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# FROM KANT TO SCHELLING: COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE NAME OF REASON

DAMON LINKER

... a system in which reason fulfilled itself would have to unite all the demands of the spirit as of the heart, of the most conscientious feeling as of the strictest understanding.<sup>1</sup>

... reason must sooner or later be satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

## I

MODERN GERMAN PHILOSOPHY PRESENTS A PECULIAR PUZZLE to the historian of ideas. For most of the early modern period, philosophers throughout Europe had allied themselves with the Enlightenment in its self-proclaimed struggle against dogma, superstition, and ignorance. Yet beginning in late eighteenth century Germany, this situation began to change—so much so that by the early decades of the twentieth century, Germany had become the undisputed home of the philosophical Counter-Enlightenment. If today the most celebrated Counter-Enlightenment figures hail from France or Italy, that should not obscure the fact that the ideas of such authors as Derrida and Foucault, Vattimo and Virilio descend directly from the writings of

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich von Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke* (hereafter, "SW"), ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61), 1.7.413. (Schelling's complete works are divided into two parts. Thus, "1.7.413" refers to part 1, volume 7, page 413. Subsequent references will follow this format.) Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* (hereafter, "Freedom"), trans. James Gotmann, 4th ed. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992), 95. Whenever possible, citations to Schelling will contain a reference to the standard German edition, followed by one to the accepted English translation. Except in cases in which an English edition of a work does not exist, all quotations are taken from those translations.

<sup>2</sup>Immanuel Kant, "What is Orientation in Thinking?" (hereafter, "Orientation"), in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 240.

Nietzsche and Heidegger. All of these theorists are united in their opposition to the Enlightenment and what they see as its detrimental social and political effects in the modern world. Moreover, all of them deny the core assumptions of the Enlightenment: the possibility and goodness of rational discourse dispelling darkness and mystery from human life. Hence, their writings tend to take the form of deconstructive commentaries on seminal texts from the Western philosophical and literary traditions or radically critical analyses of the social and intellectual practices common to the post-Enlightenment world. Above all, these works claim to show that what might superficially appear to be examples of disinterested argument and rational impartiality in those texts and practices are, instead, attempts at violating, marginalizing, delegitimizing, and dominating the “other”—with the “other” defined as the nonrational, unusual, different, or abnormal dimensions of human life and experience. The role of the Counter-Enlightenment theorist is to liberate the “other” from its subjugation at the hands of reason by exposing the myriad ways in which all supposedly enlightened discourses and practices are themselves permeated by the “other” and thus always one step away from collapsing under the weight of their own incoherence. In other words, Counter-Enlightenment philosophy seeks to expose reason’s own inevitable and fatal dependence upon unreason.

And so the question remains: Why is it that so much of German philosophy since Kant has taken such a virulently Counter-Enlightenment form? The answer is extremely difficult to determine, not least because of the complexity of the issues involved and the obscurity of the philosophers in question. But in trying to make headway toward an answer, the work of F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) promises to be extremely helpful. According to a widely accepted view of his philosophical development,<sup>3</sup> Schelling began his career (in the mid 1790s) as arguably the most gifted and ambitious of the young German Idealist philosophers trying to complete the radical Enlightenment project of Kant and Fichte. However, by the time of his last published work of philosophy (the *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* of 1809), and even more so in the posthumously published lectures of the numerous university courses he taught during the last four decades of his life, Schelling had broken decisively with the idealism of his youth. In these late works, Schelling can be seen to be struggling to articulate a new understanding of philosophy—one

that would come to exercise an enormous influence on the Counter-Enlightenment philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and, through them, many others in our century. That is, the postidealist Schelling seeks to show that the enlightened understanding of the world is grounded in something prereflective or preenlightened that it must presuppose and yet cannot grasp. He thus begins<sup>4</sup> the Counter-Enlightenment's great effort to show that far from being what it itself claimed to be—namely, the clear-sighted attempt to cast the light of human reason into all the dark corners of the world—the Enlightenment was and is willfully oblivious to the ineradicability of darkness and mystery at the basis of human existence.

If this were the end of the story, then, as one of the few figures in the German tradition whose work stands on both sides of the divide between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Schelling's corpus might very well give us some insight into why the former has so frequently given way to the latter in German intellectual history. But, as I will argue at length in this essay, the well-documented changes in Schelling's views actually mask an underlying continuity between them that promises to teach us even more: namely, an "erotic" conception of human reason bequeathed to him by Kant.<sup>5</sup> Once Schelling's works are viewed in the light of this continuity, his career begins to

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975); Werner Marx, *The Philosophy of F. W. J. Schelling: History, System, and Freedom*, trans. Thomas Nenon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983); Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). A subtler approach (and one that has exercised a greater influence on this essay) is taken in Manfred Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975); *Eine Einführung in Schellings Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985); and Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> However, J. G. Herder is an important precursor. See my essay, "Culture, Community, and Counter-Enlightenment in the Thought of J. G. Herder," presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Velkley focuses on this connection between Kant and Schelling in "Realizing Nature in the Self: Schelling on Art and Intellectual Intuition in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*," in *Figuring the Self: Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. David E. Klemm and Günter Zöllner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 149–68.

take on a different shape. Rather than bifurcated into discontinuous Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment periods, Schelling's development can be more accurately described as ever more profound attempts to answer a single question—can human reason attain satisfaction within an enlightened world?—and his otherwise dramatic shifts of view as a sign of his increasing skepticism that this question could be answered in the affirmative. One could say that Schelling eventually comes to believe that when understood correctly, human reason is a faculty of the mind that cannot help but strive to attain access to something—the “unconditioned” (*Unbedingte*), or the “Absolute”—that is inaccessible to the modern, critical intellect. Hence, within the context of enlightened modernity, reason itself demands Counter-Enlightenment. But if this is the case, then we are confronted by the distinct possibility that the deconstructive program of today's Counter-Enlightenment figures is, likewise, based on a series of unstated assumptions about the nature of reason, its place in the human psyche, and what the proper response to the prospect of its perpetual dissatisfaction should be. By raising this possibility, this essay not only helps us to understand why the German philosophical tradition has embraced the Counter-Enlightenment but also prepares the way for rethinking what the Counter-Enlightenment is.

In what follows, I begin by sketching the outlines of the Kantian Enlightenment, focusing on the dichotomy within it that had the greatest influence on Schelling's philosophical development: not the more commonly researched and discussed dualisms between necessity and freedom, appearances and the thing in itself, or theory and practice, but rather the distinction between immanence and transcendence.<sup>6</sup> Then, having set up the problematic of Kant's notion of Enlightenment, I examine Schelling's early, failed attempts—in such works as *On the Ego as the Principle of Philosophy* (1795) and the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800)—to conceive of its metaphysical ground. Next, I turn to Schelling's late work to see what form his philosophy takes in the wake of this failure; particularly important in this section of the paper is Schelling's response to Hegel's own version of Enlightenment philosophy, which, in its wholehearted embrace of immanence—as well as in its emphatic insistence that reason could become satisfied with that condition—surpassed Kant's thought to become the paradigm of Enlightenment self-deception in Schelling's eyes. It was in his confrontation with Hegel's philosophy

in his university lectures of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s that Schelling articulated the most radical version of the Counter-Enlightenment philosophy he had been fashioning since the first decade of the nineteenth century—the one that most resembles the form of Counter-Enlightenment thought so prevalent today. I then conclude with some general thoughts about Schelling's notions of reason and philosophy, and what we might be able to learn from them.

## II

*Reason and Immanence in the Kantian Enlightenment.* According to a well-known statement of Aristotle, philosophy begins in wonder.<sup>7</sup> By this, Aristotle means that men first begin to philosophize when they cease to take the given state of the world and their experience of it for granted and start to inquire after the “why” of a particular object or event within the world.<sup>8</sup> That is, at some point in his experience, man begins to find some element of it to be “wondrous,” and since “all men desire to know,” he sets out to develop a theory as an explanation of why it is the way it is.<sup>9</sup> But for both Aristotle and Plato, the quest for knowledge of the why does not stop at particular objects and events within the world. On the contrary, once a human being begins to philosophize, he starts to seek answers to ever more profound and fundamental questions. Not satisfied with learning the true

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the terms “transcendence” and “transcendent” in their traditional (pre-Kantian) philosophical meaning—that is, as synonyms for “metaphysical” and in contrast to “immanence.” This should not be confused with the term “transcendental,” especially when it is used in the phrases “transcendental idealism” or “transcendental philosophy,” which are Kant's names for the revolutionary form of philosophy he employed for the first time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In fact, this notion of “transcendental” is virtually the opposite of the traditional meaning of “transcendence” since the transcendental philosophy consists largely of the attempt to demonstrate definitively the impossibility of human transcendence of the immanent world. For an excellent discussion of this matter, in Kant as well as in other modern thinkers, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 172–86.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1.2.982b12.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* 2.3.194b17–20.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1.980a1.

causes of things within the world, he begins to long to learn the true causes of the world as a whole: not just what it is and how it is, but even more so, why it is at all.<sup>10</sup> In other words, philosophy in the fullest sense strives to understand both the world and its grounds—it practices both physics and metaphysics. This thoroughly comprehensive notion of philosophy persisted for well over a thousand years, arguably reaching its most highly developed form in the Scholastic Aristotelianism of St. Thomas Aquinas, for whom philosophy and theology merged to form a single, unified quest for knowledge of the whole—an investigation of the world in its totality, from the simplest motions of inanimate objects within the world to the essence of the transcendent God who grounds it.

