

From Kant to Schelling: The Subject, the Object, and Life
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Abstract

To the end of his life Kant was struggling to counter criticisms and overcome deficiencies in his earlier work, many directed at the dualisms in his philosophy. The *Critique of Judgment* was written in part in response to such criticisms, giving a place to subjective and objective purposiveness to bridge the gulf between his theoretical and practical philosophy and to guarantee, by giving a place to formal purposiveness in nature, the systematic coherence of empirical laws. To this end, Kant offered the foundations for biology as a distinct science. However, Kant left teleology as a regulative principle of reflective judgment, and still left a gulf between organic nature and inorganic nature. While a number of Kant's disciples grappled with the problem of reconciling freedom and necessity, physics and biology and relating concepts to the sensory manifold, the most radical solution to these problems was offered by Schelling. Here I will examine and evaluate Schelling's proposal for what amounts to a naturalization of the transcendental and a hermeneutics of nature.

The Incompleteness of Kant's Philosophy as Challenge

Given the widespread view that Schelling's philosophy of nature was an obstacle to the advance of science while Kant's philosophy was a major contribution to it, why should the work of Schelling be considered as a possible advance over, Kant's philosophy? After all, in the concluding paragraph to 'Preface' to his last published book, the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant proclaimed: 'With this, then, I conclude my entire critical enterprise.'¹ Kant had examined the nature of judgment of taste in art and of final causes in things, providing a place for purpose in art, in organisms, and in nature as a whole. A principle to comprehend order in natural diversity was provided, and the concept of organism mediated between the phenomenal and the noumenal. The system appeared to be complete, with only some loose arguments requiring refinement.

This did not complete the development of Kant's philosophy, however. Kant continued to grapple with the problems raised by his critics. In his last years Kant was working towards a new architectonic for his philosophical system to meet these criticisms and to take into account recent advances in the sciences. Centrally, Kant was struggling with the relationship between *a priori*

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 7 (*Ak* 5:170). I will use a number of abbreviations for collected works of Kant, Fichte and Schelling.

Ak *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902-).
FW *Fichte's Werke*, ed. I.A. Fichte (Berlin: Walter D. Gruyter & Co., 1971), reprint of *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, ed. I.A. Fichte (Berlin: Veit & Comp., 1845/46).
Ge Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob (Stuttgart: Friedrich Fromann, 1965-).
SW F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61).
We Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Hans Michael Baumgartner, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, and Hermann Krings (Stuttgart: Fromann-Holzboog, 1976ff.).

knowledge of objects in general and objects of the external senses.² It is still necessary, Kant concluded, to consider what he called in his incomplete work of his final years, published posthumously as the *Opus postumum*, ‘The Transition from the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science to Physics.’³ In this work Kant abandoned the identification of matter with bodies or ‘things,’ as defended in *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*.⁴ The transition to physics requires that the subject recognize itself as a force acting on the forces of nature, constituting itself as an empirical object for itself, thereby making space and time sensible.⁵ On the basis of these reflections Kant redefined transcendental philosophy as ‘the act of consciousness whereby the subject becomes the originator of itself and, thereby, also of the whole object of technical-practical and moral-practical reason in one system.’⁶

In the light of these ideas, Schelling can easily be seen to have been carrying through Kant’s project.⁷ Schelling’s philosophy was, as he himself claimed, made possible by Kant’s work, and the conclusions he came to can be interpreted as solutions to the *aporias* of Kant’s philosophy. However, to understand Schelling it is also necessary to understand ideas Schelling embraced from other philosophers, and his attitude to Kant. Kant always took Newtonian physics as the quintessence of scientific achievement, and all his work revolved around his acceptance of this. Schelling was more interested in the nature of life and art, and was more influenced by the *Critique of Judgment* which he characterized as ‘Kant’s deepest work’.⁸ On this basis Schelling was prepared to challenge the significance accorded to Newtonian physics.

