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The Concept of the History of Intelligence in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the role of the history of intelligence in relation to the realization of the ideal in F.W.J. Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). To this end, I examine Schelling's concept of history as an unfolding process and analyze his division of history into three "periods". A central theme here is how Schelling's depiction of consciousness evolves throughout these periods and how it relates to the concepts of death and God, with dead nature functioning both as a remnant and a necessary condition for historical progress. Additionally, I engage with the problem Schelling poses concerning how the self can become conscious of the original harmony between subjective and objective, offering a novel interpretative approach. I conclude by arguing that Schelling's concept of history should be understood as the development of an overarching self reflecting on itself, ultimately striving toward the attainment of full self-knowledge.

Keywords: F. W. J. Schelling; history of intelligence; self-consciousness; absolute; pure will; necessity and freedom

1 Introduction

At the end of the chapter on history in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (*System des transcendentalen Idealismus* [1800], hereafter *STI*),¹ Schelling notes that, "We attributed the emergence of the objective world to a wholly blind mechanism of the intelligence" (SW, 606/Schelling 1978, 213). In the following, I argue that Schelling

1 All references to Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* follow the English translation by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978, 5th printing). Citations are given in the format (SW/STI), where SW refers to the original German edition: *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, Erste Abtheilung, Dritter Band (Stuttgart und Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1858). I have modified the translation where necessary; all bracketed interpolations are my own.

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views history as a self (i.e., as a whole), whose absolute constitutes its own self-knowledge, meaning that I conceive it as the self-consciousness² of, in Schelling's own words, the "genus" (*Gattung*). In Section 2, I analyze Schelling's concept of legality and its relation to the system, and argue that happiness (*Glückseligkeit*)³ should be viewed as given by the "I" (*Ich*) and, by extension, potentially conceivable by the genus. In Section 3, I interpret the route and motion of history through the evolution of the genus's intelligence, examining the most significant elements of history's development as Schelling conceives it. Moreover, I explore how there are two histories for Schelling, one of the will and one of "non-will",⁴ so to speak, which further contributes to my emphasis on the polysemy of the ideal.⁵ In Section 4, I track the development of consciousness through the three periods of history that Schelling lays out, while also delineating the possible relationships between the concept of God and that of death *qua* dead nature. In Section 5, I probe the problem that Schelling tried to solve in *STI*, providing a twofold illustrative example that aims both to clarify the nature of the problem and to offer a distinct interpretative response. Finally, in Section 6, I explore some of the nuances of Schelling's ambiguous claim about the absence of God in the current epoch, concluding that history needs to be seen as a self in the act of reflecting back on itself.

2 Preliminary Reflections: Universal Reign of Law

In the fourth main part of the *STI*, before dealing with the concept of history, Schelling refers to a universal constitution – a moral world order – which represents

2 I employ the terms "self-consciousness" and "self-knowledge" interchangeably throughout.

3 It is noteworthy that the Greek translation of *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by Panagiotis Dafnos and edited by Theodoros Penolidis, renders Schelling's "Glückseligkeit" as *ευδαιμονία* (eudaimonia) rather than the more common *ευτυχία* (happiness). See Schelling (2015).

4 By "history of non-will", I refer to the period preceding the first expression of choice (*der ersten Äußerung der Willkür*) by the genus (*Gattung*), during which humankind remains unconscious, as the genus has not yet actualized its will. Although this phrasing may seem unconventional, I believe it accurately captures this specific phase without contradicting Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*. In this context, the genus's lack of will signifies its inability to participate consciously in history until that first expression of choice, which precisely marks the transition between the two "histories". One could also describe this as the distinction of human being (*spirit*) and the history of non-human being (*nature*), though this characterization lacks the specificity of the account outlined above.

5 In connection with these first two sections, see Habermas 2004, 43–89.

the sought-after ideal (see SW, 587f./STI, 199), suggesting that such a political system must be the distinctive feature of history.⁶ Nevertheless, owing to its form and the characteristics it bears, it is a system that can only be realized from the standpoint of the totality of history (see SW, 591f./STI, 202). The direct consequence of this is the inability to realize the ideal within history.

As a necessary condition of freedom that exists in the external world, the legal system and the legal order's first emergence are considered a consequence of natural compulsion, and not a product of chance (*Zufall*) by Schelling. Similarly, the concept of order emerges unconsciously as a consequence of forces, which are not perceptible by the genus.⁷ By identifying pure will both with the external world and happiness, and since "nature cannot *act* in the proper sense of the word" (SW, 582/STI, 194) the need for a second nature surfaces. This second nature will maintain a rule of law as natural, or to put it another way, it will house the rule of law within itself. Thus, because the pure will that dominates in the external world is deemed the sole and supreme good, the refutation of the human being's freedom becomes *a priori* impossible (see SW, 581–3/STI, 194–196).