Early modern philosophy, which frequently took the form of a critique of theological speculation, arose in explicit opposition to this traditional conception of philosophy. Confronted with mounting discoveries of modern science that seemed to undermine the basis for belief in the Aristotelianism that had dominated the European mind for centuries, figures like Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, and Locke came to the conclusion that the problem with premodern philosophy—the error that led it to propose theories that in the light of recent scientific discoveries appeared to be unjustified—had been its preoccupation with metaphysics, which they claimed was both untenable and dangerous. According to the early Enlightenment view, the untenability of metaphysics could be seen as soon as we ceased to accept the simple incorrigibility of the common sense experience of the world and reasoning based uncritically upon it to examine the considerable contribution that human subjectivity plays in constituting that experience. When we do so, we discover a number of subjectively grounded (psychological and epistemological) explanations of how we come to believe in erroneous metaphysical doctrines. Apparently, we both want to believe in certain metaphysical views and are cognitively predisposed to fall victim to self-deception. For example, Hobbes claimed that polytheism arises from a combination of men's fear of the future and their ignorance of the true causes of events

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1.980a1–1.3.983b1; Plato, *Symposium*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 211d and following; Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 485b and following.

within the world, while monotheism—or the metaphysical belief in a first cause of the world—comes about as a result of the work of natural scientists who, following the chain of efficient causes back as far as they can, postulate that there must be a first cause at which point their investigation could reach a conclusion.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, these views tell us more about the human beings that hold them than they do about the world itself. We do not exist because some metaphysical entity wishes it; rather, a metaphysical entity is posited to exist because human beings wish it. We want to find an ultimate answer to the question of why, and we trick ourselves into believing we can and even have found one. But once we become aware of our predisposition to self-deception—our tendency to accept the truth of illusions of transcendence—we also discover that it is within our power to live in the light of the knowledge of our own ignorance of metaphysical truths. Doing so provides the occasion to focus our attentions clear-sightedly on this world, which is what natural philosophers like Copernicus, Gallileo, and Kepler had already begun to do. There simply was no way to gage what discoveries might follow in the wake of a widespread effort to pursue physics unencumbered by the dead weight of a discredited metaphysics. The full-blown eighteenth century Enlightenment grew out of the hopes generated from this skeptical stance toward metaphysical speculation.

But the early modern philosophers not only believed that metaphysics was a futile pursuit; they also held it to be a dangerous one. They were united in arguing that popular belief in the existence and accessibility of a metaphysical substrate of the world led certain individuals (the clergy) to claim that they possessed esoteric knowledge of that domain. But, in fact, they possessed no such knowledge. Instead they actively perpetuated the ignorance and fear of the common people in order to insure that the latter would willingly submit to their rule in both political and spiritual matters. Europe in the early modern period was thus subject to the domination of small groups of elites claiming to rule in the name of a knowledge of metaphysical truths that modern science (and the modern philosophical methods developed to justify that science) had supposedly proven to be spurious. Given an ignorant and fearful public and a power-hungry priesthood

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 61–74.

out to exploit it with consoling lies, it was no surprise that disputes among those elites were quickly amplified into full-blown, bloody civil wars that engulfed England and the continent. In this way, metaphysics was largely responsible for the social and political ills of early modern Europe.

However, just as modern philosophers eventually came to suspect that the psychological and epistemological dimensions of human subjectivity play a much larger role than previously suspected in determining our ideas and beliefs about a metaphysical ground of the world, so many of these same philosophers argued that human beings should learn to ignore the advice of their spiritual leaders—that they could determine for themselves what social and political order was most appropriate for them. If, until now, men had tended to conceive of themselves as passively following the dictates of an external God or nature, that was only because they had chosen to view themselves in such a way. The truth is that man has (and always has had) it within his power to remake the order that currently prevails in the world to serve his own ends. Rather than voluntarily submitting either to the rule of priests or the often destructive processes of a natural order utterly indifferent to human concerns, human beings can choose to take matters into their own hands. They can choose to become masters and possessors of nature and, in turn, seek to relieve their burdens in life by using scientific discoveries about the natural world to spur advances in political science, medicine, technology, and transportation. They can spread the findings of physics through universal education, thereby insuring that ever greater numbers of people will be capable of ruling themselves, both as individuals and collectively through political institutions of their own devising. They can come to see that, given that mankind has been left for most of its history to wallow in ignorance and fear in a hostile world and only found its way out of this sorry situation through its own efforts, God (if He exists at all) must be reconceived as a entity with little, if any, interest in aiding the human race in its quest to better itself. In all of these ways, then, the early modern philosophers who inspired the Enlightenment placed their hopes for human improvement (intellectually, morally, and politically) in the rejection of transcendent or metaphysical allegiances and a subsequent turn toward the study of the immanent world in and of itself.

Viewed in this light, Kant is in many ways the archetypal Enlightenment philosopher and arguably the most self-consistent. His critical philosophy took aim at a number of targets, but not least was the dogmatism of the early modern philosophers who preceded him. Although some (most notably Leibniz and Wolff) had attempted to continue the metaphysical tradition despite the findings of modern science and so had proceeded dogmatically by not engaging in a prior epistemological investigation of what the human mind was capable of knowing, others (especially empiricists like Hume) had simply asserted the impossibility of metaphysics on the basis of skeptical argumentation. Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* amounted to the charge that these latter figures had been dogmatic in their rejection of metaphysical speculation; they had not provided "knowledge of our unavoidable ignorance [*Kenntnis der uns unvermeidlichen Unwissenheit*]" as much as tried to generate a generalized mistrust of metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> Kant famously argued that if the Enlightenment wished to overcome its dogmatism, it would have to become thoroughly self-critical—it would have to engage in a quasi-Socratic "science of ignorance" to produce knowledge of our incapacity to acquire knowledge of metaphysics.<sup>13</sup> That is, it would have to show, once and for all, that human knowledge is limited to this world and thus that metaphysics, ontology, and theology as they had traditionally been understood—as sciences that grant us a priori knowledge of substance, the ground of the world, the nature of the world as a whole, God, final causes, and an ultimate answer to the question of why—are impossible.

As is well known, Kant claimed to be able to accomplish this task by engaging in what he described as a "transcendental" form of investigation—that is, by reflecting on "the conditions of the possibility of experience." Doing so famously shows that all human experience is mediated by "forms of intuition" (that is, space and time) and "concepts of the understanding" [*Verstand*] that are present a priori in the subjective human mind. There is thus no possible nonconceptualized

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<sup>12</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter, "CPR"), trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), A767/B795. All references to the CPR will be to the pagination of the first (A) (1781) and second (B) (1787) German editions.

<sup>13</sup> See CPR, A758/B786: "knowledge of our ignorance is science [*Erkenntnis seiner Unwissenheit ist also Wissenschaft*]."

access to the world—all experience of it is a human representation. Likewise, we have no possible access to the world as it might be “in itself,” apart from how it “appears” to human beings in a possible experience, and neither can we ever have an experience—or knowledge based on that experience—of an object outside of the world, with the world defined as the spatiotemporal whole within which empirical investigation can be conducted using the five human senses.<sup>14</sup> The acquisition of metaphysical knowledge is thus impossible because it would require having an experience or intuition of the world as a whole or some object outside of the world, which, in turn, is impossible because experience or intuition (and hence knowledge) is always an experience or intuition of some object within the world.<sup>15</sup> In order to do metaphysics as it had traditionally been understood, human beings would have to be capable of attaining a “view from nowhere”<sup>16</sup>—something that is, quite clearly, beyond our powers. In Kant’s philosophy, man is trapped within the immanent world more effectively than any previous philosopher ever dared to claim; he is cut off from transcendence by nature. The Kantian Enlightenment thus radicalizes and deepens the humanistic, this-worldly tendency already apparent in earlier, more dogmatic forms of Enlightenment.

But this is obviously only half of the story. Almost from the time of its publication, Kant’s philosophy has been accused of giving back with one hand what it had taken away with the other. This is the case because although he certainly did set out to demonstrate the impossibility of acquiring metaphysical knowledge, Kant nevertheless maintained that metaphysics was a natural disposition (*Naturanlage*)—that “human reason” is “driven on by an inward need, to questions such as cannot be answered by any empirical employment of reason.”<sup>17</sup> And this need of reason (*Bedürfnis der Vernunft*) is not something that can be exorcised through any kind of Enlightenment, even one that definitively showed the futility of metaphysical speculation. On the contrary, Kant uses the strongest possible language to empha-

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<sup>14</sup> See Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) for an interpretation of Kant that treats the distinction between appearances and things in themselves as referring to two standpoints on the objects of human experience rather than to two kinds of objects (for example, phenomenal versus noumenal objects).

<sup>15</sup> *CPR*, A519–23/B547–51.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase is Thomas Nagel’s. See *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

size that "in all men . . . there has always existed and will *always* continue to exist some kind of metaphysics."<sup>18</sup>

Why did Kant hold such a seemingly idiosyncratic view of reason's need for metaphysics? According to what he argues in the "Transcendental Dialectic" and "Doctrine of Method" of the first *Critique*, reason must be recognized to be an architectonic faculty—the part of the mind that systematizes our experience.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the understanding makes experience possible on its most basic level—as a sequence of events unified in a single consciousness<sup>20</sup>—it is reason that enables us to interrogate our experience, to treat it as something other than simply given, to conceive of the possibility that reality could have been other than it is, to pose the question of why it turned out to be the way it is, and to formulate and test hypotheses that would answer this question. In other words, reason is the faculty of the mind that makes it possible for human beings to theorize, to philosophize, to engage in scientific research—in short, to acquire and make progress toward acquiring ever greater knowledge—within the immanent world.<sup>21</sup> But how exactly does reason go about interrogating and thus systematizing our experience? It does so by striving to transcend the boundaries of the very world it enables us to understand. That is, for every event given in human experience, reason seeks to find an event that was its immediate cause, and once it

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<sup>17</sup> CPR, B21. The following account of the "erotic" side of Kant's philosophy is indebted to the interpretation presented in Mark Lilla, "Kant's Theological-Political Revolution," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52 (December 1998): 397–434, and especially 405–12. See also Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 15–19; Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and "Moral Finality and the Unity of *Homo sapiens*: On Teleology in Kant," in *Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs*, ed. Richard F. Hassing (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 109–10; Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 96–8, 154, 160, 164–5, and 188; Susan Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 62, 72, 197–99, 204, 228, 263, 300, and 309. Strangely, this erotic dimension of Kant's philosophy is one that has largely been overlooked by German scholars, despite the encyclopedic body of secondary literature on Kant in that country.

<sup>18</sup> CPR, B21.

<sup>19</sup> CPR, A474/B502.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the "transcendental unity of apperception," see section 3 below.

<sup>21</sup> See Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, 59 and the discussion in chapter 2 as a whole.

discovers one, it then sets out to find the cause of that cause, and so on.<sup>22</sup> But reason is never satisfied with the identification of any cause within the world, no matter how many steps that cause is removed from the initial event it sought to understand, since, as yet another event within the world, it will always be conditional on the action of yet another prior cause (for instance, the billiard ball will move if it is struck by another one). Reason thus ultimately strives to transcend the world altogether, to discover the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*): the end to the empirical regress—the cause that has no prior cause.<sup>23</sup> For Kant, every question of why raised by a human being implies that person's tacit longing to unlock all the secrets of the universe in its totality. In other words, Kant maintains that a man's capacity to do physics is made possible by his desire to do metaphysics.