Schelling’s Reworking of the Idea of Philosophy and of its Relation to Science

Schelling initially began as a disciple of Fichte. Fichte’s work was a development of Kant’s investigation into the ‘power of reason.’ Fichte argued that the absolutely first principle of all human knowledge, that can be neither proved nor defended, is the intuition of the capacity of the subject to be aware of its own activity.⁹ This intuition is the intellectual intuition, considered as a possibility and then rejected by Kant as implying the possibility of knowledge of the noumenon.¹⁰ This intuition is not a faculty of the subject, but is the subject knowing itself and thereby constituting itself in a non-objective manner through mediation of what can be known objectively. Fichte argued that for this to be possible, the self must be unconditioned, freely positing itself, becoming aware of itself by opposing itself to the non-self, posited as the sensible world of objects limiting its free activity. It is through action that the sensible world is

² Immanuel Kant, “Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science” [1786], in *Philosophy of Material Nature*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), 13 (*Ak* IV:476).

³ Eckart Förster, “Introduction” to Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, ed. Eckart Förster, trans. Eckart Förster and Michael Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xvi.

⁴ See “Preface” to “Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science” [1786] (*Ak* IV:467) in Kant, *Philosophy of Material Nature*, 3f.

⁵ Kant, *Opus postumum*, 109f. (*Ak* 22: 325f).

⁶ Kant, *Opus postumum*, 245 (*Ak* 21: 78).

⁷ This essentially is the argument of George Di Giovanni, “Kant’s Metaphysics of Nature and Schelling’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17(2) (April 1979).

⁸ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 173.

⁹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 93-97 (*Ge* I:91-96).

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, “On the form and principles of the sensible and intelligible world [Inaugural dissertation]” [1770], *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, §10, trans. and ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 389 (*Ak*. 2:396), and Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 196 (B 159).

constituted as objects, and it is only on reflection that we develop concepts of these objects.¹¹ However, Fichte also came to see that self-consciousness and free agency are further dependent upon being recognized by and recognizing other finite rational beings and ascribing efficacy to them. ‘No Thou, no I: no I, no Thou’ he proclaimed.¹² These others, in defining oneself also limit one by demanding respect for their freedom.¹³ Rejecting Kant’s method of transcendental deduction of the categories, Fichte argued for a constructivist or ‘speculative dialectical’ approach by which the categories are deduced through a genetic account of the structure of empirical consciousness from the postulate of the original self, the original, though derivative, non-self, and other selves.

Schelling took over from Fichte the view that the subject is activity that can be appreciated as such through intellectual intuition, that objects of the sensible world can only be understood in relation to such activity, that conceptual knowledge is derivative from practical engagement in the sensible world, that there can be and is also an appreciation of other subjects as activities rather than objects, and that the formation of the self-conscious self is the outcome of the limiting of its activity by the world and other subjects. Schelling also took over and further developed Fichte’s defence of construction and his genetic, dialectical approach to construction. He defended an even stronger thesis against Kant’s effort in ‘Discipline of Pure Reason’ in *The Critique of Pure Reason* to limit construction to mathematics,¹⁴ arguing that ‘the philosopher looks solely to the act of construction itself, which is an absolutely internal thing.’¹⁵

Schelling’s divergence from Fichte revolved around his acceptance of Hölderlin’s argument that even mutual recognition could not account for self-consciousness. Consciousness and its object presupposes a whole of which subject and object are parts. Hölderlin characterized this as ‘Being’.¹⁶ To accommodate this argument Schelling set out to develop a Philosophy of Nature that took nature as the source of both subjects and objects. For Schelling, nature is *Being Itself* which we cannot avoid presupposing. As he proclaimed: ‘It is not, therefore, that WE KNOW Nature as *a priori*, but Nature IS *a priori*.’¹⁷ It is nature, outside of which there is nothing and which is prior to all oppositions, that Schelling took to be the unconditioned or the ‘absolute’, or ‘Being Itself’, the condition of everything that exists. As such, it cannot be known either as a subject or as an object, since these assume division. It is the source of both subject and object, the I and the not-I, consciousness and the world.

