition of the real (see SW VI, 185).⁸

God is not, as Fichte asserts, an effective essence merely for thought, but, as we have seen, that which is exclusively reality and is essentially being. God can only be, as Fichte wants, a being for thought, because he is beforehand a positive and real being that really exists in the natural world, that is, it is objective. With God, as with the Absolute, there is no contradiction between the ideal and the real: in his bosom, both are one (SW VII, 30). We see how Schelling's and Fichte's positions are irreconcilable because what Fichte ascribes to the reflexive capacity of the I as subjective power, Schelling transfers to God as objective and real power, but in so doing he inverts the notion of idealism, according to which the evidence of knowledge constitutes the metaphysical grounding of being, to a position according to which the metaphysical grounding itself is ground of both being and knowing (see SW IV, 252-262 and Schnell, 2009).

Later, in the text of 1806, Schelling mentions again this equivalence between the effectively existing, i.e., God (being in itself), and the

⁷ For more on Schelling's change of vocabulary from "Absolute" to "God", see Vater & Wood (2012, p. 13).

⁸ For the transformation of the notion of intellectual intuition in Schelling, see Bruno (2013), Vater (2000, pp. 213-234), and Goudeli (2002, pp. 150-152). For the difference between the concept of intuition in Fichte and in Schelling, see Goudeli (2002, pp. 96-97) and Nectarios (2008, pp. 139 & 144).

intuition of this being, when he asserts the non-existence of the finite as such in accordance with the thesis of his *System* of 1801 (see Oser 1997). Only that which exists, i.e., nature or being, can be intuited. What is intuited is intuited as existing, and only what exists can be intuited. There is therefore a correlation between intuition and effective existence: “for what is intuited is *ipso facto* intuited as being, and what cannot be so intuited, because its nature is contrary to all being, cannot be intuited at all [...]” (SW VII, 81).

It is important to go back to the equivalence of nature, being, and objectivity in order to characterise philosophy as philosophy of nature, i.e., of the absolute. For if philosophy is the science of the divine and refers to the positive or reality of the natural world, then philosophy can only be a philosophy of nature.

For Schelling, then, philosophy of nature is the philosophy of being, of the objective, philosophy of the effective and existing being, and not, as is claimed, of that which appears in the realm of the empirical or phenomenal. If there were no philosophy of nature, i.e., no philosophy of being, there could not be anything positive, and God would not exist outside of thought: “If it was not philosophy of nature, it would maintain that God alone is in the world of thought, i.e., not the positive of the real or natural world, i.e. it would abolish the very idea of God” (SW VII, 30).

It is Thomas Oser, following Theunissen on this point, who highlights the gradual identification between reason and nature, i.e., between the absolute of the identity system and the nature of natural philosophy in the transitional years between 1804 and 1807. This shift has also been pointed out more recently by Beiser (2002), Melamed (2020) and Gentile (2018, p. 128).

Oser has also drawn our attention to a radical discontinuity in Schelling’s philosophy during its middle period both in relation to his early philosophy and to his later thought. We speak of the discovery of the facticity of the individual or, as we call it, of the finite as such. This centrality of the individual would be characteristic of Schelling’s philosophy during its middle period and differs, on the one hand, from the necessity of reason in Schelling’s philosophy up to 1804 and, on the other hand, from the opposite thesis—the contingency of reason—in his later philosophy. Schelling’s middle metaphysics thus shifts attention from the general and the necessary to the truly individual for the first time in his work. We note a discontinuity between the early and the middle Schelling in relation to the concept of freedom and, in general,

the existence of the finite, while we see a continuity in the concept of facticity and contingency in general between the middle and the late Schelling. With this reservation, however, we adhere completely to Oser's thesis and regard it as complementary to our view.

As in *Philosophy and Religion*, Schelling returns in an esoteric way to the finite as such and traces its existence back to the Fall:

[...] so also from this point of view such an existence [*Dasein*] of such a finite world as we have described can only be deduced in the imagined way, namely, by a turning away of the individual will from God as the unity and blessedness of all things through a true Platonic Fall, in which man finds himself, who nevertheless considers the world being thought [*gedachte*] as dead, as absolutely manifold and separate, to be true and effective (SW VII, 81-82).