However, despite the view that nature cannot act,⁸ and therefore cannot oppose the realization of this highest purpose in any way, the collapse of the system is inevitable from the outset; through temporality, systems carry the seeds of their own overcoming and downfall. This occurs because free beings go along with any compulsion stemming from the current system so long as they "allow themselves to be compelled"⁹ (SW, 585/STI, 197), an acceptance pivoting on the reception of advantages deriving from the system itself (see SW, 584–6/STI, 196f).

6 Later in the text, Schelling describes "the gradual emergence of a political world order" as "the sole ground for a history" (SW, 591f./STI, 202).

7 In our view, "genus" (*Gattung*) refers to a "human genus" such that it signals "humankind". This is especially apparent when we consider that Schelling talks about it in relation to the "first expression of choice", which is a characteristic of rational beings as well as the "history of intelligence" and/or "history of consciousness". And yet, if we approach the concept of history as a "history of everything", there is no doubt that we should (re)frame the *Gattung* to include all "species as a whole". On this issue, Jeffrey Bernstein emphasizes that "Schelling is not here referring to any particular race/generation but rather, solely to a possible genus which could actualize aesthetic intuition in the form of mythology" (Bernstein 2004, 253). On the same issue, Michelle Kosch argues, "This is not to say that Schelling views human agents in exactly the same way he views plants, but he does see a strong analogy between them: both are self-governing systems which cause themselves to develop in accordance with dynamically conceived essences" (Kosch 2006, 77).

8 Even though this may seem somewhat ambiguous, Schelling clarifies that "although nature does not behave with absolute passivity in regard to action, it still cannot offer any absolute resistance to the execution of the supreme purpose" (SW, 582/STI, 194).

9 Schelling's remark about free beings resonates with Spinoza's analysis of human bondage in Ethics IV, where individuals, in pursuing what they perceive as advantageous, often unwittingly submit to external forces that shape their fate (Spinoza 1985, 583–587, esp. E4P66, E4P73). This tension –

Consequently, from the suggested relationship between pure will and inclination – or “drive” (*Trieb*) – it can be inferred that the I cannot directly bring about happiness, even if it wishes to. This is especially the case because happiness is not a mere object of choice but rather the appearance of pure will, whereas inclination serves as the sole vehicle through which the I makes its way into the external world (see SW, 581f./STI, 194).

3 The Route and Motion of the History of Intelligence

Taking the above into consideration, as well as drawing from both mythology and the *Bible*, Schelling first argues that nature had initially placed human beings in the position they deserve (or, what amounts to the same, God placed them in paradise). He then sees the genus take the first step outside the domain of instinct into the Golden Age of law, identifying the start of history with the first expression of choice (*der ersten Äußerung der Willkür*), which is symbolically aligned with the Fall (see SW, 589/STI, 200). Therefore, at this point, the philosopher¹⁰ implies (albeit in a dilemmatic way) either that there is no genus before the first choice or that, because its actions are insufficient, it cannot become a part of history (which still does not exist), and yet the genus simultaneously gives birth to history, for “[n]ot everything that happens is... an object of history” (SW, 588/STI, 199). For if the history of the genus starts with the first choice, then we can infer *ipso facto* that whatever exists before the first choice is not history, which means a lineage of concepts capable of realizing an ideal¹¹ (or moving toward it, at least).

As a consequence, if time zero for the genus of essential action and the history reaching for the ideal coincide with the expression of the first choice, then there must be an era before this. This becomes an even more difficult thought when we are prompted to picture two histories: first, the history unravelling before the first choice

between apparent choice and deeper systemic constraints – parallels Schelling’s view of history as a structure in which individuals, believing they act freely, are in fact participants in a larger, impersonal order that determines their course.

¹⁰ Throughout this paper, I use the term “philosopher” as a designation for Schelling and his views.

¹¹ Schelling’s notion of the ideal is historically complex, particularly in relation to Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (see Fichte 2021) and the broader debates of the 1790s. While the ideal/real distinction plays a significant role in post-Kantian thought, this paper does not engage with that historical debate. Instead, “ideal” is used here in a broad sense, referring to a regulative principle, telos, or aspirational concept that structures history’s intelligibility rather than serving as an opposition to the real.

as the history of non-will – or human beings as unconscious – and, second, the history unravelling after the first choice as the history of will – or human beings as conscious.