Yet as the "Transcendental Analytic" and "Antinomy of Pure Reason" of the first *Critique* so effectively show, metaphysics as it has traditionally been understood is impossible. Reason longs to be given an object that would satisfy its desire for the unconditioned, but all possible objects appear to us within the conditioned world. Hence, any and all professions to metaphysical knowledge—whether made by a philosopher who thinks he has grasped the essence of God in thought or by a religious believer who claims to have experienced a divine revelation—must be spurious.<sup>24</sup> Of course there is no way to know for certain that the nature of things in themselves is not the way the would-be metaphysician asserts they are or that the ultimate cause of a vision of God is not God Himself.<sup>25</sup> But because we can have no access whatsoever to a domain of reality that transcends the immanent world, we have absolutely no basis on which to make an inference or judgment about supersensible entities and how they might interact with the sensible world in one way or the other.<sup>26</sup> And since the thought or experience in question—whatever its permanently hidden, ultimate antecedent might be—will always appear within the immanent, conditioned world, it will always be possible to identify an

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<sup>22</sup> *CPR*, A497 and following, 656, 663/B525 and following, 684, 691.

<sup>23</sup> *CPR*, A307–9, 322 and following; 409–12, 416–18/B364–6, 379 and following; 435–9, 443–6.

<sup>24</sup> *CPR*, A631/B659 and following.

<sup>25</sup> *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (hereafter, "*RBMR*"), ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99–100.

immanent, conditioned cause of that thought or experience, which will, in turn, inevitably be preceded by a prior immanent, conditioned cause.

But if a human being never has and—short of a complete transformation of his nature—never will experience or acquire knowledge of the unconditioned, from where does the notion originate? According to Kant, the unconditioned is a nonempirical concept—or “Idea” (*Idee*)—that is generated by the subjective human mind.<sup>27</sup> It is a principle we use to orient our minds when we engage in scientific investigations of the immanent world, not an object that exists independently of the human subject.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the errors of metaphysics arise from failing to recognize that the Ideas are grounded in the subjective human mind—from mistakenly thinking that they exist independently of us.<sup>29</sup> No small part of the Kantian Enlightenment consists in coming to understand and recognize the tendency of the human mind to fall victim to self-induced delusion—to mistake its own subjective projections for possible objects of knowledge. If he is ever to overcome his predisposition to self-deception, man must come to realize that his Ideas are merely regulative principles—that is, subjectively grounded principles that reason uses to order, judge, and systematize experience—and not constitutive ones that apply to objects in the world.<sup>30</sup> For Kant, being enlightened thus means coming to live with a paradox: it means coming to understand, on the one hand, that we cannot help but assume or presuppose that we will one day be able grasp the essence of the universe in its unconditioned totality and, on the other, that we will never be able to reach this goal.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See *CPR*, A517/B545 on how it is impossible to have an experience of the unconditioned because it would have to be based on a perception of “nothing” (*Nichts*). Schelling will be aware of this problem, and yet it will not stop him from seeking the “Absolute”—his preferred term for the unconditioned; on Kant’s endorsement of “Absolute” as a synonym for the unconditioned, see *CPR*, A323/B380 and following.

<sup>27</sup> *CPR*, A312–38, 409 and following/B369–96, 436 and following.

<sup>28</sup> *CPR*, A481–3, 568/B509–11, 596. On the use of Ideas to provide orientation for the mind in both theory and practice, see *Orientation*, 237–49.

<sup>29</sup> *CPR*, A643, 692 and following/B671, 720 and following.

<sup>30</sup> *CPR*, A642/B670 and following. Kant eventually changed his terminology in his later work, referring to “reflective judgments” rather than “regulative principles” in the *Critique of Judgment* (hereafter, “*CJ*”), trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Or, as Lilla puts it, man must “learn to think and live with necessary illusions”; “Kant’s Theological-Political Revolution,” 406.

But this also means that the deepest human longings—the needs of our reason—cannot be fulfilled in the domain of speculation, for in its speculative employment reason will never be satisfied with anything short of acquiring knowledge of the object for which it strives. However, according to Kant, the prospect of perpetual theoretical dissatisfaction is no cause for despair because reason is actually far more concerned with practice than it is with speculation. Above all, reason longs to mollify the practical anxiety of the moral man who fears that the universe is indifferent to the suffering of the righteous and the triumph of the wicked.<sup>32</sup> Confronted with this disturbing prospect, reason experiences a felt need to believe both that there is a moral God who will insure that each man receives his just desert and that there is an afterlife in which this justice will be meted out.<sup>33</sup> Without this belief or rational faith (*Vernunftglaube*), morality would become impossible, not because man would cease to be aware of the moral law and the unconditional duties it commands, but because, as a finite creature who, lamentably, cannot act with complete indifference to his own happiness, he would succumb to despair and paralysis at the glaring incongruity between virtue and happiness in human life.<sup>34</sup> Hence, morality presupposes certain metaphysical doctrines, just as speculation does: what regulative principles are to the latter, the “postulates of pure practical reason” regarding freedom, God, and the afterlife are to the former.

But this is where the parallel between theory and practice with regard to metaphysics ends. For whereas in speculation, assuming (rather than demonstrating) the reality of regulative principles cannot help but lead to reason’s permanent dissatisfaction, things are entirely different in moral matters. According to Kant, once the human mind has undergone a critique of its own powers and come to see that it can possess no knowledge about the supersensible, either positively or negatively, satisfying the practical needs of reason is simple. It requires only that one combine faith in the postulates with the hope that

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<sup>32</sup> In Kant’s terminology, reason is confronted by the prospect that the “highest good” (happiness experienced in exact proportion to one’s worthiness of it) is composed of subconcepts (virtue and happiness) that cannot be synthesized. This is the “antinomy of practical reason” in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (hereafter, “*CprR*”), trans. Lewis White Beck, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Orientation*, 243; *CprR*, 128 and following.

<sup>34</sup> *Orientation*, 244 and following.

the human species is making progress toward realizing the “Highest Good” of uniting virtue and happiness in the world.<sup>35</sup> In its practical employment, then, reason is indifferent to whether or not a knowable object can be found that conforms to its Ideas; all that it demands is that it be allowed to project those Ideas onto the empty space of the transcendent, thus making it possible for man to act morally without falling prey to despair and self-doubt.<sup>36</sup>

The Kantian Enlightenment thus culminates in a completely novel form of metaphysics—one based on faith and hope rather than knowledge. In Kant’s technical language, whereas traditional metaphysics had wrongly considered its doctrines to be knowledge and thus a form of “holding-to-be-true” (*Fürwahrhalten*) that was sufficient to warrant assent to a conviction of truth on both subjective and objective grounds, his own metaphysics of faith and hope is a holding-to-be-true that is subjectively sufficient to warrant assent to a conviction of truth, even though it is, and must always remain, objectively insufficient.<sup>37</sup> In other words, those who would believe in Kant’s metaphysics have to do so in full awareness of the fact that its doctrines are, at best, “true for us,” and that they could never possibly be known to be true in themselves. This is certainly one way to resolve the core tension within Kant’s philosophy—the tension between the fact of our immanence and our irrepressible longing for transcendence, between Kant’s unrivaled attack on the possibility of metaphysics as it had previously been practiced and his conviction that we cannot do without it. But to judge from the history of post-Kantian German philosophy, this was far from the only way of resolving the tension. In fact, the form and power of the philosophical Counter-Enlightenment in Germany must be understood to follow from fact that so many of Kant’s successors embraced both his critique of and nostalgia for traditional philosophical paths to transcendence without accepting his proposal to satisfy the needs of our reason with a new form of metaphysics based on subjectively-grounded faith and hope. Schelling was the first such Counter-Enlightenment figure.

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<sup>35</sup> *CPR*, A776–7, 795–9, 828–30/B804–5, 823–7, 856–8; *CprR*, 114–17, 128–30; *CJ*, 317–23.

<sup>36</sup> *CPR*, A259–60/B315.

<sup>37</sup> *CPR*, A820/B848 and following; *CprR*, 140 and following; *Orientation*, 244–5; *CJ*, 360–8.

## III

*On the Grounds of the Kantian Enlightenment.* The success of Kant's proposal to satisfy our longing for transcendence through a new, subjectively grounded form of metaphysics depended on one's acceptance of the truth of two interrelated assumptions: first, that man will accept his speculative limitations because his true interests are practical; and second, that reason's practical needs can be satisfied with a form of faith (or a "subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient form of holding to be true") that is aware of itself as a faith. For Kant's solution to be a plausible one, human beings would have to be capable of finding satisfaction in a God that they know to be a postulate of their own reason.<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, few, if any, in the German philosophical tradition found this to be an acceptable solution. Rejecting both of the assumptions on which the plausibility of Kant's positive proposals rested, many set out to fashion a new form of speculative metaphysics that would allow reason to satisfy its needs once and for all. But in asserting that Kant's successors attempted to develop a new form of theoretical metaphysics are we not simply repeating the charge heard so often among admirers of Kant—namely, that those who followed him (especially the German Idealists) ignored his strictures against metaphysical speculation and therefore reverted to a precritical mode of philosophizing? On the contrary, as we shall see, the Idealists were convinced that the presence of crucial loose ends within Kant's own critical philosophy not only entitled them to appeal to the supersensible but even required them to do so. Moreover, we shall also see that, at least in the case of Schelling, the content of the metaphysical systems he developed was entirely determined by his strict adherence to Kant's criticism of the metaphysical tradition, and that, in fact, it was his very refusal to abandon crucial Kantian distinctions that eventually led him to develop a radically Counter-Enlightenment philosophy.

In their early work, the first Idealists (J. G. Fichte and Schelling) fastened on to what they believed to be two loose ends in Kant's work. The first of these had to do with the epistemological status of

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<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of the incoherence to which Kant is led by his subjective theology can be found in *RBMR*, 165: "every human being makes a God for himself . . . in order to honor in Him *the one who created him*" (emphasis in original).

the critical project itself. We have already seen that Kant conceived of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as, at least in part, a “science of ignorance” that clearly delineated what man could count as knowledge and what he could never possibly know. But Kant’s statements to this effect raise a perplexing and paradoxical issue: namely, what is the basis of Kant’s claim to know what can and what cannot count as knowledge? After all, it is the critical philosophy itself that supposedly determines the criteria for judging the validity of knowledge-claims. But if this is so, what is the epistemological status of those very determinations? Strictly speaking, they cannot be knowledge in the same sense that the findings of the empirical sciences are knowledge since the truths of the critical philosophy are not determined empirically; rather, Kant arrives at them through an a priori transcendental deduction from the conditions of the possibility of experience. But if the epistemological status of the critical philosophy itself is uncertain, then the foundation of the entire critical edifice—and thus also the prospects for the self-critical (undogmatic) form of Enlightenment that Kant advocates—is in jeopardy. For that project would be open to the charge that it represents a thoroughly arbitrary attempt on the part of one man to dictate what can and what cannot be regarded as the truth.<sup>39</sup> For ambitious young admirers of Kant like Fichte and Schelling this was unacceptable.<sup>40</sup> A truly critical philosophy would have to find a surer ground for the Kantian Enlightenment.