Earlier in the text (SW VII, 31) we find a thesis supporting both the reversibility and irreversibility of God and nature (see Gentile, 2018, p. 130).⁹ Corresponding to the thesis of reversibility is the realist doctrine of the equivalence of being and truth, which goes back to Aristotle.

According to this doctrine, to the extent that the philosopher thinks about what is, he must also think about what is true, and vice versa. That which is true is nature, the objective, and therefore all true philosophy, philosophy of nature, is that which is (in the sense that it is true Being). Schelling thus maintains that God is nature, that is, being, the objective, and conversely, that nature is God (SW VII, 30-31).

As we have seen, however, "nature" has two meanings. A metaphysical and fundamental one, according to which it is Being. In this sense, God is to be equated with nature. According to the second meaning, however, derived from the Kantian theory of knowledge, nature is the totality of experience, of what appears to the thinking subject in idealism. In this sense, nature stands in opposition to spirit, and since spirit stands outside and beyond nature and God is characterised as

⁹ Schelling meanwhile accepts being called a pantheist, but only if by pantheism one understands that everything that is, is in God, and not vice versa (that God is everything).

personality and spirit, the determinations of God cannot be reduced to those of nature in this second sense (see SW VII, 99-100).¹⁰

Philosophy of nature, then, entails a position of unity of thought and reality which proceeds from God himself, and conversely, if I would not have posited nature as really existing from the beginning, reality would prevent the thinking subject to effectively conceive the idea of God:

If (*per impossibile*) no nature existed for me, or I could set it down as annihilated, and I thought God truly and with living clarity, then in that same moment the real world would have to fulfil itself to me (this is the meaning of the often-misunderstood identity of the ideal and the real) (SW VII, 31).

The identity of the real and the ideal is simply the thesis according to which being or objectivity must correspond identically to true thinking. In other words, to think of God as existing is to think of him as a being with real content and thus implies thinking of nature or being as existing objectively as well (see SW VI, 31).

If we retrace our steps to the equivalence of philosophy and philosophy of nature, we must admit, according to Schelling, that with it we not only go from mere cognition to knowledge, but we reach even further: intuition (*Anschauung*) of the effective itself and the identification of the world known to us with the world of nature. This is what we mean when we speak of the actualisation of the ideal in the real and the transformation of the ethical world into a natural, i.e., objective, world for us (see SW III, 352).¹¹

In short, for a pantheistic view of the world, philosophy of nature corresponds to the totality of determinations of Being—nature is God, Being, the positive: “This presentation [*Darstellung*] of the life of God, not apart from or above nature, but in nature, as a truly real and present life, is, without doubt, the last synthesis of the ideal with the real, of cognition [*Erkennens*] with Being, and therefore also the last synthesis of science itself” (SW VII, 33-34; see also SW V, 343). Given that the appearing of the divine in nature in this sense is the final synthesis of science itself,

¹⁰ For the two meanings of the terms “ideal” and “nature”, see Wirtz (2015).

¹¹ See also *On the I as Principle of Philosophy* (SW I, 149-244) and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (SW I, 281-342).

philosophy of nature is thus once more the principle according to which philosophy is the science of the divine. Philosophy of nature as the science of the divine stands again in contrast to Fichte's conception of being. According to Schelling, Fichte draws an unbridgeable distinction between true effective Being, which lies beyond thinking and is profane, and another reality, accessible only to thinking, in which God or Being would not be in and for itself, but for thinking (see SW VII, 34).

Schelling is here inverting the sense of Fichte's idealism to establish his own philosophy of nature. Fichte's thesis on Being, much like Hegel's later remarks regarding the self-grounding status of reflexion, is that "being" is divided in being-in-itself and being-for-knowledge, but that because being-in-itself is only "known" —in the sense here of us being aware of "being" —through knowledge (as it were), then being-for-knowledge is the truth of being. Their idealism consists in affirming that the opposite is also the case, namely, that because knowledge is the truth of Being, there cannot be any Being independent from knowledge, which is what Schelling refuses from *Bruno* onwards (see also SW VII, 423-447).¹² Here, too, the problem lies in the idealist error that substitutes the concept of being for Being itself and makes the universe or true objective existence begin with the I, which is merely the subjective beginning. We already know Schelling's critique of the philosophies of reflection: they have an inverted concept of being in relation to thinking, since what appears to them as the third, namely, being, is the first, and not thinking — where the bond of being and thinking constitutes the second term of the triad:

Behold the old root of error again evidently brought to light! A world that is only accessible to thinking, in which God is, and another world that is completely empty of God, absolutely alienated from him, and therefore absolutely ungodly, which he calls the real one, are insurmountably opposed to each other (SW VII, 34; see also SW VII, 96-96 and Snow, 2018, p. xxii).

