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Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, Axel Honneth

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Peter Dews

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28

SCHELLING AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Peter Dews

The Left Hegelians and the Frankfurt School

During the 1830s the followers of Hegel – who had died unexpectedly in 1831 – began to divide into hostile camps, with opposed political orientations. On the right were philosophers who believed that Hegel's vision of the historical unfolding of reason provided assurance that the inner rationality of the Christian religion and of the modern state could contain the social conflicts of an emerging capitalist society – conflicts of which they were more acutely aware than Hegel himself had been. On the left were thinkers convinced that, although Hegel had achieved the supreme theoretical development of philosophical reason, the emancipatory potential of reason still remained to be realized in practice.

As the polarization intensified during the early 1840s, it became apparent to the most advanced “Left Hegelians” – or “Young Hegelians” – that the central issue was not simply the practical realization of Hegel's conception of reason. Rather, Hegel's philosophy, centred on the inner structure and historical development of “spirit,” still abstracted from the real life-process and experience of finite, embodied human beings, in a manner which perpetuated – rather than overcoming – the deficiencies of the entire metaphysical tradition. It therefore needed to be replaced by a new, anthropologically grounded and interpersonally oriented mode of thinking. Ludwig Feuerbach, much admired by the young Karl Marx, formulated the most sophisticated version of this approach. Since, like other Left Hegelians, Feuerbach remained Hegelian in his conviction that the Master has completed the systematic tasks of Western metaphysics, his “philosophy of the future” essentially involved a new, “post-metaphysical” conception of the relation between thinking and practical life. As Feuerbach wrote, in a tone which anticipates the later Wittgenstein, “Only when thought is cut off from the human being and confined to itself do embarrassing, fruitless, and, from the standpoint of an isolated thought, irresolvable questions arise: How does thought reach being, reach the object?” (Feuerbach 1986: §51).

Arguably, the Left Hegelians set the parameters for many of the central debates which have dominated European philosophy ever since. This is certainly the opinion of Jürgen Habermas, the leading thinker of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, as presented in his 1986 book on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity:

Today the state of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians, when they distanced themselves from Hegel and philosophy in general. And the triumphant gestures of reciprocally outdoing one another, by means of which we gladly overlook the fact that we have remained contemporaries of the Left
Schelling and the Frankfurt School

Hegelians, have also been current ever since then. Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is to say, they freed the theme of a critique of modernity which draws on the spirit of modernity from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason.

(PDM: 53)

Habermas's phrase “the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason” alludes to his view that Hegel's heroic attempt to validate modernity by unifying the eternal and the transitory, the timeless and the urgently contemporary, ultimately failed. “Modern time consciousness,” as Habermas puts it, “exploded the form of philosophical thinking” (PDM: 52). In other words, our modern awareness of time is oriented towards an anticipated future which cannot be preempted metaphysically by reason. But we must also come to accept, according to Habermas, that our contemporary forms of life cannot be endorsed or criticized simply by drawing on premodern traditions of belief and practice. This is why we have no choice but to follow the Left Hegelian example of a “critique of modernity which draws on the spirit of modernity.”

But since, for Habermas, no inherited modes of thought and activity are entitled to pass unscrutinized, the authentic “philosophical discourse of modernity” cannot – despite renouncing metaphysics – give up altogether on the concept of reason as the ultimate critical arbiter. Treating reason neither as “an objective teleology which reveals itself in nature or history” nor as a “merely subjective capacity” (PDM: 69n), it investigates and interprets historically changing social practices from the standpoint of “insight and error,” bringing the concept of reason into a domain which – for ancient philosophy, as for the mainstream of modern philosophy centred on the knowing subject – was simply not susceptible to theorization. Habermas clearly regards his own enterprise as exemplifying this approach. And he would no doubt agree that the Frankfurt School tradition as a whole remains especially close to the Left Hegelians in seeking for traces of what he terms “the unifying power of reason” (PDM: 65, 67) amidst the contingencies of the historical process, and in the light of an anticipated, more humane and rational future.