The second, not unrelated loose end in the critical philosophy on which the young Idealists focused (and here Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel took the lead) was its need to appeal to a philosophy of history in order to account for its own genesis. In a footnote to the preface of the first *Critique*’s 1781 edition, Kant had written that the eighteenth century was an “age of criticism” to which “everything must submit,”

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<sup>39</sup> By the time the first Idealist works were published (in the mid 1790s), such charges had already been made in the name of traditional Christian piety by Johann Georg Hamann. See Hamann’s 1784 essay, “Metacritique on the Purism of Reason,” in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 145–53.

<sup>40</sup> For the young Schelling’s awareness of this problem in Kant, see *SW*, 1.1.154–5; “Of the I as Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge” (hereafter, “IPP”), in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti (London: Associated University Presses, 1980), 65–6.

but he had not gone on to work out the connection between the flow of world history and his own critical project.<sup>41</sup> That is, Kant had precious little to say about the origins of the critical philosophy itself—about precisely why mankind had misused its reason for so many centuries and then finally come to attain full self-consciousness in Kant's own philosophy.<sup>42</sup> Was it really nothing more than arbitrary good luck, as Kant's silence seemed to indicate? Or might there be a greater story to tell? Could it be that despite its remarkable advance over all previous philosophical systems, the critical philosophy itself lacks complete self-consciousness in not realizing the crucial role that that very advance plays in bringing about the self-consciousness of the human spirit (*Geist*)? As with the first difficulty with the Kantian Enlightenment mentioned above, this one seemed to point to the dogmatism of the critical philosophy itself—its lack of reflection on its own grounds. For the young Idealists, then, the question that needed to be answered if Kant's project was to proceed in truly critical fashion was: what are the conditions of the possibility of determining the "conditions of the possibility of experience"? That is, the Idealists set out in search of something like a critical philosophy of the critical philosophy itself.

But how could they possibly determine the ground of the critical philosophy without reverting to a precritical metaphysics? They attempted to do so on the basis of a controversial interpretation of what is perhaps the most opaque section of the first *Critique*: the discussion of the transcendental unity of apperception in the "Transcenden-

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<sup>41</sup> *CPR*, Axi. Of course this is not to deny that Kant made significant contributions to the philosophy of history or that his writings on history and progress played an important (and perhaps even crucial) role in his philosophy as a whole. However, the Idealists will claim that despite certain pregnant suggestions (see, for example, *CPR*, A817–19, 852–6/B845–7, 880–4; and "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," in *Political Writings*, 221–34), Kant never adequately reflected on the historical evolution of reason from its original emergence to its dogmatic employment and then finally to its eventual self-criticism in the critical philosophy itself. For a contrary view, according to which the *CJ* represented Kant's attempt to respond to this very shortcoming of his own earlier work, see Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason*, 161–263.

<sup>42</sup> Or Kant realized that Enlightenment meant that mankind had finally overcome its "self-incurred immaturity," but he had very little to say about why it had done so at precisely the historical moment it did and in the way it did. See "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Political Writings*, 54.

tal Deduction of the Categories.”<sup>43</sup> In this part of the book, Kant argued that perception is always at the same time apperception or that thinking is fundamentally reflexive in nature. In any perception of an object within the world I am always at the same time conscious (I apperceive) that it is I who am perceiving it. In fact, what we call “experience” is actually the product of this combination of passive perception (or, in Kant’s terms, intuition [*Anschauung*]) and “spontaneous” apperception.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, if we did not apperceive—that is, if, as empiricists maintained, we merely received sense impressions passively from the external world without any spontaneous unifying activity on the part of the subject—we would not have an experience at all, at least not what we normally recognize as an experience. Rather, lacking any awareness that those impressions belong to a unified subject who accompanies all past, present, and future perceptions, we would merely experience a disconnected series of meaningless sense data. But given that this is manifestly not what experience is like—that I am always apperceptively aware of my experience being mine—Kant concluded that whenever an individual thinks, remembers, imagines, or engages in any other kind of intentional interaction with an object of experience, a spontaneous “abiding and unchanging ‘I’”<sup>45</sup> accompanies that interaction as the prior condition of its possibility.

The young Fichte and Schelling were convinced that this account of the mind’s spontaneous activity in the first *Critique* contained the key to resolving the problem of the “ground” of the critical enterprise as a whole, even if Kant himself did not pursue it. To begin with, they claimed that if it is indeed the case that the “transcendental subject” (or, as Schelling preferred to call it, the “Absolute I”) is a spontaneity, then it must be conceived of as existing outside of the conditioned, immanent world. To be sure, Kant himself had written at times as if the subject exists in two “worlds”—one the conditioned world of objects, the other a purely intelligible realm of unconditioned freedom<sup>46</sup>—but

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<sup>43</sup> *CPR*, A95–130/B129–169.

<sup>44</sup> Kant describes the mind as a “spontaneity” at *CPR*, A51, 68/B75, 93, 130, 132, and 158. For a thoughtful discussion of the difficult issues involved in Kant’s view on these matters, see Robert B. Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29–55.

<sup>45</sup> *CPR*, A123.

<sup>46</sup> The most extreme example of such thinking in Kant can be found in chapter 3 of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper, 1964), 118 and following.

he eventually backed away from such pronouncements, apparently wishing to distinguish between the kind of spontaneity attributable to the subject through transcendental argumentation (as a condition of the possibility of experience) and the kind of absolute freedom that our Ideas tell us would be possible for an unconditioned entity (like God) existing outside of the world altogether. However, in contrast to Kant, Fichte and Schelling insisted that the Absolute I simply had to be thought of as unconditioned since to hold otherwise would be either to deny the possibility of its being genuinely spontaneous or to diminish that possibility to the level of yet another regulative principle with no objective validity. Neither of these alternatives was acceptable to the young Idealists, the former because it would land the critical philosophy back in the midst of the problems that the notion of spontaneity was originally invoked to solve, and the latter because it would have the effect of turning a crucial component of the critical philosophy itself (rather than merely the principles employed in speculation and practice) into a matter of faith. If determining the ground of the Kantian Enlightenment was already problematic, then the latter alternative in particular would have the effect of rendering it extremely vulnerable to the objection that it was fundamentally a form of religion—albeit a religion that denied the possibility of genuine religious experience.

The desire of Fichte and Schelling to avoid these disturbing conclusions by affirming the unconditionality of the transcendental subject that constitutes experience led to a number of extremely radical implications. To begin with, as Schelling went out of his way to show in such early essays as “Of the I as Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge” (1795), if the Absolute I is truly unconditioned, then it is extremely difficult to say anything positive about it at all, and what we can say seems to elude the grasp of the conscious, reflective mind. For example, whereas every entity we encounter within the immanent, conditioned world can be subsumed under the categories of genus, species, and individual, and doing so allows us to think, and, in turn, to acquire knowledge about those entities, the Absolute I cannot be so subsumed since, as the unconditioned ground of our experience of the world, it must be prior to any act of ordering the world with those concepts.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, since

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<sup>47</sup> *SW*, 1.1.164–6; *I*, 73–4.

the unconditioned Absolute I is prior to the concept of "individual," it cannot be thought of as being tied to any particular finite subject within the immanent world. As an individual, I do not have my own particular transcendental subject in the same way that I have, say, my own particular body.

But the Absolute I is not only prior to the distinction between finite individuals; it is prior to all distinctions as such. This makes it extremely difficult for the finite mind to grasp the true character of the Absolute I since all human experience and knowledge are based on the distinctions that persist among finite entities: X is what it is by virtue of the fact that it is not A, B, C, and so on. Similarly, as a finite subject, all of my experience is mediated by the fundamental distinction between "me" (subject) and "not me" (object).<sup>48</sup> In contrast, as prior to all such distinctions, the Absolute I cannot even occur in human consciousness for consciousness is always a subject's consciousness of an object, and as soon as the Absolute I is treated as an object over and against the subject, it ceases to be what it is—namely, the precondition of the separation of the subject and object.<sup>49</sup> But if the Absolute I is so elusive, how do we even know of its presence at the ground of all human experience and thought? According to Schelling, we are only able to gain access to it is through what he calls (following Fichte) an "intellectual intuition"<sup>50</sup>—a form of thought that seeks and finds no particular object, but which nevertheless allows the Absolute I to appear as what it is: namely, a primordial, prereflective act whereby subjective consciousness of oneself and the world first

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<sup>48</sup> *SW*, 1.1.164–6, 178–9; *I*, 73–4, 83–4.

<sup>49</sup> See *SW*, 1.1.181–2; *I*, 84–5: "the I is no longer the pure, absolute I once it occurs in consciousness . . . the absolute I can never become an object."

<sup>50</sup> *SW*, 1.1.181; *I*, 85. Although this notion is present in Fichte, he did not take it in the explicitly mystical direction that Schelling did. Both were led to the concept by some suggestions of Kant in Sections 76 and 77 of *CJ*, 283–94, about which Schelling wrote, "perhaps never have so many deep thoughts been pressed together into so few pages," *SW*, 1.1.242; *I*, 127 n. In this passage, Kant claims it is possible to conceive of a divine understanding that, unlike our discursive intellect, is purely intuitive (*CJ*, 291). The attempt of Fichte and Schelling to apply this notion to the transcendental subject is yet another example of an idiosyncratic but influential interpretation. For a discussion of the importance of this interpretation in the development of German Idealism, see Robert B. Pippin, "Avoiding German Idealism: Kant, Hegel, and the Reflective Judgment Problem," *Idealism as Modernism*, 129–53.

comes to be.<sup>51</sup> Any attempt to reflect on it further in conscious thought has the effect of fundamentally misconstruing it; like the proverbial dog chasing its own tail, the futile endeavor cannot but end in disappointment and failure. As Schelling writes, when it comes to grasping the Absolute, even the most primary act of “self-awareness” leads to the “danger of losing the I.”<sup>52</sup>

We are now in a position to see why Schelling was convinced that the appeal to an unconditioned Absolute I contained the seeds of a solution to the problem of the grounds of the Kantian Enlightenment.