Schelling thus accuses Fichte of falling back into empirical realism — as Hegel would later do in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and before that in *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*

¹² On Fichte's and Hegel's idealism, see Ferreiro (2023, pp. 319-339).

of 1801—since the immediate in Fichte is the non-divine, nature in the derivative sense, that which manifests itself to the I as objective, while the divine is that which is primarily mediated by man’s moral consciousness, i.e., by the I. This, in turn, represents a reversal of the *ratio cognoscenti* into the *ratio essendi*, since, according to Schelling, God must be that which is directly cognised, the positive and absolutely real, while that which appears to the I is that which is derived and mediated (see Adorno, 1977, pp. 741-777): “The One directly cognisable is to true philosophy precisely the positive *par excellence*, the absolutely real, i.e., God; but to him the undivine is the immediate, God the mediate, as in all dogmatic systems” (SW VII, 34; see also SW VII, 108 and Snow, 2018, p. xvi).

According to Schelling, Fichte identifies that which is mediated by man’s consciousness with God, kills the divine itself, and puts the profane and the real-empirical in its place. This phenomenon, which links Fichte to the Enlightenment, can be called the “retreat of the gods” and of the divine itself, which both Schelling and Heidegger announce in their respective works on the work of art (see Schelling, SW IV, 213-332 and Heidegger, 2012). This is, in a broader sense, an instance of the secularisation of modernity presented by Löwith, Weber and, more recently, by Hans Blumenberg (see also SW VII, 115). The relation between the above-mentioned authors and Schelling is the following: much like authors of secularization, Schelling differentiates the modern world after the advent of Christianity both from an epoch of unity with nature in Antiquity and from a future epoch of re-unification of the ideal and real that, according to Schelling’s eschatology, would lie in a post-historical future (see SW VII, 478-484). His speculation on the retreat of the Gods both in his *Lectures on the Method of Academic Studies* and in the *Philosophy of Art* of 1803 coincides *mutatis mutandis* with Weber’s thesis of disenchantment of the modern world.¹³

Nature, as we have seen, is Being, God, the Objective, or, in the words of Spinoza, that which is in-itself and is thought through itself alone. In this sense, for both Schelling’s philosophy of nature and Fichte’s critical idealism, nature represents that which stands as an unchanging and insurmountable barrier to pure thought and, in a practical sense,

¹³ For the thesis of secularization in the context of philosophical discourse, see Löwith (2004), Weber (2010 & 2016), and Blumenberg (1985).

to the action of the I. In particular, the objectivity of nature represents a limitation of abstract freedom and the arbitrariness of thought:

If only this limiting and stiff-necked nature were not there, life could be lived much more freely, but especially thought [would move] much more freely. Nature is still the only dam against the arbitrariness of thought and the freedom of abstraction! Mr. Fichte had always agreed with this scientifically since nature never appeared to him either as anything other than a barrier to free activity that is everywhere in our way [...] (SW VII, 36; see also SW VII, 98).

Let us briefly summarise what Schelling has said so far in his critique of Fichte, insofar as it is important for understanding Schelling's position and, *a posteriori*, for assessing its scope and limits.

The first and most important criticism concerns the abstract character of Fichte's concept of nature and the fact that such a concept posits objectivity only for the finite understanding or for the I, and that, as we have seen, idealism attempts by means of reflection to pass off the third thing in reality, i.e., the concept, as the first thing, i.e., nature or being itself. In this way, the process of abstraction, which can only take place if first there is a being, is surreptitiously substituted for being itself, and abstraction becomes the grounding being.