Schelling upheld the value of systematic thought but accepted that it might be impossible to achieve a totally coherent system. Instead of foundations, philosophy should embrace a circular form of argumentation in which a number of principles are mutually conditions for each

¹¹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 259 (Ge. I:294f.) & 61 (Ge. I:490) (Second Introduction).

¹² *The Science of Knowledge*, 172f. (Ge. I:189).

¹³ J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Frederick Neuhauser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29 §3 (FW 30). It was on the basis of this insight that Fichte reworked Kant’s practical philosophy.

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 725/B 753ff. This point is examined in Alberto Toscano, “Philosophy and the Experience of Construction,” in *The New Schelling*, ed. Judith Norman and Alisdair Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004), ch.5.

¹⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, §4, “The Organ of Transcendental Philosophy,” *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 13.

¹⁶ See Friedrich Hölderlin, “Judgment and Being,” *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37.

¹⁷ Schelling, “Introduction” *First Outline*, 198 (SW III:279).

other.¹⁸ As Schelling put it, ‘A system is completed when it is led back to its starting point.’¹⁹ His system of Natural Philosophy was consistent with transcendental idealism (by making ‘the objective primary’ and deriving ‘the subjective from that’), and his system of transcendental idealism consistent with a Philosophy of Nature (by ‘*proceeding from the subjective, as primary and absolute, and having the objective arise from this*’).²⁰ Belying the usual characterization of Schelling as an Idealist, Schelling noted in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that ‘Nature ... would exist, even if there were nothing that is aware of it’ and in the third version of *The Ages of the World* he characterized idealism as the philosophy of people who had dissociated themselves from the forces that are not only the basis of their existence, but ‘the foundation of all greatness and beauty.’ They have become ‘people who are nothing but images, just dreams of shadows.’²¹

In developing these arguments, Schelling developed a new notion of metaphysics and of its relation to science. This was advanced by developing Fichte’s notion of intellectual intuition and dialectical thinking as a development of and successor to Kant’s transcendental logic to derive and defend categories, and as a complement to art and mathematics as means to comprehend being and what exists. Through intellectual intuition, Schelling argued, we can appreciate an individual as a member of a whole ‘seeing how its essential nature or inner identity depends on the totality of which it is only a part.’²² More importantly, intellectual intuition is required to comprehend that ‘which is absolutely mobile ... which cannot be held onto for a moment’, which cannot be grasped ‘as a real object of thought; for by “object” one understand something which keeps still.’²³ That is, it is required to comprehend process, and Schelling claimed that his system introduced into philosophy ‘the concept of process and of the moments of this process.’²⁴ This involved a new kind of holistic comprehension (or ‘contemplation’), different from the explanations associated with mechanistic causation that Kant had assumed to be the only valid form of explanation.²⁵

Schelling described the task of his dialectic: ‘to explain the idea of an objective world which was absolutely independent of our freedom, indeed which limited this freedom, by a *process* in which the I sees itself as unintentionally but necessarily engaged, precisely through the act of self-positing.’²⁶ This dialectic does not reduce Nature to either law governed matter or ‘nothing more than the organ of self-consciousness.’ Schelling affirmed that ‘[t]he first maxim of all true natural science, to explain everything by the forces of nature, is therefore accepted in its widest extent in our science.’²⁷ For Schelling, thought is inherently synthetic, and begins with genuine opposition either between thought and something opposing it, or other factors within thought. This opposition necessitates a new synthetic moment that can be treated as a product or

¹⁸ On this, see Frank, “On the Origin of Schlegel’s Talk of a *Wechselerweis* and His Move Away from a Philosophy of First Principles”, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, Lecture 11.

