

Contributi/5

Fichte's Critique in Early Schelling and Hegel, or a Moment of Dead and Lost God that has to Remain but a Moment

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Text addresses Fichte's concept of self-consciousness in its critical appropriation by Schelling and Hegel. It is attempted to show that in Schelling's and Hegel's critique of Fichte's self-positing *Ich* we can trace the basic shift from the question of activity of reason to the question of its actuality. It argues against the still quite frequently accepted Nietzschean-Heideggerian-Derridean ontotheological narrative ascribed to German idealism. Instead, it aims to suggest that Schelling and Hegel of the *Differenzschrift* provide an approach to see the movement of self-consciousness as being driven not by ever-increasing objectification of knowledge within the means and grounds of infinite subject, but rather, by reason's incapacity to provide these grounds and limits. Two related aspects are discussed in relation to this: i) the insufficiency of the merely ideal and subjective principle of the absolute *Ich* to account for its actuality (Schelling's emphasis) and ii) the apparent confusion of *Grenze* and *Schranke* (understood in a Kantian sense), in the act of the self-limiting (*selbst beschränkend*) *Ich* as the *Nicht-Ich* (Hegel's emphasis).

Introduction

One cannot overestimate the width and complexity of the issues evolving around the major figures of German idealism, a movement that recently has experienced a resurging interest in contemporary scholarship. A shift in the paradigmatic narratives, which for a long time have been with a light hand ascribed to these thinkers, continues to reveal their enormous potential to contribute in rethinking and reconceptualizing our own current philosophical landscape already facing the challenges of Anthropocene, a demand to question the limits and nature of subjectivity as such, now exceeding any individuality.

Having this said, the genesis of modern understanding of subjectivity and the transformations it undertook in the early works of immediate Kant's successors, namely, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel may be worth reconsidering. Among many other issues, it may be the dynamic relationship between various different versions of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* before and after the 1799, when

the concept of the absolute transforms dramatically and becomes impenetrable, early Schelling's¹ still developing *Naturphilosophie*, system of identity and early Hegel's gradual escape from Schelling's influence as well as from his theological writings. There is still much dispute revolving around the apparent and factual differences between them in their account on the limits of rationality that continue to haunt their respective scholars². However, Fichte's concept of self-consciousness in its critical appropriation by Schelling and Hegel appears to be still in need of crucial re-evaluation as it marks the major shift from the merely cognitive to the interactive inquiry in the self-mediating human reason and subjectivity.

Thus, in accordance with the general framework of our question, namely, the activity of self-consciousness, two related aspects will be distinguished and discussed in this paper. That is account for its (and thus any) actuality (Schelling's emphasis) and ii) the apparent confusion of *Grenze* and *Schranke* (understood in Kant's sense³), in the act of the i) the insufficiency of the merely ideal and

¹ Even though there is no general agreement concerning the division of Schelling's development (which is also another highly conventional assumption), for the sake of clarity, I side with the view of Welchman (J. Norman, A. Welchman [ed.], *The New Schelling*, London-New York 2004) or Wirth in holding that the basic shift from the 'early' to the 'late' or 'middle' Schelling was made with the appearance of *Freiheitsschrift* (1809). As for Hegel, the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) is commonly accepted as his first mature breakthrough. In subsequent chapters it will also be shown that there lies another and no less important basis for locating this period since it coincides with the end of friendship and of any explicit communication between the two.

² Recent studies include: M. Chédin, M. Galland-Szymkowiak, M. B. Weiss (ed.), *Fichte/Schelling: Lectures Croisées/Gekreuzte Lektüren*, Würzburg 2010; M. Vater, *Schelling and Hegel. Bruno, or On the Natural and Divine Principle of Things*, Albany 2012; L. Hühn, *Die Verabschiedung des subjektivitätstheoretischen Paradigmas. Der Grunddissens zwischen Schelling und Fichte im Lichte ihres philosophischen Briefwechsels*, in «Fichte-Studien», XXV, 2005, pp. 93-111; D. E. Snow, *Statement on the True Relationship of the Philosophy of Nature to the Revised Fichtean Doctrine. An Elucidation of the Former*, New York 2018.

³ As Kant determines it in the §57 of *Prolegomena*: «Grenzen (bei ausgedehnten Wesen) setzen immer einen Raum voraus, der außerhalb einem gewissen bestimmten Platze angetroffen wird, und ihn einschließt; Schranken bedürfen dergleichen nicht, sondern sind bloße Verneinungen, die eine Größe affizieren, sofern sie nicht absolute Vollständigkeit hat. Unsre Vernunft aber sieht gleichsam um sich einen Raum vor die Erkenntnis der Dinge an sich selbst, ob sie gleich von ihnen niemals bestimmte Begriffe haben kann, und nur auf Erscheinungen eingeschränkt ist.[...] Allein Metaphysik führet uns in den dialektischen Versuchen der reinen Vernunft (die nicht willkürlich, oder mutwilliger Weise angefangen werden, sondern dazu die Natur der Vernunft selbst treibt) auf Grenzen, und die transzendentale Ideen, ebendadurch, daß man ihrer nicht Umgang haben kann, daß sie sich gleichwohl niemals wollen realisieren lassen, dienen dazu, nicht allein uns wirklich die Grenzen des reinen Vernunftgebrauchs zu zeigen, sondern auch die Art, solche zu bestimmen» (I. Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können, Werke in zwölf Bänden*, Band 5, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 226). Even though in the most recent English version presented by Gary Hatfield (2004). Also Allen W. Wood (1996) it is suggested to translate *Schranke* – as 'limit' and *Grenze* – as 'boundary', there is no general consensus how to translate these crucial concepts not only in Kant's but in Schelling's and Hegel's scholarship as well. For example, Th. M. Green, H. H. Hudson translated Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* as *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason* (1934) which for a long time has been widely accepted. T. K. Abott also translates *Grenze* as 'limit'. In this text, however, *Grenze* is deliberately translated as