The second is the critique of the rigid separation between understanding and reason (SW VII, 41-42), already present in *Philosophy and Religion* as well as in the *Freedom Essay* of 1809, which Schelling counters with the thesis of the equivalence of understanding and reason, which he has been developing since *Bruno* (1802) at the latest (see Oser, 1997, pp. 18-20).¹⁴ Understanding is essentially an incompletely

¹⁴ What is interesting here, in addition to the critique of the abstract rationalism of idealism, is Schelling's praise of common sense or, as he would later say in the *Freedom Essay* and during the Munich period, of the "moral feeling of mankind", defined as the belief in the existence of in human freedom and a moral God who created the world (SW VII, 46; see Astrada, 1969). Human freedom as spontaneity, as pure possibility, is not compatible with the existence of a closed system of nature: "True science has in common with the way of thinking of the sound mind the mildness, the calm allowing of everything that only does not tear man apart in its sphere" (SW VII, 46).

conceived reason, since according to its essence, like everything ideal, it must lie in reason, which consists in the subjective side of the universe (see *Philosophy of Art*, in SW V, 353-736). In this sense, Schelling, in contrast to Kant and Fichte, presents us with a theory of the absolute unity of the cognitive faculties in reason, which functions as a kind of universal organism into whose “womb” all partial expressions of thought are received:

Understanding has no life for itself, but solely through reason, not as an unyielding but as a yielding tool of it. Reason expresses itself and knows itself with one look and stroke, wholly and indivisibly, and is eternally the same. Only in non-totality is progress and it is not an immovable and always the same thing. All errors of understanding arise from a judgement about things seen in non-totality (SW VII, 42).

According to Schelling, then, Fichte’s fanaticism consists in advocating a theory of pure subjectivity as the absolute ground for reality. As we have seen, idealism creates a world in and of thoughts, which substitutes the real world looked at in the philosophy of nature. Fichte’s fanaticism of subjectivity thus consists in replacing the inner validity of thought with the appearance of outer universality by making it out to be the object of all subjects, that is, the object of an intersubjective assent (SW VII, 43-44). Schelling’s critique of Fichte condenses as well as anticipates all subsequent critiques of intersubjectivity, from Descartes, Kant, and Fichte to Husserl, Habermas, and Buber. Intersubjectivity theories replace a strong objectivity independent of thinking, in which nature retains its independence, with a weak objectivity that is nothing other than a subjectivity universalised by the conditions of discourse and power relations. According to Damiani (2009), this is the main lack of modern philosophy, namely, that it replaces the inner content of reflexion with pure intersubjectivity—and this is the issue underlying all idealist thinking from Kant to modern social sciences. As we mentioned above, this is a question of clarifying how Schelling’s criticism of Fichte on the thesis of Being is related to the weak character of objectivity in idealism. It is not that idealism does not set an objectivity, but since this objectivity is of an idealist type, i.e., it does not recognise a nature or a being independent of the subject or the idea (of finite consciousness or finite rational being), there is finally no touchstone for idealism—nor

for phenomenology, unlike for Schelling's real-idealism—to distinguish objectivity and truth from subjectivity, which sets an “objectivity” only *for* a subject or a community of subjects. This is the topic both of Schelling's critique Fichte's subjective idealism and of Hegel's thesis of the self-grounding character of reflection (see SNOW, 2018, pp. xiii-xv).

Schelling then explicitly states that the sensuous world of which idealism speaks, which has no basis in the true world of nature, that is, in being independent of thinking, was purely invented (*erdacht*) by Fichte:

Apart from the divine world, which as such is directly also the real world, there is everywhere nothing but only individual arbitrary thinking [*individuelle willkürliche Denken*], by means of which the latter can be reversed into a dead and absolutely scattered thing [*ein Todtes und absolut Vieles*] but is not necessarily reversed. Mr. Fichte has now also invented such a dead and infinitely broken world [...]. He who lives and weaves in the merely invented, and holds it to be a necessary one, may nevertheless say to the natural philosophers out of this invention [*Erdachten*] that they invent all sorts of things; he, the dreamer, interprets their real views as dreams to the waking! (SW VII, 97-98; see SNOW, 2018, p. xxiii).

With Fichtean idealism, the Enlightenment reaches the character of a purely negative philosophy. As a critique, it is destructive of the various orders of being that are removed from abstract thought, such as positive religion or real existing nature, and instead presents as real a mere rational construct derived from the subject or the I—incidentally, a similar diagnosis regarding Fichte's philosophy was made by Hegel in 1801-1802: “But since one went to the positive, which after all one cannot do without, and demanded a positive moral and religious doctrine, then the strikers became mute, and in necessity themselves resorted to that which they first condemned” (in Schelling, SW VII, 45).

