

Schelling vs. Hegel: Negativity in inversion

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ABSTRACT

Paper explores the controversial relationship between Schelling and Hegel with respect to the role of negativity. By rejecting the common framework, according to which, one of the authors is usually presented as either advancing or preceding the other, it argues for an alternative synchronic reading which approaches this relationship not in terms of *surpassing*, *subordination* or *perversion* but rather presents it as an *inversion*. By discussing (a) the negativity of reflection, (b) the ontological interpretation of the transcendental object and (c) the application of dialectics, it proposes an amphibolic elaboration of commonly shared presuppositions—a movement following a similar path yet in converse directions, which in its own turn challenges our common understanding of German idealism.

Keywords: Schelling, Hegel, inversion, concept, negativity, reflection, dialectics.

It is well known that any dialogue and friendship between Schelling and Hegel ended with their last letter exchange in 1807—the year when Hegel published his *magnum opus*, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Soon after some brief and bitter remarks about each other they chose different paths to proceed towards the system of the absolute. Schelling took the famous Hegel quote about “the night in which all cows are black” as an inadequate personal critique and kept relentlessly attacking Hegel’s own project long after his death. Hegel himself believed that Schelling stopped halfway by “educating himself in public” and hence making mistake after mistake. Looking from Hegel’s perspective, even the later Schelling’s emphasis on reason’s inability to ground itself, his elaboration of the concepts of *Unground* or *umgekehrte Idee* can be seen as seeking a “bad infinity” and thus rejecting the necessary dialectical unity of the finite and the absolute. But one could reverse the judgment and demonstrate the ways in which Hegel himself—as, in Schelling’s view, only the representative of negative philosophy, that is, accounting only for the realm of the possible and not for the actual (*wirklich*) world—is indeed blind and therefore unable to admit thought’s dependence on that which is unprethinkable (*das Unvordenkliche*). Accordingly, this situation of apparent misunderstanding from both sides, this radical split concerning the limits of philosophy is the main problem which I am going to consider in this paper. How should we approach this incompatibility of Schelling’s and Hegel’s positions regarding the possibility and limits of conceptual thinking as such? What potential does this ambivalent movement between them eventually disclose?

According to the still prevailing narrative, which can be defined as a *diachronic* approach, one of the authors is usually presented as either advancing (cf. Houlgate, 1999; Rosen, 2013) or preceding the other (cf. Tritten, 2012; Freyberg, 2008; Matthews, 2007; Schulz, 1986). However, I attempt to show that insofar as it concerns the limits of reflection and their understanding of the negativity of

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self-consciousness, this model appears to be insufficient. If one takes into account their emphasis on the necessity to bring the Kantian project of critical philosophy to its extremes in order to “save Kant from himself,” it becomes equally possible to justify Hegel’s and Schelling’s criticism towards each other. What Hegel sees as major misinterpretations of the absolute, negation or the concept in Schelling’s thought, the latter shows the same in Hegel’s. The difficulty lies in the fact that even if they both approach the identity of thought and being from different angles, they both assume it, both ground reflection in speculation and both present the absolute as mediation itself. As soon as we accept that one surpasses the other, the former always appears in the shadow of the latter. Thus, in order to avoid applying such one-sided reductive schemes that would “resolve” their incompatibility, I suggest an alternative, that is, a *synthetic* view which approaches the Schelling-Hegel controversy (at least with respect to the negativity of self-consciousness) not in terms of *surpassing*, *subordination* or *perversion* but rather presents it as an *inversion*. That is, if we reject the *diachronic* framework, we may see a possibility of an alternative explication of the aforementioned commonly shared presuppositions inherent in both Schelling and Hegel, which create an inverse movement, following a similar path yet in converse directions. The narrower perspective from which I will approach this issue further in order to justify my argument is the role of negativity in the act of reflection.

However, it should be noted that even if such an alternative view eventually indeed appears to be justified, it is not so much expected to provide some positive solution to this controversy. It rather aims at giving us an opportunity to approach the Schelling-Hegel relationship from a different perspective and to modify the whole focus of the nature and the role of negativity in question. A similar path which presents Schelling and Hegel as further developing the Kantian project in different directions has also been suggested by insightful authors such as Christopher Lauer (2010) and Miklos Vetö (1998), yet the very ambiguity of their relationship, that is, the apparent impossibility to accept one position without simultaneously assuming or at least legitimating the other is not widely discussed.

Thus, leaving aside the controversial transition from negative to positive philosophy or to the philosophy of revelation in the late Schelling (cf. Garcia, 2011; Wirth, 2003), I am going to rely only on his concept of negative or rational philosophy (and its limits) as such which he presents in his Munich or Berlin lectures. I will also focus on the mature Hegel who proudly presents his philosophy as negative *par excellence*. Accordingly, first going through (a) *the negativity of reflection*, then discussing (b) *the ontological interpretation of the transcendental object* and finally (c) *the application of dialectics*, I intend to justify my proposal of an alternative.