This continuing commitment to what Habermas terms “the relation of history to reason” (the phrase “Vernunftbezug der Geschichte” implies an internal relation) (PDM: 392) explains the sense in which the project of the Frankfurt School has remained a philosophical – and not simply a sociological and political – endeavour. This philosophical dimension has often been articulated through a return to resources provided by the explosion of philosophical enquiry, experimentation and system-building which occurred between the publication of Kant’s three Critiques, in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and the emergence of Marx’s theory of history and society in the later 1840s. One might think, for example, of Marcuse’s indebtedness to Schiller’s conception of a “play drive” (Spieltrieb) (Marcuse 1955: 185–194), the links between Adorno’s thought and that of the Jena Romantics (see Hörisch 1980), or the Kantianism of Habermas’s discourse ethics (see Habermas 1990: 195–215). All these thinkers are also profoundly influenced by Hegel, of course, the dominant figure of German Idealism. However, there is one major philosopher from the post-Kantian period with whom the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have a particularly complex and ambivalent relation, namely Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775–1854). The reason for this will quickly become apparent if we consider the role of Schelling’s late philosophy in the genesis of the Left Hegelianism to which the Frankfurt School outlook is so intimately related.

Schelling and the Left Hegelians

In 1841 the ageing Schelling – then older than Hegel had been when he died – received a call from the Prussian government to leave his post in Munich for a chair at the University
of Berlin. An advantageous offer to Schelling was prompted by the hope that his philosophy could help to extirpate what the recently crowned, conservative monarch, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, had referred to as the “dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism.” Schelling’s first lecture course in Berlin was a major intellectual event, whose audience included prominent figures and future luminaries such as Mikhail Bakunin, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Engels, Alexander von Humboldt, Søren Kierkegaard and Leopold von Ranke. But many of his auditors soon became disillusioned with the content of his lectures, and Schelling was vigorously attacked by the Left Hegelians for accepting recruitment into a reactionary Kulturkampf (for further historical detail, see Frank 1977).

As Manfred Frank has pointed out, however, there is a striking ambivalence about the Left Hegelian assault on Schelling. For one thing, it seemed to involve defending the very idealistic presuppositions of Hegel’s philosophy that the young radicals of the Vormärz – the period of ferment prior to the revolution of March 1848 – would themselves seek to dismantle only a few years later (ibid.: 14–41). Engels is a case in point. In his pseudonymous report on Schelling’s lectures for the Telegraph für Deutschland, he refers – in an ironic contrast intended to deprecate Schelling – to “the good, naïve Hegel, with his belief in the existence of philosophical results, in the entitlement of reason to step into existence, to dominate being” (Engels [1841] 1977: 459). It would not be long, of course, before Engels and Marx were arguing that ideas only become historically effective when they connect with material forces, express the interests of a rising social class. But, at this stage of his career, the young Engels was even prepared to defend against Schelling the Hegelian claim that “existence definitely falls within thought, that being is immanent to spirit” (ibid.).

At the same time, the Left Hegelians could not help being aware that Schelling’s thought – despite the theological penumbra of his final system – had fostered many of the naturalistic and materialistic impulses which they were soon to mobilize against Hegel. Thus, in a letter to Feuerbach from the end of 1843, Marx characterized Schelling’s philosophy as “Prussian politics sub specie philosophiae.” But he then went on to describe the youthful Schelling – the Schelling who had already insisted on the genetic priority of nature over mind – as the “anticipatory distorted image (antizipiertes Zerrbild) of his correspondent. What in Schelling remained a “fantastical youthful dream,” Marx asserts, has in Feuerbach “become truth, reality, manly seriousness” (Marx [1843] 1963: 420–421). The Left Hegelian response to Schelling, therefore, involved sympathy for the inspiration behind the young Schelling’s Naturphilosophie, combined with hostility to Schelling’s late thought, as presented in his Berlin lectures. The young radicals were unable to recognize that it was precisely in the final phase of Schelling’s thinking that his abiding sense of the ontological independence and spontaneous dynamism of the natural world, and of the human historical world which arises out of it, had resulted in a powerful critique of Hegel’s logicist version of objective idealism, to which – implicitly, at least – they could not help but be sympathetic. Indeed, many of the problematic features of Hegel’s system pinpointed by Schelling – for example, the notoriously obscure transition from the “absolute Idea” to nature at the end of the Science of Logic – were to come under attack in their own later writings (for the cases of Feuerbach and Marx, see Frank 1975, 169–232).