subjective principle of the absolute *Ich* to self-limiting (*selbst beschränkend*) *Ich* as the *Nicht-Ich* (Hegel's emphasis). It is important to notice this twofold approach: Hegel was arguing against Fichte's concept of identity which appeared to him as still contradicting itself and entangled in opposition, thereby requiring to move from reflection to speculation. Whereas in Schelling's view, this identity remained too abstract and 'too identical', missing its differential quality and thus demanding to accept the negativity inherent in the very structure of self-positing consciousness and not merely in its effect. As a result, philosophy of nature was introduced. And yet though emphasizing different aspects, neither of them disagreed in identifying the crisis of the self-positing performative subject in its attempt to account for and thereby actualize itself. They show that Fichte's *Ich* equally leads to both extremes of absolute identity or absolute difference. And the major inconsistency with all this is that they remain *in* and *as* the extremes, there remains a limit dividing these oppositions and Fichte urges us to choose the sides, because this is the thought of *Schranke*, not of *Grenze*. Whereas the task of speculative thinking, as Schelling and Hegel seem to suggest, lies precisely in its dwelling *on the limit* (what they for a short time would call the *Indifferenzpunkt*) and therefore making it absolute where there is no inside, no outside, there is nothing to be given, produced or created, but only *done*.

However, the peculiar way of formulating their critical argument should not be overlooked as well. In its (already) speculative accomplishment, it will be also argued, it preserves Fichte's emphasis on thinking which becomes self-transformative in its very practice. That is, it remains consistent with the performative character of performativity itself. It is a perfect demonstration of how the performativity of thought is actually taking place in contrast to the merely formal enterprise. The point which idealism reached at that moment demanded to give up earlier presuppositions and rather derive them backwards (it echoes what earlier was called the *a posteriori* of any *a priori*), instead of merely applying a certain method in advance and deduce the desired goal – be it absolute, freedom, unity, nature, reality etc. For it was Kant who already showed that to discover the contradiction is already to establish and maintain it.

1. The Excessive Ideality of the *Ich* or what Happens when we Subjectify the Subject?

Given the context of the series of the (at times even dramatic) events in the critical reception of Fichte and the rising voice of Schelling and Hegel in the philosophical scene of XIX century, Hölderlin's 'painless peace of Gods

'limit' for several reasons: i) for its etymological closeness to the concept of 'liminality' which is further elaborated; ii) for the German *Grenze* origin in Slavic *грань* – meaning 'the brink', 'the edge' and also 'the threshold' which also become important in tracing the transition from reflection to speculation; iii) taking into account A. V. Miller's (1998) suggestion to translate Hegel's *Grenze* as limit (also G. di Giovanni 2010) and *Schranke* as limitation, thereby locating *Schranke* within *Grenze*.

(*leidensfreie Ruhe der Götter*)' of *Hyperion* that appeared to be gained with the absolute activity of self-intuiting and self-limiting *Ich* of Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*⁴ soon revealed its hidden and yet inevitable despair. For Schelling and Hegel, this 'painless peace' seemingly turned out to be that kind of anesthetic peace that can only surround God's grave. It turned out that precisely the weightless *Ich* was the reason of its dissolution and its loss in its own striving for itself.

Regarding our current concerns, a very eloquent quatrain written in Schelling's handwriting, echoing the Book of Exodus, 3, 14 should be quoted here: «*Ich bin der ich war / Ich bin der ich sein werde / Ich war der ich sein werde / Ich werde sein der ich bin*»⁵. I am never the one I am, always withdrawn from myself and displaced – how the I, for Schelling, appears to be never the one who is?

Schelling's dissatisfaction with Fichte's one-sided and all-too-idealistic idealism which, according to him, is 'not yet' philosophy was painfully felt and directly expressed in their correspondence. It happened even before the appearance of Hegel's famous *Differenzschrift* (1801) and *Glauben und Wissen* (1802), where the major premises and principles of *Wissenschaftslehre* were explicitly ridiculed and criticized. Some scholars even argue⁶ that already in the *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus* (1795) we can find the first traces of Schelling's break with Fichte's pure *Ich*. For example, in the ninth letter he contends: «Hence, if I posit all in the subject, I thus deny all of the object. Absolute causality in me does away with all objective causality as objective for me. In widening the limits of my world, I narrow those of the objective world. [...] However, criticism would deteriorate into Utopianism (*Schwärmerei*) if it should represent this ultimate goal as attainable at all (even though not as attained)»⁷. After realizing the impossibility to account for the manifold of the objective world within purely subjective Fichtean terms, Schelling will soon become obsessed with the idea of *Naturphilosophie* – 'a material proof of idealism' – as he ambitiously puts it himself. It should serve as a missing and supplementary element to the system of transcendental philosophy⁸, so that

⁴ Regarding this image 'peace of Gods' not only metaphorically, Fichte was totally convinced that all his involvement in the *Atheismusstreit* and Jacobi's (1799) accusations of atheism and nihilism was a result of a sheer misunderstanding.