Nevertheless, it will become evident in the following that the realization of the ideal constitutes a prerequisite for the existence of history, because history can exist only where a single ideal is on the one hand “realized under an infinity of deviations” (SW, 588/STI, 199) and, on the other, itself forms a progressive, historical whole, whose motion and route unfold in the absence of absolute lawfulness and absolute freedom (see SW, 588–90/STI, 199f).

With respect to the infinite deviations, they presuppose both a centripetal force, which restores the whole on the way toward the ideal, and a centrifugal force, which is the operative power of these deviations. For in some ways, the deviations are the result of the continuous appearance of the choice that started history in the first instance, although they also continue it; after all, only “when all choice shall have vanished from earth, and man¹² shall have returned to the same point at which nature originally placed him” (SW, 589/STI, 200) will the ideal be fulfilled.

In this connection, it is clear that the idea of the desirable ideal contributes decisively to the becoming of history, which returns to itself by means of intellectual intuition (see SW, 588–90/STI, 199f). Therefore, the claim that without destination there cannot be a journey, and in order for the journey to be complete the destination should be a return to the starting point, otherwise a system of knowledge cannot be considered complete, appears to fully reflect Schelling’s attempt to project a system of knowledge by virtue of identifying the destination with the ideal starting point.

Such an ideal that essentially and indirectly moves history could not, however, be carried out by a single individual; it could only be the purpose and conquest of the entire genus (see SW, 588f./STI, 200). The individual is not *a priori* capable of realizing this ideal because the ideal is defined as a universal legal system, a moral world order, or an Absolute whose manifestation requires the contribution of all, which necessarily transcends the individual and particular.

Paradoxically, however, the longer it takes for the ideal to be realized, the more its non-realization is considered a failure, despite the constantly reducing distance between the genus and the ideal. This is because the intelligence of the genus acts within the non-conscious – unconscious – domain, acquiring its conscious form only once the ideal is realized, from which point it can look back and conceive the length of the route it has taken. This view reveals the presence of dead nature along the

¹² In quotations from Schelling and other original sources (e.g. (Lindsay (1910))), I retain the original use of “man” in order to preserve historical and textual authenticity. In my own wording, however, I adopt contemporary inclusive language standards, using terms such as “human beings”, “human-kind”, or “the genus” where appropriate.

route of history. In this way, nature expresses its failed reflection through its partial death, haunting the route of history with the trace of death (i.e., what is left unactualized).^{13,14} Thus, progress traverses a partial destruction of its past, which becomes necessary for the future no matter how damaging it is for the present.

In the following figures, I attempt to clarify Schelling's rendering of history's movement, as well as the framework within which it takes place. Figure 1, in particular, shows the course of the history of intelligence toward the ideal if we were to unravel this route to show how the starting point is united with the ideal on a line.

For Schelling, everything begins solely to end up at the ideal, but this can neither be known nor perceptible before the ideal is actually realized. The harmonious coexistence of the centripetal and the centrifugal force determines both the space in which history moves and the time in which the ideal is realized. However, the particularization of the forces is impossible to estimate, such that there cannot be any accurate predictions as to where and in which direction history will move, nor how much time will need to elapse for the ideal to be encountered. For when the centrifugal force is at its minimum, the centripetal force reaches its maximum, drawing history into a more condensed trajectory, accelerating the realization of the ideal within a narrower historical space. Conversely, when the centrifugal force dominates, history expands – its course becomes more diffuse, deviations increase, and the ideal is reached more slowly across a broader historical field. What this means is that the history of intelligence as a system of knowledge is dynamic and oscillatory, although there are points at which necessity and freedom collapse.¹⁵

13 If we liken history to a mathematical function, then we could argue that in history nature maintains the statistically significant variables and rejects the insignificant ones.

14 By “dead nature”, I do not mean an absolute negation of life but rather a historical residue – what history leaves behind as it advances. In Schelling's framework, nature does not simply vanish but persists as an imprint of unactualized potential. On this, see also *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1988/1797), where inorganic nature is discussed as part of a dynamic process rather than as a fixed state of death.