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<sup>51</sup> SW, 1.1.181–2; IPP, 85. In SW, 1.10.151; *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (hereafter, “HMP”), trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152–3 (a lecture course Schelling taught in Munich in 1833–4), Schelling writes that by using the term “intellectual intuition” in his early work, he meant that which tries to capture what cannot be an object, what is always mobile, and what is continually an other. In other words, anticipating Heidegger in important respects, it tries to grasp “an unthought thought [*ein nicht denkendes Denken*].”

<sup>52</sup> SW, 1.1.179–81; IPP, 84. Fichte describes the Absolute I as “the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge”; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge. With the First and Second Introductions*, trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93. Treating it as such also leads to the view, not merely that it is the condition of the possibility of experience, but that it is the condition of the possibility of the world itself. This is the case because Kant’s epistemological distinction between things as they appear to human beings in experience and things as they are in themselves cannot be maintained in the face of an Absolute I that is prior to all distinctions. According to Fichte and Schelling, like all distinctions, this one can be traced back to the original activity of the unconditioned Absolute I. One sign that Kant is vulnerable to this move is that he describes entities as they are in themselves, independent of a human knower, as things, despite the fact that “thing” is a determinate concept of human thought. If we try to rectify the situation by ceasing to use this concept, we are left either with nothing at all or with yet another determinate human concept. Hence, Fichte and Schelling conclude that the transcendental subject determines or grounds both itself (considered as a finite, particular subject) and what is ostensibly not itself (the object). Or, in Fichte’s notorious formulation: the “I” posits [*setzt*] both itself and the not-self (*The Science of Knowledge*, 94–7, 104, and 106–9). The appeal to the Absolute I thus brings Fichte and Schelling very close to what Hegel would aptly describe as an “Absolute Idealism.” Here we can already see the slippage from epistemology to ontology that is typical of the Idealists: whereas Kant wished to maintain that we could not know anything about things in themselves because we had no access to them, the Idealists claim that, because we have no access to them, we have no grounds for supposing that things in themselves exist. Or, to cite one of the core doctrines of Absolute Idealism: “the principle of being and thinking is one and the same”; SW, 1.1.163; IPP, 72.

For although Kant's critical philosophy established that our conscious experience and knowledge are limited to the immanent world and that we can never hope to gain access to the unconditioned for which our reason longs, Schelling claims to show through intellectual intuition that this very limitation of our cognitive powers is itself made possible by the unconditioned activity of the transcendental subject. That is, Schelling believes he has shown that the very process whereby reason discovers its own incapacity to reach the object of its longing (the unconditioned) at the level of conscious reflection is itself a manifestation of the unconditioned Absolute I's own prereflective, unconscious, erotic striving to intuit itself. If the young Schelling did indeed set out to formulate a critical philosophy of the critical philosophy, then, at the most basic level, this metacritique teaches that the condition of the possibility of determining the conditions of the possibility of experience is the self-limitation of the Absolute I. And, in pointing to the workings of this unconditioned behind the scenes, Schelling has devised a way for modern, enlightened man to keep in touch with transcendence.

But this is far from being the end of the story. Although intuitive awareness of the presence of the Absolute I at the ground of the Kantian Enlightenment is an "anchor" that fulfills the "need" for a "common point of unity and stability" in our "languid," "spiritless age,"<sup>53</sup> important philosophical work remains to be done regarding this insight into the primordial ground of the Enlightenment. While the bulk of humanity proceeds to extend its knowledge of the immanent world (through empirical science) on the basis of the truths conferred by Kant's critical project, others (like Schelling himself) must turn their attention to a more fundamental task: having shown to his satisfaction that the Kantian Enlightenment is grounded in the unconditioned spontaneous activity of the Absolute I, Schelling saw philosophy's next goal as trying to answer the question of how and why this process of self-limitation took place in the way it did. The kind of theorizing that Schelling developed in order to answer these questions was unique in the history of Western thought. Neither a science of the immanent world (like physics), nor a traditional metaphysical account of the nature of substance, nor even an example of transcendental philosophy in the Kantian sense, it presented a kind of shadow history of

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<sup>53</sup> *SW*, 1.1.178, 157–8; *IPP*, 83, 68.

the human race—or, to use Schelling's own terms, a "transcendental history of the I"<sup>54</sup>—that focused, not on names, dates, events, or any of the other particularities of concrete historical narrative, but rather on the gradual emergence of consciousness itself out of unconsciousness. In comparison to this epochal history, the tangible details of human history appear to be mere epiphenomena that only come about on the basis of the prior movement of consciousness itself.<sup>55</sup>

To engage in this kind of philosophizing was not merely to satisfy curiosity about the transcendental grounds of human history through idle speculations. On the contrary, far more was at stake. For, if successful, the transcendental theodicy that Schelling proposes would allow for nothing less than the complete self-satisfaction of reason's most profound longing once and for all. It promised to accomplish this goal by turning the unconditioned, spontaneous activity of the Absolute I into an object, not in its original, prereflective form (which, as we have already seen, can never become an object of consciousness), but rather in the form of a recapitulation of the process whereby it objectifies itself over time in the finite subject's ever-deepening consciousness of itself and the world. In other words, in the "System of Transcendental Idealism" that he proposes to write, Schelling conceives of the world as a whole as the progressive development of consciousness and maintains that when it is grasped as such, the process itself attains self-consciousness and human reason satisfies itself in the act of reflecting on its own unconditionality.

But the implications of the System's possible failure were as grim as the prospects of its success were grand. If it turned out that the unconditioned could not appear as an object within the conscious mind in any form at all, then that would mean nothing less than that there was no conceivable form of satisfaction open to modern, enlightened man. It would mean that the very advances in human self-reflection and self-criticism of which a work like the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a prime example would have the effect of furthering and solidifying man's ineradicable alienation from the object of his most profound existential longing. The only remaining question would then be: what is the proper response to this situation? As we shall see, the System

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<sup>54</sup> *SW*, 1.10.93–4; *HMP*, 109.

<sup>55</sup> The only true successor to this highly idiosyncratic form of philosophizing is Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

was indeed a failure, and virtually all of the late Schelling's philosophical reflections constitute a sustained and unambiguous answer to that question.

#### IV

*The Failure of Transcendental Theodicy and Its Implications.* Between 1797 and 1800, Schelling produced a series of works that marked his decisive break from Fichtean Idealism.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Fichte had discovered the faculty of intellectual intuition and set out to deduce the true science of knowledge on its basis, Schelling found himself preoccupied with a single problem whose resolution required that he take a path very different than Fichte's. This problem is easy to state: on the one hand, intellectual intuition tells us that the external world of objects arises through the unconditioned, productive activity of the Absolute I; but, on the other hand, at the moment I (as a finite subject) first come to consciousness, I find the world of objects already there, as if it existed independently of me.<sup>57</sup> How is it possible that the I both produces and experiences itself as a product of the objective world? In the works produced in the late 1790s, Schelling proposes to show that this problem can be resolved—or that it is actually no problem at all—by engaging in a two-part philosophical investigation. First, he approaches the problem objectively by writing a vaguely pantheistic philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*) that treats the natural world as a dynamic productivity unconsciously striving to attain consciousness of itself, which it eventually does, in the thought of human beings, whose subjectivity both emerges from and transcends the natural world in the very act of reflecting on it. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, he approaches the problem subjectively by giving an account of the “unconscious pathway”<sup>58</sup> whereby human consciousness emerges out of unconsciousness. In contrast to the standpoint of the *Naturphilosophie*, then, the

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<sup>56</sup> *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre* (SW, 1.1.343–452); *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (SW, 1.2.1–344); *Von der Weltseele* (SW, 1.2.345–583); *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (SW, 1.3.1–268).

<sup>57</sup> See SW, 1.10.93; *HMP*, 109.

<sup>58</sup> SW, 1.10.93–4; *HMP*, 109.

subjective approach to consciousness will tell the story of its emergence from the inside; it will show how at each stage in its development, consciousness turns its own activity at that stage into an object of reflection, thereby advancing to an even higher stage of consciousness. The problem that motivated this two-pronged philosophical project would be solved (and Fichte's goal of producing a comprehensive science of knowledge would be reached) if these two approaches could be shown to be in perfect agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) with each other—that is, if the subjective half of the System culminated in complete awareness that, despite the fact that it appears to exist prior to and independently of the subject, the objective, natural world is actually a product of the striving of the unconditioned, unconscious, prereflective Absolute I to attain full self-consciousness.

The *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800 contains Schelling's most thorough account of the crucial, subjective half of the complete System. It begins with a description of the first step in the process whereby the infinite Absolute I seeks to intuit itself by limiting itself—that is, by dividing itself into a finite subject and object.<sup>59</sup> But the act of this initial separation<sup>60</sup> is not itself an object of consciousness for the finite subject, which at this point has no idea that the finite subject and object are both posited by the Absolute I.<sup>61</sup> On the contrary, the subject's first, most elementary conscious experience is of an immediate encounter with a finite worldly object which the subject takes to be completely independent of itself and in which the subject completely loses itself. If the subject remained trapped in this elementary lostness in the sensed object, no progress toward self-consciousness would be made because the Absolute I cannot simultaneously intuit and intuit itself as intuiting. That is, in order for consciousness to develop, the finite subject must begin to treat its own absorption in the finite object as itself an object of consciousness, but this can only be accomplished by way of a recapitulation once the subject is no longer participating in that initial moment of conscious-

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<sup>59</sup> SW, 1.3.393–4; F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) (hereafter, “STI”), trans. Michael Vater (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 46–7.

<sup>60</sup> This act (described by Schelling as “original sensation”) is the beginning of the first “Epoch” in the history of self-consciousness. See SW, 1.3.399 and following; STI, 51 and following.

<sup>61</sup> SW, 1.3.403–5; STI, 54–5.

ness.<sup>62</sup> Hence, the character of the first moment of consciousness only becomes apparent in the second moment of consciousness, when

subject → object

becomes

subject → object [subject → object].