¹⁹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), 232 (SW I:628-29).

²⁰ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), 7 (SW I:342-43).

²¹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), 5 (SW I:338-40), and F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World, Third Version* (c.1815), trans. Jason W. Wirth (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 106 (343/342).

²² As Beiser put it in *German Idealism*, 580.

²³ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 152.

²⁴ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 130.

²⁵ See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §78, 295 (Ak 5:410).

²⁶ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 111.

²⁷ Schelling, “Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature, Or, On the Concept of Speculative Physics and the Internal Organization of System of this Science” *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Petersen (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 194f. (SW III:273).

factor in the next level of development. Building on Kant's ascription of a central place to imagination in synthesis,²⁸ Schelling's dialectic involves a reflective and imaginative experimentation and reconstruction of the sequence of forms produced by a procreative causality of the unconditioned or absolute, a process that has produced matter, extension, inner sense and sensory object, causation, space and time, organisms, and our present consciousness. What Schelling was providing was a naturalization of the transcendental and a 'hermeneutics of nature.'²⁹ As such, he was concerned not only to show the cognitive conditions for objective knowledge, but the nature of the world that enables it to be known objectively, and to produce beings which could achieve knowledge of it and of themselves. As dialectical construction, the intellectual intuition enables the universal and the particular, the ideal and the real, to be grasped while conforming to Kant's dictum that the mind can only know what it constructs while avoiding or overcoming Kant's problem of how to apply synthetic *a priori* principles to experience.³⁰

Schelling did not believe that such thinking by itself would guarantee the truth of his system of philosophy. In fact, a final, perfect system would be the death of philosophy and the death of spirit. Philosophers should develop their own systems, knowing that no system could be final. A system should be judged according to its coherent and comprehensive account of everything, and its capacity to surpass by including more limited philosophical stances.³¹ Consequently, Schelling claimed that the categories of thought are not eternal but progressively emerge in the course of real history. This means the categories presently dominating cannot be assumed to be beyond questioning, and Schelling believed that philosophers should be prepared to offer new categories to overcome the limitations of prevailing categories. It is only through providing a history of philosophy that defines its claim to truth in contrast to the work of other philosophers that a system can be properly defended. This involves reconstructing the history of philosophy, revealing its achievements and failings and showing the logic of its progress to the position being defended, which Schelling later attempted to do.

Schelling also abandoned the quest for apodictic knowledge that had dominated Kant's philosophy and claimed a more intimate relation between metaphysics and natural science than Kant had contemplated.³² Schelling argued that science presupposes metaphysics not as a guarantor for natural science, but as a condition for science. Following Kant's observation on experimentation, Schelling proclaimed 'Every experiment is a question put to Nature, to which it is compelled to reply.' Schelling continued: 'But every question contains an implicit *a priori* judgment; every experiment that is an experiment, is a prophecy; experimenting itself is a production of the phenomena.'³³ Such questions ultimately are dependent on the synthetic judgments of metaphysics; however, Schelling ridiculed the idea that natural science must be able to deduce all its principles *a priori*, arguing that '*we originally know nothing at all except through experience, and by means of experience*, and in this sense the whole of our knowledge

²⁸ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 169 (A 123) where Kant argues the imagination provides the "necessary unity in the synthesis of appearance", which he characterized as "the transcendental function of the imagination." See also 191 (B 151f.).

²⁹ See Andrew Bowie, "The Hermeneutics of Nature," *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993), ch.2.

³⁰ On this, see Beiser, *German Idealism*, 580ff.

³¹ Schelling described his dialectical method in *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 111f.

³² As Kant wrote in his "Metaphysical Foundations for Natural Science," "Only that whose certainty is apodeictic can be called science proper." 4 (*Ak* IV:468).