15 James Lindsay claims that, for Schelling, “Freedom and necessity [are] to be harmonized in God, the absolute synthesis, the identity of the ideal and the real. An infinite process to him is the development of the absolute synthesis. But, again, Schelling's aestheticism finds God really revealed only in art – for him the true religion” (Lindsay 1910, 261). My analysis thus far prompts a problematization of this view. For Schelling never attributes an absence of art or lack of artistic spirit to the first two periods of history. And yet he does not situate the revelation of God in these periods, either. Thus, to claim that in Schelling God reveals himself exclusively in art is to miss the wider frame, for according to the figure of the philosopher in *STI*, God will reveal himself in the third period of history. Hence, we should not argue for a gradual revelation of God through the whole route of history, since “only history as a whole is a revelation of God” (Schelling 2010, 44). For more on this subject, see Ameriks (2014, 130f.) and Michelle Kosch, who states that “The self-disclosing of the totality of things as God can never be completed within history. If it were, the condition of history would vanish, since that condition is the appearance of freedom, which itself would vanish if an

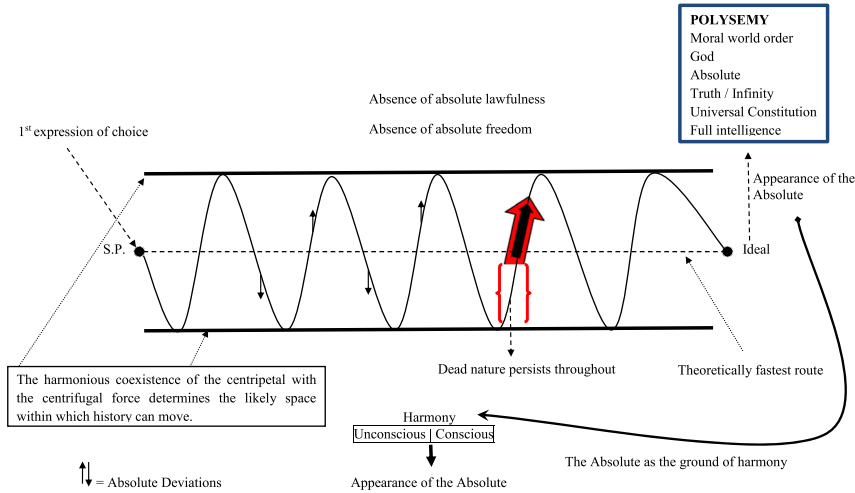


Figure 1: The course of the history of intelligence toward the ideal.

In the particular frame of *STI*, centripetal force is identified with providence,¹⁶ which is given the hue of divinity, and throughout the course of history it is incomplete and inconspicuous. That is, it is not perceived by the genus before the realization of the ideal. Alternatively, centrifugal force expresses the opposite, a power which cannot be categorically defined, such that it is identified with absolute necessity. Throughout *STI*, it becomes evident that without a counteracting centrifugal force there would be no deviation, no history or iteration of difference.

However, in Figure 1 displayed above, we diagnose the movement of history upwards or downwards as an absolute deviation¹⁷ when it is already found beyond or below the imaginary line¹⁸ that unites the starting point (S.P.) with the ideal.¹⁹

empirical intuition of the whole (as whole) were possible and we could have an experience of the unity of action and intuition” (Kosch 2006, 78f).

16 The concept of providence understood as a centripetal force in Schelling’s hands can also be likened to a gravitational force, where its moment of perception expresses the conception of the Absolute.

17 It should be noted that the term “absolute deviation” is my own, not Schelling’s.

18 I use this line to signal the fastest possible route of history. Of course, for Schelling there is no such shortcut, which is why I deem it “imaginary”.

19 At the starting point (S.P.), time (t) equals zero ($t = 0$). At this point, the genus somehow says, “I want” and proves this desire by simultaneously enacting it, thus sparking the history of intelligence. But, of course, we know that this causes Schelling all manner of problems, most clearly at work in his problematic *Weltalter* drafts from his middle to late period, which attempt to delineate this “before” of the beginning.

Based on this, the deviations have the capability of infinite iteration, even without counting the array of deviations bound up with the choice instantiated by each member of a genus. Consequently, because the centrifugal force is dependent on the wills of the individuals constituting the genus, the movement of history as a whole remains constrained within the bounds of what intelligence or self-consciousness generates. In other words, historical deviations and fluctuations, though infinite in iteration, never escape the framework established by self-conscious agency.²⁰

The ideal itself appears to be inherently diverse, to the point that one could argue that it both originates from and is burdened by its own polysemy (i.e., multiple interpretations). This polysemy – which, in Schelling, refers to differences iterated through a scale of being – renders the ideal invisible within the horizon of history, or at least imperceptible to the majority of the genus, a fact that significantly contributes to the delay in its realization.

Once Schelling poses the question as to why it seems we are not moving toward the ideal, the majority (that is, the common perspective excluding that of the philosopher) responds: because people simply opt to do other things. But, and this is the innovation Schelling makes in his transcendental idealism, the more appropriate answer – which fits the schema of the philosopher – is that we must do other things first since the intelligence is yet to be sufficiently developed.