According to Schelling, this first example of an “intuiting that is an intuiting of an intuition” is the most primitive act of “productive intuition” and serves as a paradigm for all future advances in consciousness.<sup>63</sup>

Over the course of most of the rest of the book, Schelling goes on to deduce matter, electricity, and a host of other properties and qualities of the finite objective world from the self-limiting activity of the Absolute I as it comes to intuit itself. This process continues through the second and third “Epochs” of self-consciousness, as the subject slowly begins to understand at ever more profound levels the dependence of the objective world on the subject’s own productive activity. As Schelling recounts the origins of modern philosophy, the Enlightenment, and Kant’s Copernican Revolution at the transcendental level, we get to relive the gradual unfolding of the subject’s awareness that it (understood as the Absolute I) is ultimately responsible for all the distinctions that seem to reside in the objective world itself. We see the human mind come to the realization that the most basic of philosophical distinctions—between subject and object, a priori and a posteriori—are all products of the activity of the Absolute I and that even this realization is itself an example of such an act.<sup>64</sup> All of this—as well as all the myriad developments of world history—eventually comes to light as being a means to the end of the Absolute I’s fully intuiting or disclosing itself in the totality of the historical process.<sup>65</sup> As Schelling writes, the evolution of self-consciousness reaches its terminus when the finite subject finally achieves consciousness of the fact that “history as a whole is a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *SW*, 1.3.403–4; *STI*, 54.

<sup>63</sup> *SW*, 1.3.426–7, 423–4, and compare 411–13 and 420–3; *STI*, 72, 70, and compare 61 and 68–9.

<sup>64</sup> *SW*, 1.3.533–4, 564–66; *STI*, 156, 181–2.

<sup>65</sup> *SW*, 1.3.600–1; *STI*, 209.

<sup>66</sup> *SW*, 1.3.603–4; *STI*, 211.

As noted above, if it were truly possible for us to reach this goal—if the infinite activity of the primordial Absolute I that produces finite human consciousness could be fully captured by that finite human consciousness—then our reason would finally attain the satisfaction that Kant claimed was impossible for it. That is, reason would be given an unconditioned object and thus would be able to remain in touch with transcendence within the immanent world. But, perhaps not surprisingly, this thoroughly paradoxical goal turns out not to be possible. We can see the depth of the obstacle that stands in the way of reason's satisfaction most clearly in the implications of a statement that Schelling makes toward the beginning of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*: "Self-consciousness is the lamp of the whole system of knowledge, but it casts its light ahead only, not behind."<sup>67</sup> This statement reflects what we saw in the dialectical advances of consciousness: in its development, consciousness is pushed along unconsciously. It only becomes aware of the productive activity that underlies any given stage of consciousness retrospectively, once that stage has been surpassed by a later stage that turns the former one into an object. But this has dire consequences for the prospects of the Absolute I's ability fully to intuit itself since it implies that consciousness is always, as it were, one stage too late to grasp itself with complete transparency; at any given stage in the development of consciousness, its ground must remain hidden. In Schelling's terms, in order to intuit itself completely, the Absolute I would have to be able to bring about "the identity of the conscious and the unconscious in the self, and the consciousness of this identity."<sup>68</sup> Or, in other words, the self-transparency of the Absolute I depends upon the possibility of there being "an intuition . . . whereby in *one and the same* appearance the self is at once conscious and unconscious *for itself*."<sup>69</sup> But this is quite obviously an impossible goal for finite, reflective thinking, for as soon as the unconscious is made into an object of thought, it ceases to be unconscious. There is, then, no possible way for the purely identical, nonobjective, unconditioned Absolute I to be represented in finite consciousness, which must always rend asunder the unity of the primordial whole into subject and object in order to think. In fact, by the

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<sup>67</sup> SW, 1.3.357; STI, 18.

<sup>68</sup> SW, 1.3.611–13; STI, 219.

<sup>69</sup> SW, 1.3.609–11; STI, 217–18, emphasis in original.

end of the book, it appears that, as something “utterly nonobjective” and incapable of being “apprehended through concepts” or “set forth by means of them,” even the initial intellectual intuition of the Absolute I with which philosophizing begins is “inconceivable.” Apparently there is not even a way to “establish beyond doubt, that such an intuition does not rest upon a purely subjective deception.”<sup>70</sup>

If the *System* ended with these gloomy statements, one would be entitled to conclude that Schelling became convinced that reason’s longing for the unconditioned could never be satisfied—that, like Kant, he began to think that nothing less than human nature itself stands in the way of reason’s attaining the goal for which it cannot help but strive. But the *System* does not end there. Rather, Schelling concludes only that although reason can never be satisfied with the limitations of philosophical, reflective thought, it can find satisfaction in the domain of aesthetic experience. According to Schelling, art serves as the “organon” or “keystone” of philosophy and enables it to complete the science of knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Unlike philosophy, which must remain mired in the cognitive limitations of the finite and reflective human mind, the artistic activity of the “genius” produces an object that transcends the usual bounds of objectivity; he presents the “infinite finitely displayed.”<sup>72</sup> As Schelling writes,

Art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious.

Art and only art can open discursive, reflective thinking to that which eternally eludes its grasp:

the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart.<sup>73</sup>

In making this possible, the artistic genius attains all at once the unconditioned goal that science endlessly pursues.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the work of art he produces is nothing less than the intellectual intuition

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<sup>70</sup> *SW*, 1.3.624–5; *STI*, 229.

<sup>71</sup> *SW*, 1.3.349; *STI*, 12.

<sup>72</sup> *SW*, 1.3.619–20; *STI*, 225.

<sup>73</sup> *SW*, 1.3.627–8; *STI*, 231.

<sup>74</sup> *SW*, 1.3.622–4; *STI*, 227–8.

of the Absolute I made objective: it is a bursting forth of infinitude or transcendence into the finite, immanent world.<sup>75</sup> The satisfaction of reason's deepest needs can only take place in a region that lies beyond philosophical criticism. The *System* thus concludes with a call for a new mythology that would combine science and poetry and, in turn, reintroduce a divine dimension to the disenchanted world bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, Schelling's desire to satisfy the needs of reason in speculation leads him, by end of the *System*, to distance himself considerably from the Kantian Enlightenment. In fact, after a final brief (albeit productive<sup>77</sup>) attempt to fashion an "Identity Philosophy" that would capture the Absolute I in conscious thought without appealing to aesthetics, Schelling spent much of the next fifty years following up on his comments in 1800 about the need for a new mythology to express its inexpressible essence. The positive philosophy that Schelling first proposes in 1804<sup>78</sup> and begins to develop in his university lectures af-

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<sup>75</sup> SW, 1.3.624–5, 628–31; STI, 229, 232–3.

<sup>76</sup> Strictly speaking, from the standpoint of one of the Enlightenment's advocates, the Enlightenment cannot be either praised or blamed for having disenchanted the world since the world had never really been enchanted in the first place. Rather, at one time, the vast majority of people mistakenly believed it to be enchanted, whereas somewhat fewer do in the present. But by describing Schelling's project as one that seeks to "reenchant the world," I am trying to indicate his continuity with other figures in the German philosophical Counter-Enlightenment (like Herder, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) who adhere to a form of historicism that leads them to conclude that ages of history have essences that can be discerned by philosophers. Once this assumption has been made, a contrast can be drawn between, say, the Middle Ages, which can be portrayed as an essentially religious time in which the world itself had been enchanted and modernity, which can be described as an essentially atheistic age in which the world itself has been disenchanted by the Enlightenment's emphasis on philosophical criticism. With these assumptions in place, the path is open for a philosopher (like Schelling) to entertain the possibility that he can single-handedly reenchant the world by revealing the mysterious ground that underlies all reflective thought.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* (SW, 1.4.105–212); *Fernere Darstellungen aus dem System der Philosophie* (SW, 1.4.333–510); and *System der gesamten Philosophie und der Naturphilosophie insbesondere* (SW, 1.4.131–574). The renewed (but temporary) optimism about the prospects for such a systematic philosophy in these works is nicely captured by the following statement, in which Schelling asserts that although most people conceive of the Absolute as being merely the negation of the differences that prevail within the immanent world, he will show that, in fact, "the night of the Absolute can be turned into day for knowledge" (SW, 1.4.403).

ter 1809 views the Enlightenment's pursuit of knowledge with considerable skepticism, if not outright disdain, as perhaps the single greatest obstacle to achieving a genuine reconciliation with the transcendent: "The Absolute subject is only there to the extent to which I do not make it into an object, i.e., do not know it, renounce [*begebe*] knowledge."<sup>79</sup> Once the quest for knowledge has been sufficiently renounced, this explicitly Counter-Enlightenment philosophy attempts to fill the void left over by that act of self-purgation with a unique reinterpretation of the history of myths and religious beliefs, according to which the mark of their divinity lies not in the discredited beliefs themselves, but instead in the contribution they make to the progressive unfolding of the Absolute in human existence.<sup>80</sup>

But as others have pointed out, the importance of Schelling's late philosophy does not lie in his often tortured theological meditations on the history of religious consciousness.<sup>81</sup> Rather, it lies in the propaedeutical half of his project—in his attempt to help us to renounce

<sup>78</sup> See his essay on "Philosophie und Religion," SW, 1.6.44.

<sup>79</sup> Schelling, *Initia Philosophiae Universae: Erlanger Vorlesung WS 1820/21*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans (Bonn: H. Bouvier und Co. Verlag, 1969), 38.

<sup>80</sup> Various versions of this positive philosophy of mythology and religion can be found in numerous works and lectures that were published only after Schelling's death. These include *Die Weltalter*, "Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus" (SW, 1.10.225–86); "Historische-kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie" (SW, 2.1.1–252); "Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie oder Darstellung der rein-rationalen Philosophie" (SW, 2.1.253–572); *Philosophie der Mythologie* (SW, 2.2.1–674); "Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung oder Begündung der positiven Philosophie" (SW, 2.3.1–174); *Der Philosophie der Offenbarung erster Teil* (SW, 2.3.177–530); *Der Philosophie der Offenbarung zweiter Teil* (SW, 2.4.1–344). For the decidedly mixed reaction of the future philosophical luminaries (including Kierkegaard, Engels, and Bakunin) who attended Schelling's lectures in Berlin in 1841, see Manfred Frank's informative introduction to Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung, 1841/42*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1977), 7–71.