Firstly, considering the negativity of reflection, which presents itself as the always mediated act of cognition dividing itself into subject and object, both Schelling and Hegel tend

to radicalize Kant’s position. The only way to overcome the crisis of reason left behind by the dualism of Kant and Fichte was to push their discoveries to the extremes and to question not only the forms of cognition but the very substance or what they call *die Sache*—the “absolute form” of thinking. Kant himself had already noticed that there is no possibility to grasp the transcendental subject as the source of reflection and determination. If in the act of reflection that which is the object is always presupposed by the subject and vice versa, we must also assume that the subject *as* subject always appears as something negated because in every reflection it is always transformed into an object. Consequently, the transcendental subject, understood as that which is unconditional and which grounds and provides the object its determinacy, is turned into its own phenomenon as soon as it attempts to grasp itself as it is in itself. That is, it can always be given only as something determinate or phenomenal and not as something that is unconditional. Every attempt to grasp a reflective act appears to be the product or result of reflection doubling its own structure. Thus, in order to avoid admitting that the act of reflection separates itself from itself and always remains outside itself, Kant suggests, we must presuppose the subject only as a *function* of thinking in the unity of apperception (Kant, 1998, p. A116-A120). Yet Schelling and Hegel were not satisfied with the merely regulative or formal description of reflection since it remained confined to the dualistic logic of subject-object, form-content etc. They realized the necessity to open its ontological and speculative horizons, which could account for the initial unity and separation of subject and object. Accordingly, the passage from the question of the transcendental subject to the question of the absolute subject concerned precisely the passage from reflection to speculation. In this way the problem of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, freedom and necessity, subjectivity and objectivity turned into the question of how these distinctions were possible at all.

It seems that Schelling, in particular, takes advantage of this impossibility to grasp the reflective act itself. Looking from his perspective, this *impossibility* can also be conceived as its only *possibility* or confirmation. For if true self-reflection would somehow be possible, that is, if it could indeed be determined as such, it would inevitably only become its own projection or result. And if it is not possible, then this indeterminacy or negativity which lies within reason’s permanent effort to ground itself eventually posits thinking in a never-ending and open process of self-overcoming. It is a permanent striving to destroy mediation which simultaneously creates or produces it. According to Schelling,

we could use the term ecstasy for this relation. Our ego, namely, is placed outside itself, i.e. outside its role. Its role is to be subject. Confronted with the absolute subject, it cannot remain a subject, for the absolute subject cannot behave like an object. It must, then, give up its place, it must be

placed outside itself, as something that no longer exists (Schelling, 1997, p. 228).

Therefore, following this view, the reflective act itself can be conceived as a kind of ecstatic nothingness which is not just simply nothingness but is ontologically rooted nothingness, as a *no*-thing, a potential void or Plato's *χώρα* in which something can appear at all. It seems that this paradoxical openness of thought to the world arising from its inability to ground itself becomes the core axis of Schelling's philosophy of freedom and ontology (or rather topology) of nothingness, which he first elaborates through the concept of *Ungrund* in his *Freiheit* essay in 1809 and which in particular distinguishes him from Hegel.

Hegel, on the other hand, elaborates this insight by reversing the crucial tensions: if, strictly speaking, the source of reflection cannot be given directly and without any mediation, then this, according to him, does not necessarily signify that no ultimate self-reflection and absolute knowledge is impossible. That would eventually lead us to the dead ends of skepticism. Rather, it can reveal the fact that mediation is exactly the way through which consciousness is given its speculative content. And if so, then the capacity to conceive and grasp this fact leads us to the recognition that this "inequality lies within consciousness itself" (*die Ungleichheit im Bewußtsein*). In the *Science of Logic* Hegel claims:

Reflection is at first the movement of the nothing to the nothing, and thus negation coinciding with itself (die Bewegung des Nichts zu Nichts) and therefore back to itself (mit sich selbst zusammengehende). [...] it is the negative of itself: its being is to be what it is not (das Negative ihrer selbst ist, dies zu sein, was sie nicht ist) (Hegel, 2010, p. 346).

This complicated but very important remark presents mediation as that which is itself immediate and which has to be so in order to be grasped. Yet at the moment of its reflection, this immediacy is negated again and with this double move the immediacy of negation becomes necessarily presupposed (*vorausgesetzt*). In other words, it means that reflection can only determine itself as negation but being determined is already being negated and that is how thought, according to Hegel, actualizes or performs that which is negative in negation itself.