But the ideal itself is pictured in a variety of ways in *STI*: as a moral world order which circumvents the role of the state, an absolute which becomes visible, God who reveals himself in one of the stages of history, the full development of the intelligence. It is even framed using transcendental criteria such as truth, the infinite, and self-knowledge. For Schelling history is the sole field within which we are permitted to discuss the ideal such that an account of its development up to the point of our own intelligence is paramount.

Another formulation is that the ideal is the genus's realization of what Schelling himself establishes in the course of the *STI*, namely, that if history moves as a whole premised on the will, one can act in such a manner from the very beginning so as to fully shine light upon the ideal at a textual level. Thus, during the realization of the ideal, the genus is conditioned by its wisdom of itself – its theoretical-epistemological knowing is its practical-ontological acting. However, such a fully developed circle only occurs in the third period of history, according to Schelling.

What is crucial to understand here is that the ideal constitutes the cornerstone of this system of knowledge and forms the ground of the harmony²¹ between the

²⁰ For more on the relationship between the genus and history, see SW, 595–97/*STI*, 205f.

²¹ Fichte in his *Grundriß des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre in Rücksicht auf das theoretische Vermögen* (*Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre with respect to the Theoretical Faculty*) points out that “It is certainly remarkable that those persons who believed

unconscious and conscious.²² For without the ideal, everything would plummet into the unconscious, which in Schelling refers to the realm of nature.²³ The incomplete would prevail, while the absence of perspective would flatten the very course of history, transforming it into insignificance, making its movement resemble marking time. For we cannot in any way claim that, even without the ideal, there would still be meaning in experiencing a journey without a destination, since none of its passengers would perceive that they are traveling at all.²⁴

For Schelling, the aforementioned harmony between the conscious and unconscious seems to be situated in the Absolute *qua* the genus's ultimate destination. The said harmony is identical to a proposed solution of the problem of freedom, which must be shown to transform into a continuous band with necessity. In other words, the issue is about action through will, which is subjective and a result of consciousness, and how it can fit with action through nature, which is objective and a result of the unconscious (see SW, 594–97/STI, 204–206).²⁵ This objective world (which Schelling had already set out in his previous *Naturphilosophie*) is landed upon as soon as full intelligence has developed, that is, in the third period of history, where the ideal is fulfilled. In this connection, the ideal is established only by virtue of its traversal of the real; the conscious must traverse the unconscious to develop fully into what it is.

In Schelling's system, history is perceived as a pure and continuous action – as Schelling puts it, “[t]heory and history are totally opposed” (SW, 589/STI, 200) – within which a free play of forces is observed, and this is identical to the entire course of

themselves able to recognize things in themselves did not notice this simple point, which becomes obvious with the least reflection upon consciousness, and that it did not occur to them to inquire concerning the basis for this assumed harmony – a harmony which is obviously only presupposed, but neither is nor can be perceived” (Fichte 1993, 255). *Schelling, in STI*, initially follows Fichte's position but reinterprets this harmony through the lens of self-consciousness, where the thing in itself becomes a projection of intelligence rather than an independent reality. For a thorough interpretation of the concept of “harmony” in Schelling's work, see Goudeli (2002).

²² See Hartkopf 1975, 71.

²³ For a discussion of Schelling's treatment of the Absolute and its relation to self-consciousness, particularly in terms of striving, differentiation, and unity, see Dozzi (2019, esp. sec. IV).

²⁴ Kant's notion of “purposiveness without an end” (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant 2001, §58, 221f.) closely parallels the trajectory of history toward the ideal in Schelling's thought. While history exhibits structural purposiveness, its end remains indeterminate – a theme that resonates with Schelling's philosophy of history.

²⁵ Barton (2021) offers a related analysis of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, emphasizing that Nature as a universal organism possesses its own set of (unconscious) motivations, distinct from the (conscious) motivations of individual organisms within it. He describes how Nature's struggle against individuation reflects a broader tension between universal, teleological necessity and human free will – a tension central to Schelling's concept of history at issue. See Barton 2021, 292–295.

history itself (see SW, 587/STI, 198) as well as the certainty of its obviation owing to providence. By implying that all things are incited by divine providence toward the ideal, Schelling is led to a pantheism which responds to every form of atheism by claiming to never seek for God in the present, but to seek him in the future, where you will not exist.²⁶

With the return of the genus to its original position considered as a given (or even inevitable), the question emerges as to “how a history is conceivable at all” (SW, 590/STI, 201)? In my view, the simplest answer to this question is that it is conceivable by looking back. That is, tracing back the path of action that the genus took, which resulted in the present point, after all one of the objectives of history is the explanation of the present condition of the world.²⁷

After the realization of the ideal, Schelling hopes that the question will become easy to answer since the genus will have returned with full intelligence to the point at which it started with no intelligence such that it will have all the tools of self-consciousness at its disposal. At this juncture, nature will reflect upon itself through the genus and the absolute binding of conscious and unconscious will become apparent.