³³ Schelling, "Introduction" *First Outline*, 197 (*SW* III:276).

consists of judgments of experience.’³⁴ The distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* ‘is a distinction made solely *with respect to our knowing*, and the *kind* of our knowledge of these judgments, so that every judgment which is merely historical for me – i.e., a judgment of experience – becomes, notwithstanding, an *a priori* principle as soon as I arrive, whether directly or indirectly, at insight into its internal necessity.’³⁵ This is true both in particular sciences and metaphysics, and in both cases, this insight into internal necessity does not guarantee the validity of this knowledge. The synthetic *a priori* knowledge of metaphysics arrived at through dialectical construction must engage with experience and is fallible and subject to falsification and revision or replacement.³⁶

Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*

Schelling saw the dualism in Kant’s philosophy as an echo of the deeper and more problematic dualism introduced into philosophy by Descartes.³⁷ Not only did he see the conception of the subject struggling to know the world as a further development of Descartes’ cogito, but saw the source of this conception of the subject and the problematic status of knowledge in a physical world as due to the mechanistic view of physical existence. While nature was conceived in a way that made it amenable to mathematical analysis, this rendered life, mind and freedom unintelligible.

To address this problem Schelling attempted in his philosophy of nature to replace the Newtonian conception of physical existence. He argued that nature as Being is first and foremost constructive activity. [*B]eing itself* is nothing other than *the constructing itself*, or since construction is thinkable at all only as activity, *being itself* is nothing other than the *highest constructing activity*, which, although never itself an object, is the principle of everything objective.’³⁸ This is the condition of everything else: ‘[T]his *absolutely* productive character (which no longer has a substrate, but is rather the cause of every substrate) is that which absolutely blocks all analysis; precisely for that reason, is the point at which our analysis (experience) can never arrive.’³⁹ So, ‘The chief problem of the philosophy of nature is not to explain the active in Nature (for, because it is its first supposition, this is quite conceivable to it), but the resting, permanent. Philosophy of Nature arrives at an explanation of these simply by virtue of the presupposition that for Nature the permanent is a limitation of its own activity.’⁴⁰ The whole of Nature is ‘an ever-*becoming* product’ in constant formation, in which ‘everything must engage in that universal process of formation.’⁴¹ Any individual being is something having already become, and like a whirlpool that forms in a stream when it encounters resistance,⁴² should be viewed ‘as a determinate form or limitation of the originary activity.’⁴³ As such it is never merely fixed but ‘is reproduced at each instant through the force of nature entire.’⁴⁴

³⁴ Schelling, “Introduction” *First Outline*, 198 (SW III:278).

³⁵ Schelling, “Introduction” *First Outline*, 198 (SW III:278).

³⁶ Schelling, “Introduction” *First Outline*, 197f. (SW III:277).

³⁷ This was only fully spelt out in Schelling’s *History of Modern Philosophy*.

³⁸ Schelling, *First Outline*, 78 (We 7: 13f.).

³⁹ Schelling, *First Outline*, 5 (We 7: 67).

⁴⁰ Schelling, *First Outline*, 17 (We 7: 82).

⁴¹ Schelling, *First Outline*, 28 (We 7: 93).

⁴² Schelling uses this example to illustrate his meaning in *First Outline*, 18n. (We 7: 82n.).

⁴³ Schelling, *First Outline*, 13f. (We 7: 78).

⁴⁴ Schelling, *First Outline*, 18n. (We 7: 82n.).