⁵ *Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Archiv-Sign.: NL Schelling*, 86, p. 20.

⁶ L. Hühn, *Die Philosophie des Tragischen. Schellings Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus. Die Realität des Wissens und das wirkliche Dasein. Erkenntnisbegründung und Philosophie des Tragischen beim frühen Schelling*, Stuttgart 1998, pp. 95-128; A. G. Bruno, *Schelling's Philosophy. Freedom, Nature, and Systematicity*, Oxford 2013; M. Vater, *Schelling and Hegel. Bruno, or On the Natural and Divine Principle of Things*, Albany 2012.

⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, ed. by F. Marti, Lewisburg 1980, p. 192.

⁸ Cf. his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur als Einleitung in das Studium dieser Wissenschaft* (1797); *Von der Weltseele* (1798); *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (1799); *Das System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800).

both would accomplish the true and authentic system of identity. However, it is still to be clarified what does it actually mean to introduce philosophy of nature as a missing counterpart of transcendental idealism if it was not merely a nostalgic gesture towards the *Ding an sich* in the pre-critical sense. Why is it necessary⁹? How it affects the structure and activity of self-consciousness and how it determines its limits? These are the questions that bring us back to Kant's third *Critique* and his emphasis on reflective judgment, which, if we recall, «possesses an a priori principle for the possibility of nature».

It was already discussed how the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* opened up a possibility to think the object *not* merely in terms of being limited within the horizon of necessary laws of empirical cognition, alien to the realm of freedom (as if it would only be possible in the moral and subjective agency, as a negative freedom *from*). Rather, it gave us an opportunity to think the object itself teleologically, as purposiveness without a purpose, a being which appears as the *effect* of freedom, even if this effect of freedom still remained understood in terms of reason's activity *within* and *as* nature. In that sense, the concept of objectivity was provided with its primordial though critically transformed ontological character. To this extent, Fichte elaborated the third *Critique* to its extreme horizon. By claiming that the *Ich* as pure, infinite and unlimited activity (*Ich = Ich*) posits, manifests and encounters itself in nature practically by limiting, forming and determining itself (*Ich = Not-Ich*), he attempted to demonstrate the necessary unity of ideal and real activities, subject coinciding with the object. Every finite phenomenon is simultaneously the experience of the infinite self, albeit in a permanent resistance to itself. Self-limitation now appeared to be not merely a formal demand to determine the limits of any *possible* knowledge as the rhetoric of the first *Critique* seemed to suggest. Instead, it became the very way thought *actually* discovers and experiences itself, the very way in which it thinks and manifests itself to itself in the finite, i. e. self as always the other. Hence, it would not be very difficult to trace the ideological origins of *Frühromantik*, what Oscar Wilde once called «Caliban's fury at not seeing his face reflected in the mirror» back to the writings of Fichte¹⁰. But how *actually* does this self-limitation take place and perform itself? What kind of absolute is being created? Though for Schelling and Hegel this account would soon prove itself to be no less problematic, its 'gravest error' turned out to be precisely what had to be accepted (instead of being somehow corrected or rejected), maintained and established. How come?

Schelling and Hegel soon discovered and made it clear that the closer this account on self-limitation brought to the promised land of unity between real and ideal, the deeper the gap became between form and content, determinacy

⁹ In this context a very important study was made recently by Jason Wirth: J. Wirth, *Schelling's practice of the wild*, Albany 2015.

¹⁰ Also see F. Beiser, *Dark Days: Anglophone Scholarship Since the 1960s. German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, London 2007, pp. 70-91; M. Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, New York 2004.

and indeterminacy. The price the *Ich* had to pay for its purity was nothing more than the whole world. They simply asked: if the pure activity, which ideally is unbounded and absolutely free, comes into being by limiting itself, what else, strictly speaking, can be said of any object whatsoever except that it is undetermined *Nicht-Ich* which, nevertheless, is still the product of the *Ich*? Moreover, if the *Nicht-Ich* is conditioned by the *Ich*, likewise, Fichte forces us to admit, the *Ich* must be conditioned by the *Nicht-Ich* as its possibility to come into being.

The apparent contradiction is formulated by Hegel in the following way:

The Ego posits itself as not posited [das Ich setzt sich als nicht gesetzt]. In this move the immanence of the Ego even as intelligence is asserted in respect of its being conditioned by something other = X. But this only gives the contradiction another form; it has now become immanent itself. The Ego's positing of the opposite and its positing of itself contradict each other¹¹.