Fanaticism is thus the philosophy of subjectivity as a universally valid instance that destroys all nature and sets in its place a non-nature. According to Schelling, this is the result of Fichte's philosophy:

[...] an inflexible endeavour to impose its subjectivity through its subjectivity and as universally valid [*seine Subjektivität durch seine Subjektivität und als allgemeingültig aufzudrängen*], to eradicate all nature where possible, but on the other hand to make non-nature the principle and all the hardships of a one-sided education in their most glaring cut-off as scientific truths (SW VII, 47).

His philosophy substitutes the connections that result from the reflection of the thinker for the true connections that result from nature, i.e., from the objective principle itself (see SW VII, 48 & 65-66; Snow, 2018, pp. xv & xviii-xix):

This is the clearest point of the present Fichtean view, from which we wish to proceed precisely for this reason. First of all, knowledge and consciousness, even as absolute knowledge, pure consciousness, is here no longer the unconditioned, but only the existence of a being, and [that is] subordinate to being, or essence, as the form, just as we have also designated it in its relation to essence (SW VII, 65).

Therefore, nature has the character of non-existence, in contrast to that which for Fichte is the only thing that exists, namely, human reflection: "This other, which is not there, and yet at the same time must be there as a non-existing being [*nichtdaseyendes*], is nature" (SW VII, 74).

But since nature must play a limiting role *vis-à-vis* the action of the I or the finite being of reason, Fichte encounters here the same problem that will later concern Hegel's *Science of Logic*, namely, how to account for the transition from logic to nature. As we see from the outset, this transition cannot take place at all, precisely because in it the reversal of the true relationship between the two concepts is already at work. It is nature that makes the transition to logic possible, and not vice versa, but this eliminates the idealist leitmotif of the primacy of the concept or reflection over being or the objective. It is for this reason that we have repeatedly stated that nature cannot be reached from outside, as idealism claims, but that to reach it we must always-already-been-in-it. We cannot escape nature, for it is the living substratum of all being and of all coming into existence (SW VII, 75; see also SW VII, 101).

What is at stake here is a general criticism of the absolute idealism of reflection, according to which reflection is self-grounding, and, as in Fichte, Nature and Being are understood only according to the *concept* of nature or being, so that a true objective nature or existence cannot then be restored from reflection itself, in which Being itself is dissolved into being-for-knowledge, but, as Schelling and later Kierkegaard assert, it must be imported or incorporated from outside through a non-explicit use of intuition. As we show both in this article and elsewhere (see Rodríguez, 2023a), Schelling asserts himself here as a Kantian thinker who defends a limited idealism that brings both intuition and concept into play and does not fall into the Hegelian logicist excess of dissolving real intuition in the concept and then re-incorporating it in a spurious manner as a consequence of—as Manfred Frank (1992) put it—its “infinite lack of Being”.

We must once again refer to the concept of inversion that idealism performs with the help of reflection in relation to nature and the thing-in-itself. This operation consists in substituting the concept of nature, which arises as an abstraction from real nature, for nature itself as the foundation and as the first thing, thus erecting the abstract in general as the foundation of the real:

He [Fichte] sets up some unity, which, however, is merely formal, since it does not at the same time comprehend its multiplicity; an incomplete thing that needs another, hence a thing produced by abstraction from this other, which other thing may then again not be complete; how far the defectiveness extends is again arbitrary, for it depends on the abstraction made [...] (SW VII, 47; see also SW VII, 97).

Further, Schelling tells us in a similar way that living in nature is not something to be grasped in thought as an imaginative formation (*Ineinbildung*) but must be seen and felt as the immediate in the intuition of nature (see SW VII, 62 & 95-96).

In short, Fichte’s idealism is a philosophy that opposes and contradicts reality, for which, as Schelling says, the eternal is not the real and the real is not the eternal, so that a derived unity, empirical nature, is posited as real, whereas thinking, limited to the merely ideal, is posited as eternal (see SW VII, 51-52).