From the dualism of productivity and products generated through the limiting of activity, Schelling derived ‘a dynamic graded series of stages in Nature.’⁴⁵ From opposed tendencies of activities coming into conflict and limiting each other, we get the polarity of opposing forces, matter (resulting from a balance of forces), extensity (associated with light, magnetism, electricity and chemistry), non-living organization and living organisms, different kinds of organisms, and mind.⁴⁶ We cannot avoid cognizing organisms as independent wholes in which there is unity in diversity, Schelling argued. ‘Every organization is ... a *whole; its unity lies in itself*; it does not depend on our choice whether we think of it as one or many.’⁴⁷ ‘You are compelled to concede that the purposiveness of natural products dwells in *themselves*. ... [It] is not merely logical ... but real.’⁴⁸ To think otherwise is a pathology of reflective thinking that can only investigate by separating. ‘The organic,’ Schelling proclaimed, ‘*arises out of itself*. ... Every organic product carries the reason for its existence in itself, for it is cause and effect of *itself*. No single part could *arise* except in this whole.’⁴⁹ Mechanistic explanations are derivative from holistic comprehension and only provide a limited form of knowledge. Analytical thinking ‘never reaches a final source of motion in Nature [and] deals only with secondary motions, and even with the original ones only as mechanical (and therefore likewise capable of mathematical construction).’⁵⁰ The relations between bodies studied by Newton and privileged by Kant were portrayed as Schelling as abstractions from dynamical processes, presupposing the holistic causation that produces component bodies in motion as relatively permanent.⁵¹

Schelling also offered an account of the emergence of sentience. While he wrote that ‘everything individual in [Nature] is predetermined by the whole or by the idea of a Nature generally,’⁵² he also argued that individuals exist only by asserting themselves against the absolute. Accordingly, he concluded, ‘life must be thought of as engaged in a constant struggle against the course of nature, or in an endeavor to uphold its identity against the latter.’⁵³ ‘In order that it not be assimilated,’ Schelling wrote, ‘[the individual organism] must *assimilate*, in order that it not *be* organized, it must *organize*. In this act (of opposition) *inner* and *outer* are divided for it. It is an activity *that works from the inner toward the outer*.’⁵⁴ Here, outer activity generates an internal activity which counters the tendencies of the outer activity, thereby maintaining internal stability. This involves a duplicity in which a cause is active ‘only under the condition of a *positive and negative reciprocal relation*’ in which the cause acts against outside influences.⁵⁵ This is the basis of the organism’s receptivity, which makes the outer activity into a product or products for the organism that then affect it as an inner factor so that its activities are not merely the effect of the outside activity. Consequently, we can say that ‘[t]he organism has an external world because there is an original duplicity within it’ while ‘[d]ead matter has no

⁴⁵ Schelling, *First Outline*, 53 (We 7: 117). Also, see Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 111f, and 142f. where he contrasts his notion of dialectics with Hegel’s.

⁴⁶ See *First Outline*, 53ff. (We VII: 117ff.) and 141ff. (We VII:210ff.).

⁴⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 31

⁴⁸ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 32.

⁴⁹ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 30f.

⁵⁰ Schelling, *First Outline*, 196 (SW VII:275). Schelling had argued this earlier in the preface to *Von der Weltseele* (1797) (SW II:517). On this, see Beiser, *German Idealism*, 516f.

⁵¹ Schelling, *First Outline*, 196 (SW VII:275).

⁵² Schelling, *First Outline*, 198 (SW III:279).

⁵³ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 127 (SW I:496-98)..

⁵⁴ Schelling, *First Outline*, 54 (We VII:118).

⁵⁵ Schelling, *First Outline*, 109 (We VII:176).

external world, it is absolutely identical and homogeneous with the whole whose part it is.’⁵⁶ Schelling characterized this duplicitous receptivity ‘excitability.’

‘*Excitability*’, Schelling argued, ‘must be posited as the essence of organism, by virtue of which alone the organic activity is really hindered from exhausting itself in its product that, therefore, never is, but always only becomes.’⁵⁷ This makes the organism an object to itself, and therefore makes it also a subject, and as such ‘the most original thing in Nature.’⁵⁸ With excitability we have sensibility, irritability and the formative drive associated with reproduction.⁵⁹ Schelling noted of that ‘If we move upwards in the scale of organization, we find that the senses gradually develop in that order in which, by means of them, the world of the organizations is enlarged.’⁶⁰ Thus there are differentiated organs such as the brain and the eye associated with the differentiation of sensibility from irritability.