<sup>81</sup> Andrew Bowie is one; see his *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, chapter 6. Bowie's book is heavily influenced by Manfred Frank's work on Schelling's importance for the development of post-Hegelian philosophy. See, for example, Frank's *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975) and *Eine Einführung in Schellings Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985). Of course this is not to deny the importance of Schelling's positive philosophy for the history of post-Enlightenment religious thought. Schelling's influence on Paul Tillich, for instance, was significant. See Tillich's doctoral dissertation, *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling's Positive Philosophy: Its Presuppositions and Principles*, trans. Victor Nuovo (London: Associated University Presses, 1974).

our knowledge of the immanent world. In his post-1809 lectures, Schelling begins to refer to philosophies that concern themselves with the world without adequately reflecting on its Absolute ground as negative philosophies, and he sees it as his task to prepare the way for his own positive philosophy by engaging in their negation.<sup>82</sup> According to Schelling, one negates a negative philosophy by demonstrating that it rests on the “unground” (*Ungrund*) or “abyss” (*Abgrund*) of the Absolute which it can never capture in conscious thought.<sup>83</sup> All attempts at thinking, in other words, ought to begin with the realization that genuine human autonomy is an illusion, as is the conceit that mankind could ever banish mystery from the experience of human existence. Not the question of what there is in the world—which is the focus of all merely negative philosophies—but much more the fact that there is a world at all: this is the wondrous perplexity that first prompted metaphysical speculation in ancient Greece and that even today, in the modern, enlightened world, beckons to us to open ourselves up to the mystery of our emergence from the Absolute—of our presence arising from absence.<sup>84</sup> For those who pursue negative philosophy as an end in itself, who would banish the mystery of existence in order to focus our attention on and counsel resignation to the here and now—to the immanent world—Schelling has nothing but scorn. He will show them that their castles have been constructed on quicksand—that they lack (and will always lack) the firm foundations that must underlie all solid structures. Schelling’s critique of the pretensions of negative philosophy thus shows us that once it has been deprived of an object that would satisfy its insatiable longing for the unconditioned, reason can turn destructive—or deconstructive—in its aims. That is, reason itself can demand Counter-Enlightenment.

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<sup>82</sup> As with so much of his late philosophy, this way of thinking can be traced back to Schelling’s 1804 essay on “Philosophie und Religion,” in which he first writes of the need for a “negation of negation” of the merely finite. See *SW*, 1.6.45.

<sup>83</sup> See *SW*, 1.4.258; *Bruno or On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things*, ed. and trans. Michael Vater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 158–9, and *SW*, 1.7.406 and following; *Freedom*, 87 and following.

<sup>84</sup> Schelling is very much aware of a problem to which Heidegger will repeatedly point: to speak of “nothingness” is paradoxically to turn the absence of anything into a substantive.

## V

*Counter-Enlightenment in the Name of Reason.* Since much of modern philosophy had been motivated by the goal of founding an autonomous form of reflection, many of its central figures come in for severe criticism in Schelling's lectures. But no philosopher inspired Schelling's wrath as Hegel did.<sup>85</sup> That this is so has far deeper roots than Schelling's desire to engage in a personal vendetta. To be sure, Schelling felt he had been scorned by his former friend and partner in speculative idealism, and he resented the latter's meteoric rise to fame, not least because he was left to languish in provincial universities while Hegel went on to enjoy unprecedented notoriety while teaching in the capital of Prussia.<sup>86</sup> But Schelling's hostility was based on more than petty resentment, for there is an extraordinarily important philosophical issue at stake in their *Auseinandersetzung*.

As Judith Shklar has noted, there is much to be said for viewing Hegel as the "last of the great Enlightenment thinkers."<sup>87</sup> In fact, the case could even be made that Hegel's philosophy represents the completion (*Vollendung*) of the Enlightenment in the sense that his thought portrays human beings determining for themselves (through the collective evolution of their intellectual and social practices, and without reliance on nature, an unreflective adherence to tradition, or the commandments of a transcendent God) what will count as

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<sup>85</sup> On this understanding of the impulse behind much of modern philosophy, as well as Hegel's place in it, see Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>86</sup> Schelling and Hegel were roommates (along with the future romantic poet, Friedrich Hölderlin) while studying theology in Tübingen during the 1790s and briefly coedited the important *Critical Journal of Philosophy*. However, they experienced a falling out upon the publication of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the preface of which contains what seem to be a number of rather nasty swipes at Schelling's insistence that the Absolute had to be conceived of as a ground rather than a result (for more on this issue, see below). Although in a famous letter Hegel denied that he had Schelling in mind in the preface (and had only meant to challenge the latter's less sophisticated admirers), Schelling (not to mention most scholars since that time) was unpersuaded, and their friendship never recovered.

<sup>87</sup> Judith Shklar, "A Life of Learning," in *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar*, ed. Bernard Yack (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 276. This is one of the central themes of Shklar's book on Hegel, *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Mind"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

acceptable criteria of truth and legitimate standards of conduct.<sup>88</sup> Or, to state the point in terms that return us to Schelling's deepest concerns, Hegel claims to be able to demonstrate that there simply is no transcendental Absolute to ground human thought and action. Rather, Hegel writes that "of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result," and this is a view that, from Schelling's standpoint, is indistinguishable from saying that there is no Absolute at all.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, despite Hegel's unfortunate tendency to inflate his claims to theological dimensions and to use terminology (especially in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*) that makes it seem like he is describing world history as the evolution of a monistic entity (*Geist*) that attains self-consciousness in Hegel's own thought, his project is radically immanent in orientation. In fact, when it is stripped of quasi-religious rhetoric, Hegel's philosophy can be seen to teach that the longing for the Absolute that permeates Schelling's thought is actually the final form that an ultimately untenable desire for a metaphysical "beyond" has taken in the West. From Plato's Idea of the Good through the Scholastic notion of God and the various ways earlier Enlightenment thought valorized nature, Western philosophy has consistently appealed to a metaphysical ground of one kind or another. Kant had certainly made a revolutionary move away from such appeals by problematizing the whole attempt to reach such a

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<sup>88</sup> This is, I think, the implication of Robert B. Pippin's ambitious attempt to rehabilitate Hegel today, although he does not explicitly use the language of "Enlightenment" and even issues a disclaimer according to which "it would obviously be a gross simplification, or at best very misleading, to describe Hegel as an 'Enlightenment thinker'"; Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 19 n. 24. Despite this statement of scholarly prudence, I would argue that even if Hegel was highly critical of previous (English and French) formulations of modern, Enlightenment principles, he can still be said to share a similar philosophical aim with his predecessors—namely, the attempt to fashion a radically this-worldly or immanent form of reflection. At any rate, in what follows, I will be relying on Pippin's interpretation of Hegel as it is presented in *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, chapter 3.

<sup>89</sup> *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11. And see 110–11 for another formulation of the view that self-consciousness consists in seeing that there simply is no metaphysical substrate to speak of: "It is in self-consciousness . . . that consciousness first finds its turning point, where it leaves behind it the colorful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present."

ground, but he had flinched at the implications of his own thought by inconsistently maintaining that we both need and are required to presuppose the unconditioned as a subjectively grounded postulate. The result was a final transformation of the notion of ground into the unconditioned Absolute I that could be found in the numerous failed systems of Fichte and the young Schelling. But Hegel believed that his own phenomenology showed that all such notions must be "sublated" (*aufgehoben*) into the Notion (*Begriff*), according to which the development of these very metaphysical views in human history is the only "ground" there is. Or, in other words, in Hegel's thought, the Absolute turns out to be nothing more than the story of our progressive realization that there is no Absolute as Schelling understands it.

In claiming to be able to show the inadequacy of all traditional metaphysical views, Hegel does not understand himself to be demanding that modern man face an ugly or unpleasant truth. On the contrary, for Hegel, realizing the impossibility of any transcendent appeals is a cause for celebration. For not only does it mean that mankind has finally reached a state of full self-consciousness—it also means that mankind can finally attain the self-satisfaction (*Selbstbefriedigung*) for which it has been striving since the dawn of human history. That is, Hegel believes that the modern, critical intellect, which (as one can see in the cases of both Kant and Schelling) is so vulnerable to despair at its own finitude, can actually find satisfaction<sup>90</sup> in the immanent world, at least once it comes to realize (through the mediation of the Hegelian philosophy, on the one hand, and the social institutions of modern ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*], on the other) that this very despair is based on a fundamental misconception of the

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<sup>90</sup> Exactly how stable that satisfaction will be is unclear from Hegel's writings. Although he sometimes adopts an eschatological rhetoric about the end of history, there are also passages like the following which seem to envision a far more unstable reconciliation characterized by continuous contestation: "The identity of the Idea with itself is one with the process; the thought which liberates actuality from the illusory show of purposeless mutability and transfigures it into the Idea must not represent this truth of actuality as a dead repose, as a mere picture, lifeless, without impulse or movement, as a genus or number, or an abstract thought; by virtue of the freedom which the Notion attains in the Idea, the Idea possesses within itself also the most stubborn opposition; its repose consists in the security and certainty with which it eternally creates and eternally overcomes that opposition, in it meeting with itself." See *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 759.

human situation. For Hegel, to lament the finitude of the modern mind is invalidly to presuppose the existence of some indeterminate infinite entity in comparison to which human life appears paltry and limited. To understand human life in and for itself is to see that all notions, including those of the infinite and the finite, are mediated by the intellectual and social practices of concrete communities as those practices evolve, break down, and are replaced by others over time. To view human life in this light is to see that, regardless of what this or that historical notion has taught him, man has never been determined or conditioned by given, external standards, but rather, without realizing it, he has actively accepted those standards by taking them to be true. In Hegel's philosophy, then, modern man achieves Absolute Knowledge—and his reason, complete self-satisfaction—in coming to see that man himself is unconditioned—that his essence is Absolute Freedom.

As we have seen above, Schelling had also once entertained hopes that reason could attain satisfaction within the immanent world. For Schelling, such satisfaction could only be possible if the process of the Absolute I's infinite productivity could become an object. But this turned out to be impossible because of the unbridgeable gap (if perhaps not in art, at least in discursive, philosophical thought) between the primordial infinitude of the Absolute and the categories of the finite, subjective mind. But the presence of this gap not only convinced Schelling that there was no possible satisfaction for reason within the immanent world. It also made possible his extraordinarily radical criticism of Hegel regarding the latter's claim to have shown both that human thought grounds itself and that reason can derive the satisfaction it seeks from awareness of this fact.

Anticipating Heidegger to a remarkable extent, the late Schelling maintains that Hegel's errors (and indeed the errors of all philosophy since Descartes<sup>91</sup>) arise from his tendency to ignore the distinction between two fundamentally different senses of Being (*Seyn*): Being as existence and Being as the ground of existence.<sup>92</sup> Hegel's entire philosophy and the antimetaphysical conclusions he reaches with it are made possible by his emphasis on the former at the expense of the lat-

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<sup>91</sup> *SW*, 1.10.28–9; *HMP*, 60. Of course Schelling excludes himself from this criticism.