Figure 2 pictures the first two periods of history. The third period, which concerns the future, presupposes that God will exist within it. Schelling does not clarify what exactly he means by this, and it remains a mystery as to how he conceived of the link between the “third period of history” and “God” or even what the wider consequences of God appearing in an epoch of history would be. Of course, if we hypothesize that the Absolute is identical to God, then, because the Absolute becomes apparent through nature’s reflection upon itself, then once this occurs it is assumed that this would mark the start of the third period, or the existence of God.

²⁶ It is worth noting the irony that, while Schelling here directs us to seek God in the future, in later works such as *Weltalter* (Ages of the World; see Schelling 1815/2000) and *Philosophy and Religion*, he turns to the past to trace the emergence of the divine. However, even in those works, Schelling investigates the past as a means to understand the unfolding of the divine, which contrasts with the forward-looking teleology presented in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

²⁷ Discussing the transcendental necessity of history, Schelling further argues that the gradual emergence of a political world order can be the only true object (and ground) of history (SW, 591f./STI, 202). Accordingly, the return of the genus to its original position signals not merely a metaphysical closure, but also a political and ethical transformation. The third and final period of history, in this light, realizes the ideal not only cognitively but also institutionally, by aligning the genus’s self-consciousness with the establishment of a universal political order. On the one hand, this aligns with my interpretation of the ideal as polysemic; on the other, one might even suggest – if Schelling is taken literally – that the political world order constitutes the ultimate, all-encompassing appearance of the ideal, one that encompasses and presupposes all its other appearances.

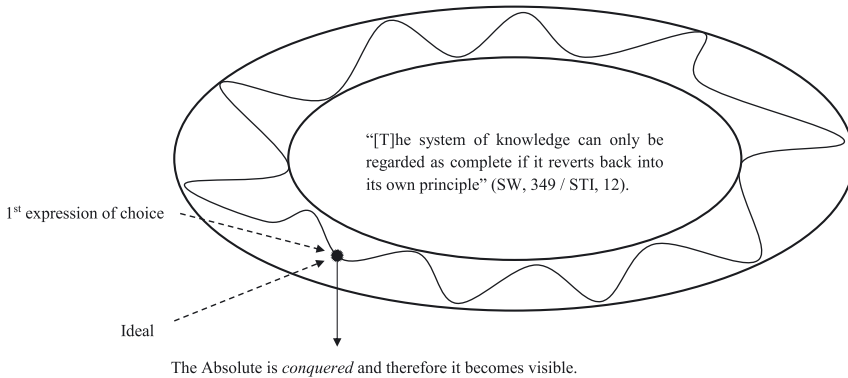


Figure 2: The becoming of history as nature's reflection on itself.

On the other hand, if the third period of history is presupposed by the totality of history preceding it, then Figure 2 also depicts the third period itself.²⁸

4 Three Periods of History

In *STI*, Schelling's overarching argument is that "History as a whole is a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute. Hence one can never point out in history the particular places where the mark of providence, or God himself, is as it were visible" (SW, 603/*STI*, 211). Here, Schelling implies that the third period of history cannot be particularized by the genus since it is located in the future; if we constantly find ourselves in the present, the third period of history will forever remain ahead of us in time. And, because it is identified with the future, the third period is defined in temporal terms as constantly exceeding us, resulting in the impossibility of signaling the place where providence – God himself – becomes visible.

Consequently, Schelling suggests that although a third period of history will exist in the future, the genus will not perceive it because it will still be entirely bound to the present. Therefore, even if, at some point, the genus finds itself in what we call the third period of history, its consciousness will still be bound to its present moment, making it impossible to fully grasp the third period as such. In other words, what is, from the perspective of an observer outside history, the *future present* of the genus

²⁸ In this connection, Werner Hartkopf says, "According to Schelling, within the framework of nature only circular movements develop, and nature itself, as a whole, constitutes a holistic circular movement" (Hartkopf 1975, 67; translation mine).