Thus, if we agree that both Hegel and Schelling approach the negativity of self-consciousness within the speculative, we can also admit that the former does it by recognizing the all-encompassing mediation lying within reflection, the "movement from nothing to nothing," while the latter presents this void as a permanent state of being *outside* or being the other, always determining that which is indeterminate. It can be interpreted as the inversion of thought's teleology: even if both Schelling and Hegel admit the immanence of rea-

son and the impossibility to reach "beyond" thinking, Schelling presents it as a major structural lack and finitude of rational thought. Hegel, on the contrary, moves in the opposite direction: if the negativity of self-consciousness presents itself as a permanent self-negation and always seeks to overcome itself, then this is exactly the way how it affirms and returns to itself that which was negated. Therefore, either there is no outer that would not simultaneously be the inner as it is for Hegel, or there is no inner which is immediately not the outer, which appears to be the case in Schelling.

II

Similarly, the ontological interpretation of Kant's idea of the transcendental object which is present in the works of both thinkers leads to ambiguous interpretations. The inevitable necessity to reject the merely formal or descriptive (instead of constituting) aspect of knowledge allowed them to reestablish the lost identity of thought and being. Hegel justified it by emphasizing the *performativity* and *dynamics* of the concept as such. By bringing it back to its origin in the German verb *greifen* as it appears in the word "concept" as *Be-griff*, he aimed to show that the structure of reason or, to be more precise, the negative movement of determinations constitutes the very structure of being, whereas for Schelling, conversely, the proposed identity of thought and being relies on the emphasis on concept's *potentiality*. That is, by relying on the insight into thought's amphibolism (alluding to Kant), Schelling argues for the asymmetrical relationship between being and the concept of being and thus limits rationality only to the sphere of permanent potentiality (or what he calls *das unendliche Seynkönnen* [Schelling, 2007, p. 133]). In other words, the concept of being coincides with but never exhausts being as such.

This tension implies their different understanding of the genesis of the concept. Hegel conceives it as a particular *move* (and not only a kind of subject's capacity to attach words to things), whereas for Schelling this "move" is something that has *already become* concept in the act of reflection. According to him, philosophy always starts from not-knowing, from the experience of lack and insufficiency. It seeks that which from the primal state of not-knowing appears to be transcendent, it seeks to know reality and being *as such* and not only its deduced concepts. In his Munich lectures on the history of modern philosophy Schelling claims: "What is first of all in question is: *What is*. How, therefore, could that from which one begins already be in existence itself (*selbst schon seyend seyn*) is supposed first to be found?" (Schelling, 1994, p. 154). Thus, according to Schelling, reason primordially finds in itself that which is not and cannot be identical with the concept and which due to its irreducibility reveals itself as its moving force. In other words, negative or rational philosophy can only produce the *concept* of being as its final *telos*. Yet if Schelling understands concept only as a potency of being which reveals its inequality to actual being, Hegel, on the

contrary, locates this inequality *within* the concept itself and defines it as its auto-poietic nature. It follows then that, taken in this sense, negative philosophy is no longer *only* the negative here (as in the case of Schelling) because exactly by being negative, philosophy, according to Hegel, can absorb everything: possibility, becoming and reality are only the different moments of the same thought's development. In his *Science of Logic* Hegel writes: "As science, truth is pure self-consciousness as it develops itself and has the shape of the self, so that that which exists in and for itself is the conscious concept and the concept as such is that which exists in and for itself" (Hegel, 2010, p. 29). Thus, even if both Schelling and Hegel agree that the concept is born from the negative relation established in the reflective act, for Schelling, the concept understood as essence (the "what" or "was" of the thing) *ex definitio* cannot be identical or coincide with the relation itself. That relation is only the *possibility* of its actuality and not of its specific essence given *a priori*.

The basis for this mutual confusion may also lie in the fact that Schelling and Hegel use one and the same German term, "übergehen," in different senses. For both of them the process of the concept "going over" into the actual is of crucial importance. Yet what separates them is the very direction and quality of this "übergehen." Existence for Hegel is only the development of the concept's self-referential identity and mediated immediacy which is reached in the self-negation of the reflective act or in the already mentioned split (*Teilung*) and twofoldness of reflection. It follows then that this approach towards existence considers not existence *as such* but only the way how it reveals or becomes possible *in* the concept and *as* its development. Taken in this sense, any question about the existence that could be somehow external to the concept simply becomes meaningless because existence here is only the derivative of the concept. Thus, unlike the case of Schelling, where existence appears to be prior to the concept and is what he calls an inverted idea (*umgekehrte Idee*), where the concept itself is conceived only as the passive *result* of cognition, in Hegel's case existence is presented as the dynamic nature of the conceptual itself. Concept (as *Begriff*) for him appears to be the retaining, "seizing" or "grasping" power which is also the primal separation—*Teilung*, if we remember how accurately the concept of *Urteil* was explained by Friedrich Hölderlin already in 1794 (Hölderlin, 1991). Therefore, Hegel justifies his idea by emphasizing the *performative*, whereas Schelling stresses only the *potential* aspect of the concept. One sees the concept as the very dynamics of mediation, while the other always sees it as its delayed result, only as the passive possibility to be.