Fichte's philosophy, as Hegel warned as early as 1801, does not achieve real unity because, as a philosophy of understanding or reflection, it is unable to posit unity as an uncontradicted opposition to difference or contradiction. As it also happened later in Hegel's philosophy, Fichte places the negation of the contradiction at the head and thus places unity in a relation, as we have seen in *Bruno*, of relative opposition to difference: "In thus positing unity, he nevertheless leaves the contradiction between itself and the contradiction, and for this very reason does not truly posit unity itself" (SW VII, 52).

Contradiction and difference, however, are inherent to unity and must be placed within it so that there is true life and creative unity of $A = B$ and not mere uniformity of $A = A$:

Opposition must be, because life must be; for the opposition itself is the life and the movement in the unity; but true identity itself holds it under itself as mastered, i.e. it sets it as opposition and as unity at the same time, and is thus only the unity that moves, springs, and creates in itself (SW VII, 52).

Just as Schelling stated in his *Freedom Essay* three years later, "where there is no struggle, there is no life" (SW VII, 400). Reality is thus maintained in an inherent tension between the forces of contraction and expansion, of unity and opposition, which mediate between the pure, abstract ideal and the absolute, all-encompassing real. Unity, then, is a living unity or becoming that unfolds between the two poles of the ideal and the real, or, as Schelling likes to say, the immediate and the mediated.

Conclusion

Schelling's central concern began to shift around 1806-1807 from the concept of system conceived under the predicates of identity and unity, which dominated his thought until 1804, to the question of the existence of the finite as such, which characterises individual existence. In this sense, we asserted a continuity in Schelling's middle and late thought regarding the conception of the factual, the contingent, and the free in contrast to the previous, rational system. Schelling shifts the focus of his interest to the consideration of two systems that are incompatible with each other: the negative and the positive philosophy of the 1830s and

1840s, which take up the existing opposition between rationality and human freedom on a systematic level.

The doctrine of a second absolute reappeared in 1806, as it did in 1804, when Schelling tried to explain the emergence of the real as a being that is different from God, but which is a copy or doubling ratio of the original absolute. The accentuation of dualism, on the one hand, and speculative realism, on the other, verified themselves in the thesis of the irreversibility of nature in God. This marked the breakpoint with the system of idealism of 1800 and thus the beginning of Schelling's real-idealist position, according to which, as Schelling posited in 1809 and 1810, the real had primacy in relation to existence, while the ideal had primacy in relation to dignity. The beginning of the universe can never lie in thinking, but in Being. God is not only, as with Spinoza, a being that is immanent to nature, but is above all transcendent to it. Human freedom, too, stood in a dual, immanent-transcendent relation to nature and thus marked the actual beginning of the ideal part of Schelling's philosophy.

Because of the duality between the system and its parts, Schelling's thought cannot close onto itself, as Hegel's system of thinking would later try to do, but is forced, instead, to consider the unfinished character of the reality of the world and of human action. Let us look at this development a little more closely before concluding this paper. Schelling's critique of Fichte of 1806 followed the same line as his earlier critique of 1801-1802. Schelling focused primarily on the negative character of being *vis-à-vis* reflection and thus on the question of the extent to which the primacy of reflection in idealism represented a reversal of the true relationship between *ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscenti*. In this sense, Schelling followed the line of thought of early romantics like Hölderlin, who came up with a trans-reflexive concept of being and denied that the Fichtean concept of being can be a proper substitute for Being itself. The non-existence of the finite seemed to be a thesis that emerged from the theory of the primacy of Being. Paradoxically, however, as we have seen, the existence of the finite followed indirectly from the thesis on Being, insofar as the finite is factually self-determined and thus exists out of itself. The existence of the finite was thus conditioned by the fall, that is, by a sharp separation between the absolute and the world.

Nature is another central theme that Schelling explored between 1806 and 1807, moving toward the position he would later adopt in *Philosophical Investigations on the Essence of Human Freedom*. Since 1797,

Schelling had conceived of nature as an objective counterbalance to the arbitrariness of idealist thought, distinguishing it from Fichte's view, in which nature held only a weak, intersubjective objectivity. In this sense, idealism is not merely a subjective philosophy but also an abstract mode of thought incapable of attaining true objectivity. As a result, it remains divided between nature and spirit, just as in Fichte's system, where it is ultimately determined as a purely ethical idealism.

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