Life and Transcendental Idealism

The derivation of categories through the examination of subjective experience was undertaken by Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*. The *System of Transcendental Idealism* always presupposed the Philosophy of Nature. Schelling emphasized that ‘the essence of man is active’ in which he ‘exerts his powers upon a world which has influence upon him, lets him feel its forces, and upon which he can react.’⁶¹ So, in response to the question ‘whether the self is a thing-in-itself or an appearance’ Schelling dismissed the question as absurd, since ‘there is assuredly a higher concept than that of thing, namely the concept of *doing*, or *activity*.’⁶² Limiting of this activity can only come about ‘through *real opposition*,’ although this opposition only arises for the self through the action of self-positing.⁶³ It is in this process of being really limited and positing itself as limited that the totality of objects is produced as a world for humans.

The object of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* is ‘*the act of construction itself*’ that can only be grasped through the imagination of the aesthetic sense.⁶⁴ Comprehension of this construction requires of philosophers that they be engaged in constant productive activity while reflecting on this production. Through this phenomenological investigation of experience as reflexive construction, or speculative dialectic, Schelling, like Fichte, set out to systematize Kant’s insights, ‘to bring system into my knowledge itself, and to seek within knowledge itself for that which all individual knowing is determined.’⁶⁵ Schelling also followed Fichte in characterizing this active development of consciousness as a sequence of self-limitings, that is, as ‘*a producing that becomes an object to itself*, that is, an intellectual intuition,’⁶⁶ and portrayed reason as a self-relation seeking to maintain identity in the face of otherness.⁶⁷ He wrote that

⁵⁶ Schelling, *First Outline*, 112n.‡ (We VII:179). This notion of “world” clearly anticipates the work of Jacob von Uexküll.

⁵⁷ Schelling, *First Outline*, 105 (We VII:170f.).

⁵⁸ Schelling, *First Outline*, 106 (We VII:172).

⁵⁹ Schelling, *First Outline*, 148 (We VII:218).

⁶⁰ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 124 (SW I:492-94).

⁶¹ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 10.

⁶² Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 32 (SW I:375-76).

⁶³ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 35 (SW I:380-81).

⁶⁴ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 13 (SW I:350-51).

⁶⁵ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 18 (SW I:357).

⁶⁶ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 28 (SW I:369-71).

⁶⁷ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 118f. (SW I:486).

‘[a]ll categories are modes of action, whereby objects themselves first come about for us.’⁶⁸ Schelling also accepted Fichte’s argument that this development is only possible through being limited by the other.⁶⁹ ‘[A] rational being in isolation could not only not arrive at a consciousness of freedom,’ Schelling noted, ‘but would be equally unable to attain to consciousness of the objective world as such.’⁷⁰ As in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling claimed that the ‘scale of organization merely refers to different stages in the evolution of the universe.’⁷¹ Schelling deduced through this imaginative production the categories of the physical world, organization, organisms, the capacity of humans to abstract and think conceptually, moral reasoning, the legal order, history and art, revising and integrating the insights of Kant’s three critiques into one system.

Conclusion

Schelling’s works have an exploratory quality. While he never developed his system of philosophy with the rigor of Kant’s philosophy, it is suggested here that by further developing Kant’s concept of life, Schelling was able to overcome the dualisms and gulfs in Kant’s philosophy that Kant himself recognized as problematic. Schelling was able to sketch a system of philosophy that was neither idealist nor materialist, but as he himself claimed, a system that overcame the oppositions between idealism and realism, spiritualism and materialism.⁷²

⁶⁸ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 107 (SW I:471-72).

⁶⁹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 106ff. (SW I:538ff.).

⁷⁰ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 174 (SW I:555-57).

⁷¹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 125 (SW I:494-95) and 122 (SW I:490-91).

⁷² Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 120