In that sense, the absolute *Ich* is no longer absolute or it can remain such always only potentially, formally, virtually but never actually. In other words, it can only be *thought about*, *sought* or *presupposed* but never *done* or *take place*. For in reality the *Ich* strives for *Ich*, since it is a drive (*Trieb*), it strives for itself but finds only *Nicht-Ich*, as Novalis also already noticed. Every appearance is thus only a negative trace of this pure activity which can only be presupposed since the product and the producing remain separate. The limit does not coincide with the freedom itself. In that sense, the phenomenal-natural-objective world can only be understood as a self-withdrawal of the *Ich*, a world which at the same time remains neither within, nor outside itself¹². And ironically, this shrinking is precisely the result of an attempt to introduce idealism as the only possible and genuine system of philosophy. As Schelling also adds in his letters to Fichte: «You believe you have fulfilled the whole demand of speculation through the latter [viz., taking the path of idealism to explain conditioned appearance]; and here is one chief point on which we differ. [...] Either you must never depart from seeing, as you express yourself, and that precisely means from subjectivity, and then every single I, as you say once in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, must be the absolute substance and remain so, or if you depart from it to an equally incomprehensible real ground, this whole reference to subjectivity is merely preliminary»¹³. Thus it follows then, that if the sole object of philosophy is merely the activity of the I,

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, ed. by H. S. Harris and W. Cerf, Albany 1977, pp. 63-64.

¹² Also see Fichte's position concerning *Pantheismusstreit* (1785-1789). He was highly suspicious of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* since he considered it as a threat of falling back to Spinozism. However, the figure of Spinoza will be very important in the further development of Schelling and Hegel. That is, in trying to understand, how the organic, dynamic and productive (and not merely formal, mechanistic or passive) concept of nature could be integrated in transcendental philosophy; how nature itself could be seen as endowed with subjectivity.

¹³ F. W. J. Schelling, J. G. Fichte, *The philosophical rupture between Fichte and Schelling: selected texts and correspondence (1800-1802)*, ed. by M. Vater and D. W. Wood, Albany 2012, p. 61.

there is not much left to add to its purity, for it becomes, to paraphrase Hegel, action pure and free – knowing *of* the knowing or intuition *of* the intuition which, as we shall see, is still different from Aristotelian νόησις νοήσεως as understood in Hegelian and Schellingian manner.

It may be contended, then, that Fichte's understanding of the identity of self-consciousness presents itself in a radicalized form of Kant's regulative idea (for we encounter here a kind of idea of the idea) and substantiation of categorical imperative¹⁴. In this way, it created a kind of, to borrow an expression from David Farrell Krell, 'tormented idealism'¹⁵, where the *Ich* is absolute only in its struggle to become absolute: its infinite poverty being the infinite possibility of wealth: «*Ich soll gleich Ich sein*»¹⁶. In other words, the excessive subjectification of the subject-object¹⁷ turns against itself and suspends its own striving. What is being posited only exposes an incapacity to posit the positing itself, an incapacity *to become* what it already is. It performs merely its own undoing. As Hegel also puts it,

for Reason itself nothing is left but the impotence of self-suspending requirements and the semblance of a formal mediation of nature and freedom by the intellect through the mere Idea of the suspension of the antitheses. [...] But the antithesis itself has not vanished. On the contrary, it has been made infinite; [...] From this highest standpoint [of reflection] nature has the character of absolute objectivity, that is, of death¹⁸.

Moreover, if nature is only the negated *Ich*, then, also the reality of the *Ich* (or what Fichte also sometimes calls *Vernunftwesen*) turns out to be accessible merely as its own corpse. The death of nature within nature itself.

Why then, this kind of self-limitation should ever take place at all, either in thought or in nature? Is there a way to think it not in terms of deprivation, obstruction or even annihilation of life and the real? Is there a way to see it not as leading to the death of life, but maybe – to the life of or within death? The question of nature thus becomes the question of the very life (or what is being called its *Lebenskraft* or *Lebendigkeit* and no longer a mere activity) of self-consciousness, with all its loss and abundance, its worldly despair and ecstasy.

¹⁴ Joan Steigerwald also notices that «Fichte's science of knowledge thus only transposed the rupture at the core of Kant's system of philosophy into a rupture within the self» (J. Steigerwald, *Epistemologies of Rupture: The Problem of Nature in Schelling's Philosophy*, in «Studies in Romanticism», ILLI, 4, 2002, pp. 545-584).

¹⁵ D. F. Krell, *The Tragic Absolute*, Indiana 2005, p. 49.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie, Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 2: *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 97.

¹⁷ In his *Clara* (1811), Schelling also notices that modern philosophy, «Because it wanted to spiritualize itself completely, it first of all threw away the material that was absolutely necessary to the process and right from the very beginning it kept only what was spiritual. But what is to become of the spiritual if it is spiritualized again?» (F. W. J. Schelling, *Clara, or, On nature's connection to the spirit world*, ed. by F. Steinkamp, New York 2002, p. 2).

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p. 140.