III

The situation is similar in the case of dialectics: by formulating and accepting the principle of identity within difference, both authors reintroduce Kant's transcendental dialectics in terms of speculative logic, which plays an essential

role in the whole movement of their thought. However, the dialectical suspension of pure identity or pure difference in both authors also eventually appear to direct them in converse directions.

According to Schelling, real dialectics takes place not only in thinking but rather *between* thinking and that which, as the very process of thought's actualization, always escapes its immanent determinations and is left beyond. Again, it is the negative power which enables and sustains thought's continuity. Already in *The Ages of the World* Schelling admits that the very existence and necessity of dialectics only signifies the fact that dialectics itself is far from "actual knowledge" (*wirkliche Wissenschaft*) (Schelling, 2000, p. xxxvii). Since the dialectical process posits and at the same time dissolves any positive knowledge, it eventually signifies the insufficiency of logic and one-sided rationality. Thus, Schelling sees the necessity for the dialectics of dialectics, which means that reason must presuppose the negativity of itself *in toto*.

Hegel, as we saw, on the contrary, argues that any difference already anticipates a common identity and directs everything towards absolute knowledge and immanence. Schelling, although following the same structure of this thesis, applies the inverse logic. Difference rather than identity here comes as the generating force which grounds the possibility of identity. Of course, Hegel does not argue for the contrary but what separates them is the direction of the elaboration of this principle and the problem which is at stake. One questions the differential nature of difference and finally claims for absolute identity as reason's *terminus ad quem*, while the other sees the necessity to admit the primordially of difference and rejects the possibility of any final synthesis. Thus, either we have a closed circle and absolute knowledge, or an open and never-ending process of separation. It depends on the focus: looking from Hegel's perspective, Schelling's alternative only confirms the totality of discursive thinking. That is, even if we accept the idea of radical reason's otherness to what is actual and thus remains always more or less but never equal to what is conceptual, the very possibility of *grasping* this idea can be interpreted in the Hegelian manner as the capacity of dialectical reason to embrace within itself the whole totality (*Ganze*). Yet equally looking from Schelling's perspective, we can assume that the supposed totality of Hegel's speculative logic, its magic power to internalize everything external, actually does not *internalize* anything at all. On the contrary, it may be seen as only negatively revealing or presupposing that which necessarily remains indeterminable and irreducible to conceptual thought. In the words of Schelling himself, this supposed Hegelian all-encompassing totality is only the "agony of the concept." Yet for Hegel this agony reveals itself as a sacrifice, as what he famously calls the "Bacchanalian revel." It is the process of initiation which eventually resurrects all reality and returns it to the concept as the absolute itself. This inner dialectical movement of the concept for Hegel explains its relationship with what can be defined as a pre-conceptual or objective reality. But Schelling conceives this agony almost

literally, as the fall (*Abfall*) of the concept, when he claims that “in nature the concept is supposed to be stripped of its splendor, powerless, to have become untrue to itself, and incapable of sustaining itself any more” (Schelling, 1994, p. 154).

For Hegel, who relies on the idea of the concept’s exteriorization (*Entäußerung*), i.e. being the other while always remaining itself, thought appears as always inevitably directed towards identity and final synthesis. It presents identity as something to be *returned to* as an eternal past or permanent beginning. Schelling, conversely, always emphasizes the primal difference (*Urwisheit*), the moving force which always leaves thinking open and directed towards the future of the absolute *Unprethinkability* (*Unvordenklichkeit*). Therefore, we have the reverse movement of the same circle again: it either is the heteronomous identity or the identical heteronomy.

Conclusion

I attempted to show how the suggested mirror play between Schelling and Hegel could help us modify the whole focus of their controversy. The central issue here would no longer be the question of overcoming or subordination but rather the question of how the coexistence of these two different but equally legitimate approaches towards negativity can be possible at all. If, as it was argued, Schelling can indeed be read as an inverted Hegel, or Hegel as an inverted Schelling, we may ask further: is it possible to think about another form of *mirroring effect* which is implicit in their very relationship and yet totally different from the understanding of dialectics provided by each of them separately? Or should we rather admit that by fulfilling itself in these two extremes German idealism had already reached its limits and requires a movement beyond itself? In any case, there is no doubt that its “pendulum of the negative” still haunts and challenges our thinking with its own, to borrow Schelling’s metaphor, “eternal Magic.”

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