<sup>92</sup> *SW*, 1.7.357–9 and 406 and following; *Freedom*, 32–3 and 87 and following; see also *SW*, 1.10.17–19; *HMP*, 52–3 and *SW*, 1.6.38, 40, 42.

ter—by his transformation of the Absolute from a notion denoting the primordial ground of existence into a synonym for the result of merely human thought about Being as existence. But Being understood as the ground of existence cannot be so easily dismissed. Beneath what exists and all thought about it lies its primordial condition (*Urstand*), which is prior (*Prius*) to any determination or predication. It is a “pure That,” a “conceptless Being,” the simple “What is” or brute fact that anything exists at all.<sup>93</sup> As soon as a consequent, predicate, or attribute of any kind is assigned to this *Urstand*, it ceases to be the ground of existence and becomes a determinate thing that exists (even if only as an object of thought). Hence, the *Urstand* cannot be equated with God since even God Himself is an entity to which attributes (including existence) can be assigned.<sup>94</sup> In contrast, one cannot even say that the *Urstand* exists, for “how . . . could that from which one begins itself already be a Being [*selbst schon seyend Seyn*]?”<sup>95</sup> But as prior to all predication, even to existence, the *Urstand* would seem to be beyond thought itself. Yet Schelling nevertheless maintains that all thought inescapably depends upon it: “I must think [the *Urstand*] in this nakedness, at least for the moment” that thinking commences.<sup>96</sup> One could say that the ground of existence is the indescribable absence within which entities appear; it is the condition of the possibility of any entity’s being a determinate entity at all. In Schelling’s words: “it is that which never was, which disappears as soon as it is thought, and is only ever in what is to come, but is only in a certain manner there as well.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *SW*, 1.10.17–18; *HMP*, 52–3; *SW*, 2.3.162–3, 170, 173.

<sup>94</sup> *SW*, 1.7.375; *Freedom*, 51: “God himself requires a foundation in order that he may be; only this is not outside him but within him; and he has in him a nature which though it belongs to him himself is, nonetheless, different from him.” See also *SW*, 2.3.169–70 for a passage that makes it sound as if the primal condition toward which Schelling is groping could best be described as the God of God.

<sup>95</sup> *SW*, 1.10.149; *HMP*, 151.

<sup>96</sup> *SW*, 1.10.140–1; *HMP*, 52.

<sup>97</sup> *SW*, 1.10.150; *HMP*, 152. See also *SW*, 2.3.162: “It is not because there is a thinking that there is a being, but because there is a being that there is a thinking. . . . [But] one might object: a reality which precedes all possibility cannot be thought. One can admit this in a certain sense and say: precisely for that reason it is the beginning of all thinking—for the beginning of thinking is not yet itself thinking.”

But the fact that this utterly mysterious ground of existence is, quite literally, indistinguishable from pure nothingness or absence does not mean that we can dispense with it in the way that Hegel claimed to have done. On the contrary, this radicalized notion of the Absolute can never possibly be banished from human existence since the very act of trying to eliminate it, as an act of thinking, must inevitably presuppose it. And this points to the fundamental flaw in Hegel's philosophy, as Schelling understands it: either it really does dispense with the Absolute as primordial condition, in which case it is a system so closed in on itself that it has nothing whatsoever to say about reality—and its much-vaunted "Absolute Knowledge" is nothing more than the conclusion of a "philosophy about philosophy"<sup>98</sup>—or else it presupposes the Absolute, in which case its antimetaphysical content refutes itself. But by claiming that his philosophy is a true description of reality and that it can dispense with the Absolute as primordial condition, Hegel ends up proposing nothing less than the most "monstrous" form of thinking in history. For it consigns the notion of Being as the ground of existence to oblivion and, in turn, forgets (and encourages others to forget) that an unconscious, prereflective Absolute underlies all human endeavors.<sup>99</sup>

Hence, far from bringing about the true self-satisfaction of reason's deepest needs through the attainment of Absolute Knowledge, Hegel's philosophy threatens to reconcile modern man to the immanent world at the cost of instilling a kind of metaphysical amnesia. But such a project must fail. For regardless of how successful the Enlightenment becomes at telling us about what is, there will always be something unconditioned that transcends human thought which the human mind will inevitably strive to grasp: namely, the fact that there is a world at all. As Schelling writes, "The last question is always: why is there anything at all, why is there not nothing?"<sup>100</sup> And this is a question that Hegel's philosophy is singularly ill-equipped even to recognize, let alone to answer.

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<sup>98</sup> *SW*, 1.10.140–1; *HMP*, 145–6.

<sup>99</sup> *SW*, 1.10.128–9, 140–1; *HMP*, 136, 145. It is thus also the most egregious example of a negative philosophy in that it completely neglects its own negativity and thus also the need for all human thought to appeal to a positive philosophy of its own prior, mysterious grounds.

<sup>100</sup> *SW*, 2.3.242.

Confronted with Hegel's attempt to complete the Enlightenment's turn away from metaphysics and toward the immanent world, reason rebels, unable to suppress its drive for the unconditioned. Reason thus finds itself in the unlikely position of demanding the reversal of the Enlightenment—of longing to withdraw from the pursuit of knowledge of the world in favor of unending meditation on its otherworldly grounds. Long before Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida, Schelling set out to uncover the radical finitude and contingency of all human attempts at self-sufficiency as well as to demonstrate the impossibility of a self-grounding human project—all as a means of finding a fissure in the walls of the modern, enlightened world through which man might catch one final, fleeting glimpse of the transcendent.

## VI

*Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment, and Metaphysical Longing.* In the 1781 preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant expressed his concerns about the widespread influence of ideas associated with those he described as “indifferentists”—members of the Enlightenment who claimed to be disinterested in the outcome of metaphysical disputes.<sup>101</sup> To judge from the intellectual history of Germany since the end of the eighteenth century, Kant's worries about the spread of indifferentism were misplaced, at least when it came to his own countrymen. For even before Kant's death in 1803, German philosophy had become thoroughly focused on metaphysical questions to the exclusion of virtually all others. Not that this preoccupation was entirely new. On the contrary, German philosophy prior to Kant had continued to be dominated by Neoscholastic speculation on metaphysical and ontological questions long after the leading thinkers of England, Scotland, and France had embraced a more skeptical form of philosophy rooted in empiricism. Kant's critique of the entire metaphysical tradition certainly sounded the death knell of this particular style of speculation in Germany, but it did not lead to the abandonment of metaphysics altogether. Rather, it led to the development of a form of metaphysics that was thoroughly novel in its purity and consistency. Chastened by Kant's claim that all metaphysical systems are

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<sup>101</sup> *CPR*, Ax.

inevitably projections of the subjective mind rather than reflections of the true character of the world and its grounds<sup>102</sup> as much as they were inspired by his moving description of reason's ineradicable metaphysical needs, those who (like Schelling) followed most closely in Kant's footsteps conceived of a kind of metaphysics that would literally have no object of study. Like godless theologians, they set themselves the task of thinking the unthinkable.

The result was a ghostly substitute for Platonism. To be sure, Plato's Idea of the Good exceeds Being in dignity and power and thereby arouses the erotic desires of the young philosopher, just as the unthinkable Absolute ground of existence calls to thinkers like Schelling with an irresistible siren song. But this is where the similarity ends. For unlike Plato's ideal ground, the Absolute cannot be likened to the sun, casting the light that allows the soul to see the world and discern the order that reigns within it.<sup>103</sup> Rather, like a black hole, the Absolute gives off no light and even absorbs what little illumination human beings have been able to fashion for themselves within the world—obliterating differences, leveling distinctions, creating (in Hegel's famous jab at his former friend) a "night in which all cows are black."<sup>104</sup>

If this is what metaphysics must be in the wake of Kant's critique, then it is no surprise that German philosophy after Kant has so often ended up in a stance that is hostile to the Enlightenment. For if reason's quest for the unconditioned ultimately requires that it abandon the study of the world in favor of exposing the nothingness that underlies it, then philosophy quickly becomes an activity that furthers the darkening of the world. This form of the Counter-Enlightenment certainly has very little in common with those more moderate forms of opposition to the Enlightenment that counsel conservatism and attempt to limit its criticism of traditional beliefs in God, order, and authority. The German philosophical version of the Counter-Enlightenment is far more radical: it accepts the truth of the Kantian critique of

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<sup>102</sup> See the footnote in *RBMR*, 83 for Kant's view on the inevitability as well as the injurious consequences of anthropomorphism in metaphysics and religion.

<sup>103</sup> Plato, *Republic* 508a–509c.

<sup>104</sup> *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 9. See also Hegel's criticism of Kant, Fichte, and especially Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in the conclusion to *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Welter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 189–91.

transcendence and looks for salvation, not in any intellectual, social, or religious practice within the world, now or in the past, but in the primordial, mysterious origins which precede all such practices.

Kant was certainly right to assign erotic characteristics to reason, for doing so captures an important dimension of human psychology—namely, the passionate component of man's intellectual life. This was a subject about which the ancient philosophers were well aware but which many early modern accounts of reason as a passively calculating faculty had neglected. And yet, Kant followed and greatly surpassed his Enlightenment predecessor in seeking to maroon humanity (supposedly for its own good) in the immanent world. The result was a form of Enlightenment that set up the conditions of its self-subversion—a process that continues today in the work of our own Schellingean Counter-Enlightenment figures, who continually work to show how seemingly solid social and intellectual practices break down, deconstruct, arbitrarily exclude the “other,” and so forth.

Earlier enlightenments in the history of the West did not consume themselves so violently. Like Kant, Plato and Aristotle in the ancient world and St. Thomas Aquinas in the medieval period understood that man is drawn inexorably toward metaphysics. But unlike Kant, they would have considered the attempt to close off access to metaphysics—let alone trying to channel the desire for it into practical concerns in the immanent world—a futile, and even potentially dangerous, proposition. That the limits of discursive rationality make a completed metaphysics impossible is insufficient to justify denying the legitimacy of its pursuit, just as the prospect of uncertainty in metaphysical speculation is no cause to abandon it in favor of an exclusive quest for scientific “proof.” It is only when enlightenment understands itself as culminating in the contemplation of the highest things that it allows for the satisfaction of our highest needs.

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