2. *Die unendliche Erweiterung der Schranke:* Towards the Liminal Point of Speculation

In his yet another letter to Fichte, now written by the end of 1800, Schelling continues his unexpected and for Fichte even incomprehensible gesture by claiming that

precisely this ideal-real I, which is merely objective but for this very reason simultaneously productive, is in its productivity nothing other than Nature. [...] I simply cannot imagine that in transcendental philosophy reality is just something found, nor something found in conformity with immanent laws of intelligence; for in that case, it would not be the laws of the object of philosophy, which is not that which finds reality but is itself that which produces it (*was nicht das Findende, sondern, das Hervorbringende selbst ist*)¹⁹.

This important remark concerns us for several reasons: i) first, it needs to be clarified, how and in what sense the act of *positing*, which for Schelling still appears to be passive and thereby presuming reality merely as given and found, becomes the act of *producing* or *bringing forth*; ii) second, how is it related to the problem of self-limitation of reason and self-consciousness; how does it point to the previously mentioned difference between *Schranke* and *Grenze*.

It seems that contrary to Fichte's own impression, what Schelling is suggesting here is not a kind of radical transformation or rejection of Fichte's concept of the self-positing, for he explicitly states that is he is not against it, but for expanding it²⁰. Indeed, it appears as an attempt to fully embrace and endure all the burden of the previously discussed consequences of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. That is, he remained faithful to the Kantian critical spirit of thought which thinks only what it lives and knows only what it *can* think and know – thought, which coincides with the opening of the world and follows its own eventuality. Thus, in their quest for the actual or what Hegel calls «*lebendige Anteil*»²¹ of thought, Schelling and Hegel ventured on what has been *performed* and not merely declared, deduced, intuited or presupposed by Fichte.

Therefore *if*, instead of the absolute identity or synthesis the *Ich* was striving for, it was left only with the absolute separation between real and ideal, finite and infinite; *if* self-consciousness could not account for its own activity in any other way than sacrificing its own freedom; *if* every object and determination appears as the most concrete evidence of the unsurpassable finitude and mediation of the self; *and if* one still could not surrender oneself neither to faith (as Jacobi suggested), nor to skepticism (*à la* Schulze) – for that would simply result in,

¹⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, J. G. Fichte. *The philosophical rupture between Fichte and Schelling: selected texts and correspondence (1800–1802)*, p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, p. 15.

to use Kant's expression, the *Euthanasie der Vernunft*²². Then, given the fact of reason which is already taking place and given that this taking place coincides with its self-articulation (i. e. transcendental ideas, as Kant showed, cannot remain mute), all this could only lead to the recognition that this is precisely how *self-consciousness reaches the absolute by reaching its own limit* beyond which there is no longer any beyond, any outside or inside. Its absolute finitude appears to be what makes it infinite. Its impossibility to reach the absolute synthesis becomes the only path towards it²³. In other words, negativity was found to be lying at the very core and possibility of any synthesis, identity, determination and even freedom – this is what with the 'real' in the «*reelle Entgegensetzung*» Schelling and Hegel were pointing at: «Philosophy must give the separation [*Trennen*] into subject and object its due [*sein Recht widerfahren lassen*]²⁴. In that sense, the assumed ideal activity of the subject lost its privileged inwardness. It had to be 'thrown out of itself', so to speak, to become itself in the realization and production of and as nature (for Hegel it was eventually called *Vernunft* or *Geist*, but it does not mean that he did not accept the reality of objects) – with all that was lying under the so far suppressed idea of it since Spinoza.

Having this said, we can now understand Schelling's claim in his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797) that nature

necessarily and originally, should not only express [*ausdrücke*], but even realize, the laws of our mind [*Gesetze unsers Geistes*], and that she is and is called nature only insofar as she does so [*daß sie nur insofern Natur sei und Natur heiße, als sie dies tut*] [...] for philosopher experience is in fact not the principle but the task of construction, not the *terminus a quo* but the *terminus ad quem* of construction²⁵.

Thus far from Fichte's oversimplified interpretation that in doing so one falls into error of the obvious circularity in deriving nature from intelligence and *vice versa* (ironically, it was Fichte himself who was accused for such inconsistency), Schelling admits the impossibility to ground or deduce the necessary laws of intelligence neither in advance, nor once and for all. If that was somehow still possible, the question for the living thought, for the real thought (or the ideal-real, that comprises the *Lebenskraft*) or even the identity of thought and being – all that would be merely superfluous and unnecessary. And if, as Schelling seems to suggest, there is nothing simply given, not even myself, not even my experience, then, precisely because of this undecidedness self-consciousness is open to come into being and become real. Therefore, the question of the real

²² I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg 1956, p. B434.

²³ It should be also mentioned that already in his *Fichte Studien* (1795-1796) Novalis observed that «durch das freiwillige Entsagen des Absoluten entsteht die unendliche, freie Tätigkeit in uns, das einzig mögliche Absolute, was uns gegeben werden kann, und was wir nur durch unsre Unvermögenheit, ein Absolutes zu erreichen und zu erkennen, finden» (Novalis, *Das theoretische Werk, Fragmente und Studien bis 1797*, Novalis Werke, Munich 2001, p. 312).

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p. 156.

²⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature: as Introduction to the Study of this Science*, ed. by E. E. Harris and P. Heath, Cambridge 1995, pp. 41-42.

or nature shows up not merely as the problem of the content or insufficiency of the ideal in its formal character, as Hegel defined it in the case of Fichte. Rather, it shows up as a task for thinking to become, to take place and to live through itself. In this sense, nature indeed constructs itself *in* and as *our* very inquiry into it, though «from the fact that reason gives laws to experience it does not follow that it has the right to contradict experience»²⁶. In this sense, the idea of construction could be understood as a radical interpretation of Kant's concept of exposition²⁷, a proper method of philosophical argument. That is, for Kant construction seemed not applicable to philosophy because it cannot construct its object a priori and directly from the concepts. Therefore, according to him, it can only *expose* or *explicate* the necessary conditions for the object's appearance. Schelling and Hegel, however, seem to employ this term of construction in a rather different sense. For it does not simply refer to an operation executed by a certain agent (e. g. subject) constructing²⁸, deducing or forming the object out of some pre-given a priori elements (e. g. concepts or ideas), as Kant understood it narrowing it to the field of geometry. For here construction rather signifies the very limit of the transcendental, or the transcendental of the transcendental itself. It refers to the construction of the constructible itself, the realization that not even the concepts themselves are merely *given*. The possible must itself be exposed *as possible*. As Hegel also puts it,

Nature is an immanent ideality just as intelligence is an immanent reality. The two poles of cognition and being are present in each, so that each has also the point of indifference in itself; [...] For nature is not a stillness of being (*ein ruhendes Sein*), it is a being that becomes (*ein Werden*); or in other words, it is not split and synthesized from the outside, it sunders (*trennt*) itself and unites itself by itself²⁹.

It implies that already in the forming of laws of experience, reason necessarily coincides with the experience of those laws. The concept of nature already presupposes and exhibits the nature of concept.

If that is the case, then, the structure of this self-reverting movement that was previously ascribed to the subjective activity of self-consciousness becomes subjective and objective, ideal and real at the same time. Moreover, as Schelling puts it, it becomes the 'highest potency of nature', where the 'self' signifies not merely a direction of reference but rather an exhaustion of possibilities,

²⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie und die richtige Art, ihre Probleme zu lösen, Sämtliche Werke*, Abt.1, Bd. 4, Stuttgart und Augsburg 1858, p. 100.

²⁷ Cf. I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg 1956, pp. A731, B759.

²⁸ The term itself, however, is still quite controversial and remains to be further scrutinized. Tom Rockmore, for example, provides a very different account on the very idea of construction, narrowing it to the formal epistemological framework (T. Rockmore, *German Idealism as Constructivism*, Chicago 2016). Markus Gabriel, on the other hand, emphasizes the primacy of its ontological-genetical layer and therefore remains closer to our concerns (see: M. Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, London and New York 2011).

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, pp. 166-168.

an open coming into being without any reserve or pre-established structures and principles. The 'self' also signifies here a view 'in within', so to speak – contrary to any external, neutral or disengaged meta-level approach that is assumed by reflection. Thus if we admit that in the act of self-consciousness producing *is* also the produced, discovering *is* also the making and *vice versa*, if reason transforms itself in its very attempt to account for itself, it follows, then, that with the introduction of *Naturphilosophie* the necessary performative dimension of thought is being even more emphasized and elaborated as it was with Fichte³⁰. However, it should not be overlooked that – and no less importantly – it became possible only because of a different understanding and location of the *separation, limit* and *negativity*. For it still needs to be clarified, where and how to locate this peculiar *Indifferenzpunkt* – as they call it, or a *within-difference*, a point of 'coincidence' of (n)either/(n)or, neither merely real, nor ideal, neither determinate, nor indeterminate? *In what form or way is this kind of self-consciousness actually taking place?*

If we attentively follow the elaboration of Schelling's and Hegel's argument against Fichte, it seems that sooner or later we encounter a certain inconsistency: i) on the one hand, they both claim that despite its speculative (i.e. synthesizing, unifying) tone or spirit, *Wissenschaftslehre* still remained torn apart by reflection. That is, subject remained separated or negated by the object, and yet also mutually conditioned by it. Self-limitation was understood, according to them, merely in terms of privation, thereby putting both realms of necessity and freedom, finite and infinite in the extremes of the dichotomy. And that rendered them incomprehensible in any other way than through the negation of the other that Fichte intended to avoid in the ideal synthesis of the productive imagination – «*das eine nicht ist, insofern das andere ist*»³¹. ii) Yet on the other hand, they also claim that even though the difference remains absolute, the opposition is not real yet. And it has to become real, so that the opposites could also stand up and each come into being. Otherwise, one is simply reduced to the other and that results in their mutual nullification (*Vernichten*) or merely formal, 'thinkable' character. In what sense, then, should we understand this «*reelle Entgegen-setzung*» and its relation to the self-limitation?

It was already discussed that Fichte's *Ich* gains determination and thereby comes into being by positing itself as *Nicht-Ich*. In doing so, it suspends its infinite activity. And since the pure *Ich* is understood as nothing else than absolute activity, it means that it cancels itself altogether. Any limitation appears to be its negation. Yet in order to solve this contradiction, in his 1800 *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* Schelling makes a crucial move in admitting that «the self qua self can be unlimited [*unbegrenzt*] only insofar as it is limited and

³⁰ Werner Hamacher has provided an insightful critique of Fichte's performative *Setzung* by revealing its 'impotential' character (W. Hamacher, *Premises. Essays on Philosophy from Kant to Celan*, Harvard 1997).

³¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, p. 96.

conversely, that it is limited as a self only insofar as it is unlimited»³². On the one hand, Schelling indeed seems to follow Spinozian understanding of determination as negation³³, for «every determination is a blotting-out [*Aufhebung*] of absolute reality, that is, negation»³⁴. And yet he immediately adds: «However, negation of a positive cannot be done by mere privation, but only through *real opposition*»³⁵. What Schelling seem to suggest here is rather a dynamic extension of Spinoza's account of the indifferent absolute. For the actual negation of a positive to take place, it is not enough to simply cancel it, for there is nothing what can now literally to *take place* instead of it. If I simply admit that in reality *Ich* limits itself by negating itself in *Nicht-Ich*, then either I have to admit that there is still something taking place *as* this negated *Ich* which is yet left absolutely unexplained and reached only apophatically; or I run myself into contradiction and claim that reality is really nothing, absolute void and illusion. Thus positive can be negated only *as* positive and that means that whatever takes place instead of it has also been positively posited and, in a sense, identical with the former – hence, we have a speculatively reestablished principle of *horror vacui*. In his second Jena *Systementwürfe* (1804-1805) Hegel also claims:

The limit [*die Grenze*] is true quality only insofar as it is self-connection [*Beziehung auf sich selbst*], and it is this only as negation, which negates the other only in connection with itself. In this way the limit is now synthesis as well, unity in which both subsist at the same time, or real quality [...] The limit is thereby the totality or true reality [*die Totalität oder wahrhafte Realität*], which, [when] compared with its concept, contains its dialectic as well, because the concept sublates itself therein in such a manner that it has become its own contrary³⁶.

Presented in this light, the real (i.e. qualitative and not merely quantitative) opposition thus provides a possibility to understand absolute as being primarily *relational* and *differential*.

Even though neither Hegel, nor Schelling do not put it explicitly in this way, it seems that in this case of a real opposition, we encounter a kind of inversion that is added – what is posited becomes positive in the sense of being real, shaped and graspable, even if it is still being posited and grasped as *Nicht-Ich* (yet now even over-negated). And accordingly, from the side of what

³² F. W. J. Schelling, *System of transcendental idealism*, ed. by P. Heath, Charlottesville 2001, p. 38.

³³ In Spinoza's letter written on June 2, 1674 and addressed to his friend Jarig Jelles we find «*Quia ergo figura non aliud, quam determinatio, et determinatio negatio est*».

³⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of transcendental idealism*, p. 36.

³⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, pp. 157-159. It also resonates with Kant's distinction between *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum*. If the emphasis is put on *nihil negativum* then, following Kant's table of the categories, the difference becomes no longer of quality but of modality (B105-106; B347/A79-80; A292). Hegel was also dissatisfied with Kant's treatment of modality which was based on «the nonidentity of subject and object» (*ibid.*, p. 80).

³⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Jena system 1804-5*, ed. by G. Di Giovanni and J. W. Burbidge, Kingston and Montreal 1986, p. 8.

is being posited now as positive, the positing activity itself appears as negative without losing its positing and productive power and further negates what is being posited. As a result, we have a form of *active negativity* or *negative (and not merely negating) activity* essentially inherent in self-consciousness. The very event of *opposing*, which itself cannot be opposed to anything and therefore remains identical and unbounded, presents itself more originally than any elements being opposed. This may be another possible reading of the (in)famous «*Identität der Identität und der Nichtidentität*»³⁷, where the first identity serves as a mediating or oscillating liminal point of any determination. In other words, only self-limitation itself is what is infinite and unlimited and thereby guarantees its permanent becoming along with the possibility to grasp itself as such. Self-consciousness becomes possible as the point of collision between coming into being and passing away. Schelling accurately describes this point as an «infinite extension of the boundary [*unendliche Erweiterung der Schranke*]»³⁸.

Now if we attempt to relate these two types of the (un)limiting negations, namely, privative negation and real negation with the aforementioned Kant's distinction between *Grenze* (an absolute limit) and *Schranke*³⁹ (a negative quantum, determination), the very location of self-consciousness in this transition from reflection to speculation that Schelling and Hegel suggest may become clearer. The understanding (*der Verstand*) and therefore reflection operate within the realm of determinations and are thus concerned with separations, divisions, distinctions and the highest possible manifold. The limits for understanding or reflecting consciousness point only to the closure, to what falls within them and thereby provides epistemic material. The emphasis is on the *result* of the synthesis. Whereas reason (*die Vernunft*) or speculative thought is the unifying activity, reaching for the highest possible totality. It is concentrated on drawing the limit as such – the last liminal point of thought beyond which there is nothing to be thought or known. In that sense, it is directed towards abolishing any actual 'beyond'⁴⁰. As transcendental dialectics has showed, it reaches this absolute limit in the antinomies which no longer provide any positive or determinate content whatsoever and yet still display the scene for the excessive activity of reason (without which understanding could not fully operate either). In other words, speculative reason, strictly speaking, does not and must not 'cognize' anything precisely because it stands *at* and *as* the limit of any possible determination. It is the limit of the limit itself. In its antinomical character, it is always also beyond the possible and thereby remains im-possible as its imperative

³⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, p. 96.

³⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of transcendental idealism*, p. 39.

³⁹ Also see: C. Esposito, S. Beck, *Die Schranken der Erfahrung und die Grenzen der Vernunft: Kants Moralthologie*, in «Aufklärung», XXI, 2009, 117-145.

⁴⁰ Schelling will later elaborate it further with the idea of the *Unvordenklichkeit* – the unpre-thinkability. Hegel, in his own turn, in his *Science of Logic* will later claim: «In order that the limit [*Grenze*] which is in something as such should be a limitation [*Schranke*], something must at the same time in its own self transcend the limit it must in its own self be related to the limit as to something which is not» (G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, London 1998, p. 132).

ground. Thus, self-limitation understood in terms of *Selbstbegrenzung* cannot be somehow anticipated, deduced or derived in advance, without *actually reaching* these limits. Likewise, it cannot be done once and for all, for it endows reason with its life and force. It can only be done by pushing thought to its extremes until it collapses within itself. And yet, as Schelling and Hegel seem to suggest, for reason to be able to witness this collapse *as* collapse is the greatest moment of its freedom and the highest point of self-consciousness.

Having all this said, Fichte, in his own turn, does not seem to place self-consciousness *on* the limit yet, that is to say, even if it is the *Ich* that limits itself, the limit still remains *Schranke*, a negative quantum. Instead of pertaining to the very essence of the *Ich*, it remains merely its effect and its product, i. e. still something separate. Whereas speculative limit is not simply a fixed limit *between* something, nor a limit that has anything left beyond itself. Rather, it is at the extreme of any opposition, a point of indifference, a dash⁴¹, signifying an event of forming and unforming.

For strictly speaking, it is the limit preceding even its own possibility (in Kantian terms) which thereby becomes possible only because of that. If reflection is a view from the oppositions it has established, speculation is a thought from the very event of separation that is taking place. Or, if one prefers, it is the reflection within reflection itself – reflection that is infected and exhausted by itself as soon as it is discovered. As Hegel puts it, Fichte's philosophy is a moment of dead and lost God but it has to remain a moment, for «the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed [*alles Sein versinkt*], must signify the infinite grief [*Schmerz*] [of the finite] purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment»⁴². For at the same time it is also «the spring [*der Quell*] of eternal movement, the spring of that finitude, which is infinite, because it eternally nullifies [*vernichtet*] itself. Out of this nothing and pure night of infinity, as out of the secret abyss [*geheimen Abgrund*] that is its birthplace, the truth lifts itself upward»⁴³. It is a moment of recognition that the loss of nature simultaneously signifies the loss of myself. And yet, as Schelling and Hegel seem to suggest, precisely *as* this loss of myself, *as* this giving away of myself, the nature returns. It becomes life appearing only in the loss of life.

It is important to pay attention to this twofold approach: Hegel was arguing against Fichte's concept of identity which appeared to him as still contradicting itself and entangled in opposition, thereby requiring to move from reflection to speculation. Whereas in Schelling's view, this identity remained too abstract and 'too identical', so to speak, missing its differential quality and thus demanding to accept the negativity inherent in the very structure of self-positing consciousness and not merely in its effect. As a result, philosophy of nature was introduced. And

⁴¹ There is an intriguing attempt to articulate the concept of absolute knowledge in Hegel in contemporary discourse: R. Commay, P. Neruda, *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, Cambridge 2018.

⁴² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p. 190.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

yet though emphasizing different aspects in their critique of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel both identified the *crisis of the self-positing performative subject in its attempt to account for and thereby actualize itself*. They both show that Fichte's *Thathandlung* equally leads to both extremes of absolute identity or absolute difference. And the major inconsistency appears to be lying precisely in the fact that these extremes remain *in* and *as* the extremes. There remains a limit dividing these oppositions and Fichte urges us to choose the sides. In this way, Fichte is shown to be still thinking in the frame of *Schranke*, not of *Grenze*. Whereas the task for speculative thinking, as it is argued that Schelling and Hegel seem to suggest, lies precisely in its dwelling *on the limit* (what they for a short time called the *Indifferenzpunkt*) and therefore making it absolute, with no inside, no outside, nothing to be merely given, produced or created, but only *done*. In other words, negativity appeared to be necessarily permeating the performative structure of self-consciousness that was missing in Fichte's account.

In addition to that, the very *mode* of their critical argument was also taken into account. On the one hand, in its speculative accomplishment, Schelling's and Hegel's argument preserves Fichte's emphasis on *thinking which is self-transformative in its very practice*. Yet on the other hand, they remain consistent with the *performative character of performativity itself*. Again, it is a demonstration of how the performativity of thought is actually taking place in contrast to its merely formal application or conceptual manipulation. Therefore, it was attempted to show that precisely in this point, at the very dawn of the XIX century, critical idealism underwent a major transformation in its dynamic and performative character.

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