(i.e., the moment when the genus actually exists in the third period) will never coincide with the *present future* of the third period (i.e., the standpoint from which the third period is fully realized as history). This creates a temporal misalignment – a phase difference – between the genus’s self-consciousness and nature’s own process of reflection. While nature, through the genus, may reflect back upon itself, this reflection never occurs in the genus’s own present, but always as something deferred, pushed ahead into an inaccessible future. So, the third period is doomed to invisibility with respect to itself, and eternally pushed off to an imperceptible future that forever transgresses the grasp of the genus. But even when the third period will occur, it will merely signify the end of the second period and nothing more since it is the future that will never be recognized to visibly exist for the genus.

In Table 1, I summarize Schelling’s view and tentatively consider the possibility of sub-periods within the third period. This does not imply knowledge of its exact structure but follows from Schelling’s own admission that, while he cannot determine what will happen in this period with certainty, its historical necessity allows for theoretical speculation.

Schelling divides history into three periods which are to be rendered as “necessary expressions of the Being and becoming of intelligence, since the latter is consciously aware of itself”.²⁹ The core division is that of two opposing poles –

Table 1: The three periods of history.^a

Kingdom of consciousness ^b			
Historical periods	First period (tragic)	Second period	Third period
Political order	Ancient world	Roman democracy	Kingdom of spirit (<i>Geist</i>)
Laws governing history	Obscure law of Collapse	Open physical law	Rule of law
Providence & historical development	Destiny (<i>Incomplete/Invisible Providence</i>)	Nature (<i>Incomplete/Invisible Providence</i>)	Providence (<i>the prior incompleteness of providence is revealed</i>)
Temporal position	Past (<i>It happened</i>)	Developing present (<i>It happens</i>)	Future (<i>It will happen; timing unknown</i>)
Conception of the divine	God does not exist	God does not exist	God will exist

^aBold text denotes headings or labels; parenthetical remarks in *italics* are added for clarification. ^bFrederick Beiser writes, “If philosophy were ever to escape from the impasse of Cartesian solipsism and dualism, Schelling firmly believed, then it had to follow the path of nature itself – reconstructing the natural history of consciousness, the laws by which nature gradually produces self-consciousness itself” (Beiser 2002, 471).

²⁹ Hartkopf 1975, 72; translation mine.

destiny and providence – while nature (and all its iterations) forms the middle ground and so “supplies the transition from one to the other” (SW, 603/*STI*, 211). Although Schelling does not say it explicitly, the implication is that the first period belongs to the past, the second period belongs to the present, and the third belongs to the future. We are dealing, then, with three tenses: happened, happening, will happen. Schelling places himself and his era in the second period but gives us no indication – at least in *STI* – of what the implications of this are for the transition between the second and third period.³⁰

According to Schelling, the third period makes it visible that the true path of nature (mechanical necessity) is to be located in an imperfect providence (see SW, 604/*STI*, 212), which was always at work in the first and the second period. However, the main point of difference separating the third period from the first and second appears to be the development of consciousness. From the retrospective vantage point of the third period, it is recognized how what happened could only have happened in that way because no other possibility was open; it was underpinned by mechanical necessity. Everything was bound to lawful ends thanks to providence, a view that might be linked to the idea of a tactical and controlled chaos, for in the first two periods of history, it was the unconscious that dominated.

It becomes apparent that this set of views coincides in an interesting way with Schelling’s own accomplishment of having completed the *System of Transcendental Idealism*. For the third period concerns the future, and the only certainty that satisfies Schelling is the conclusion he draws in the text, that at some point it will take place within history, although we do not know when it will do so. And yet Schelling is not clear as to whether there will be another period after the third one or if this is simply doomed to eternally repeat itself – and thus to become simply another iterated present – after it has appeared.

From this perspective, the temporal delineation of the start of the third period is a reflection of the various ways to render the conception of God. If, for instance, God is the imperishable or the immortal, then the third period of history would start

³⁰ One might object to this claim by emphasizing, on the one hand, that the placement in the second period is well-anticipated and, on the other hand, that its end is already defined in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie. First Outline*, in particular, marks the second period as the moment when speculative physics uncovers nature’s inner dynamism. Unlike empirical physics, which concerns itself only with external laws, speculative physics seeks the original causes of motion – aligning with the historical development of consciousness that surpasses Spinozistic pantheism (see Schelling 2004, §§3–4, 195–199). However, while this shift sets the stage for a third period in which providence becomes visible, *STI* remains unclear on how exactly, when, and if this transition is realized.

immediately after nature's reflection upon itself through human beings.³¹ For death is present in the developmental becoming of intelligence since its characteristic of continuity or constancy through iteration signals a constant failure of nature to reflect on itself – it is for this reason, oscillatory and constantly shifting. Therefore, only when the particular failure is overcome – when nature overthrows the status of a particular defeat to keep moving – would the start of the third period of history accrue. Curiously, Schelling does not identify the conception of God with death, nor does he imply an essential relation between the two. Rather, it seems that for Schelling the presupposition of the existence of God within a determinate period of history is identical to the absence of mortality.

5 Problem & Resolution: The Self's Consciousness of Harmony between Subjective and Objective

Although I do not believe that Schelling solves all the problems he sets out, in this section my aim is not to criticize him for the misjudgment of believing himself to have solved them. And perhaps, after all, the particular problem I am working with here is properly solved in the last chapter of *STI*, which deals with the production and nature of the art-product. But it would be remiss to overlook the fact that in that chapter another kind of intuition – aesthetic intuition – is at stake (see SW, 624–26/*STI*, 229).

The specific problem Schelling seeks to resolve here is “how the I itself can become conscious of the original harmony between the subjective and the objective” (SW, 605/*STI*, 212). By arguing that “all action can be understood only through an original unification of freedom and necessity” (SW, 605/*STI*, 212), the philosopher is almost compelled to acknowledge the existence of a pre-established harmony between the subjective and the objective at work in the appearance of action. For action, after all, constitutes a connection between the subjective and objective: our (subjective) actions begin as free, willed thoughts, while, objectively, they take place through us as determinate events in the world, subject to mechanical law (see SW, 605f./*STI*, 212f). Stated plainly, objective action is not performed by the subject in the same way but occurs through the subject, as if something else is acting in us or via us. Therefore, objective action is immanent to the subject. To put it differently, subjective action functions as the denominator in a fraction smaller than one, with objective action as the numerator. Through the process of objectification, this

³¹ James Lindsay writes, “Man is but nature's last and highest reflection” (Lindsay 1910, 265). However, if we accept that reflection has its cause in a will or a choice, then perhaps we could go further and claim that is nature's highest reflection but also its sole reflection.

fraction is inverted, surpassing the unit. The fraction, once inverted, is none other than self-consciousness itself.

Alternatively, we can illustrate this using a different example: from the perspective of transcendental philosophy (as opposed to *Naturphilosophie*), the subject initially corresponds to the larger matryoshka doll, which contains within it the smaller one, representing the objective. Objectification resembles the process in which the small matryoshka comes to exist outside the larger one. Reflection, in turn, consists in the return of the small doll into the larger one – after the small doll has first been conceived. That is, reflection presupposes that, on the one hand, the objective as such has been conceived, and, on the other hand, that the difference between subjective and objective has been conceived too. During this return, however, it is crucial to note that we must consider not two, but three components (or, to use Schelling's terminology, three "potencies"): the subjective, the objective, and the subject itself. This is because the subjective within the large doll does not constitute the entire doll but only a part of it. When the large doll encloses the small one within it, it constitutes the self.

6 Conclusion

In his attempt to interpret human freedom and reconcile the existence of order with the forces that appear to undermine it via the conception of providence, Schelling sets God in the role of both a permanent and invisible regulator of history itself.³² God participates in all relationships between the appearance and the material world since God inheres as the entity who determines the ending in all expressions of essential action which are a part of history.

In an approach that would deem the ontological existence of God unnecessary, intelligence plays the role of centripetal force, whereas the lack of intelligence plays the role of centrifugal force. This picture includes the view that intelligence, as a driving force within humanity, strives toward its full development but is inhibited by an opposing or counteracting pole – namely, the absence of intelligence. And yet, we often get the feeling that in Schelling's hands the genus believes itself to leave the center because it simply wants to, while simultaneously framing it as incapable of thinking that it abstracts itself from the ideal since it is doomed to always end up at the ideal anyway. In this connection, the centrifugal force relies on the collective will.

³² In this connection, Schelling's God in *STI* is not really an entity but rather the foreshadowing of the revelation of the Absolute through the thought of divine providence. Whether the concept of providence is ultimately dissolved in the Absolute, however, is beyond the remit of Schelling's system because it is yet to be revealed.

Indeed, one might argue that the centrifugal force is nothing other than the collective will. Therefore, it seems logical to align the external world with pure will and, ultimately, with happiness.

This is the case, in my view, because the philosopher at work in *STI* does not merely regard thought and existence as human possessions, but rather as manifestations of a higher power – of a divine substance, which may well be the universe itself, or more precisely, the Whole. This Whole, conceived as a singular Self that perpetually moves toward complete Self-Knowledge, though it will only fully grasp itself once it has attained the final shred of knowledge. This marks the moment at which a rational being turns reflexively toward itself, proclaiming: “I know that I know myself, and I know it”.

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