Schelling’s opening lecture to his distinguished audience in Berlin was full of the pathos of a self-consciously assumed historic responsibility. He presented himself as the guardian of the genuine advances in philosophy since Kant (“nothing which has been gained for true science since Kant shall be lost because of me” (PO: 95)). And, without ever mentioning Hegel by name, he made clear his central concern: Hegelian philosophy, because of its incompatibility with “life,” had called forth a reaction which might lead to the rejection of philosophy as such:

396
SCHELLING AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Never before has such a powerful reaction from the side of life risen up against philosophy as in this moment. This proves that philosophy has penetrated through to those questions of life in the face of which no one is allowed to be, or indeed can be, indifferent.

(PO: 92)

With the concept “life” Schelling alluded, amongst other things, to our *prima facie*, practical conviction regarding the reality of human freedom, and to the need for a basic orientation in human existence, which – for him – necessarily had a religious dimension. However, it is clear that he had grasped the key problem for post-Hegelian philosophy, which emerged equally in the post-religious perspective of the Left Hegelians: had Hegel’s thought falsely claimed to satisfy the vital – the existential – interests of human beings, when in fact it had overridden them, in its drive to produce a comprehensive rational system? In Schelling’s New Testament metaphor: had Hegel offered his followers not bread, but a stone? (see Schelling 1998: 12).

In his late phase, in other words, Schelling took the view that Hegel’s attempt to unite the metaphysically absolute with the personally individual and historical had failed, and in this sense – as Habermas points out – he paved the way for the emphasis of the Left Hegelians, soon followed by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Marx, on the “weight of existence” (PDM: 68). At the same time, Schelling feared that justified disillusionment with Hegel would lead to the “destruction” of philosophy as such (PO: 96). Consequently, he was far from advocating an abandonment of philosophy’s drive for systematocity. Rather, Schelling proposes a system of a new kind, which acknowledges a fundamental distinction – as well as the intimate relation – between *a priori* philosophical thought and the interpretation of the historical development of human consciousness, by dividing into a “negative philosophy” and a “positive philosophy.” If the problem with Hegel’s project was that it had overreached itself, mistaking what could only be a “fragment of a higher whole” (PO: 95) for a comprehensive understanding of the world, then the answer, for Schelling, was not to turn away from philosophy in disillusionment (a response which was in fact to be enacted many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Rather, a novel, open-ended hermeneutics of the history of human consciousness – a science which “up until now has been regarded as impossible” (PO: 95) – must complement the *a priori* development of the fundamental categories of being, within a twin-track systematic project.

Marcuse’s Inculpation of Schelling’s Late Philosophy

As we will later consider in more detail, the role played by Schelling’s philosophy in the disintegration of Hegel’s system, and in particular in the emergence of the Left Hegelians, has preoccupied Habermas ever since his doctoral dissertation of the early 1950s (Habermas 1954). However, in *Reason and Revolution*, first published in 1941, Herbert Marcuse – a leading figure of the Frankfurt School’s first generation – vigorously denied any such catalytic role to Schelling’s late thinking. In a context in which Hegel’s political thought was widely regarded as a precursor of fascism and totalitarianism (Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* – the most influential statement of this view – would appear a few years later, in 1945), Marcuse was eager to emphasize the critical and emancipatory thrust of Hegel’s dialectic. As part of this enterprise, he concluded his monograph by portraying Schelling’s “late philosophy” (*Spätphilosophie*) as the precursor of nineteenth-century sociological positivism – the bourgeois reaction to Marx, the authentic inheritor of Hegel’s revolutionary dialectic. Evidently, there is an irony here, insofar as a total abandonment of philosophical reason was precisely the reaction which Schelling – in his inaugural Berlin lecture – feared
would be triggered by Hegel's exaggerated claims for the scope of pure a priori thinking. Furthermore, Marcuse himself concedes that “Schelling stresses that ‘experience’ is not limited to the facts of inner and outer sense” and that for Schelling “free creative activity is the ultimate matter of fact of experience” (RR: 324). Indeed, his association of Schelling's “positive philosophy” with the positivism of a figure such as Auguste Comte is based on little more than a terminological echo – Kierkegaard might have offered a more appropriate point of comparison. How, then, does Marcuse seek to portray Schelling as annulling the emancipatory power of reason he finds articulated by Hegel?

In the introduction to his Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Hegel declares that history “is one of the particular forms in which reason reveals itself, a reflection of the archetype in a particular element, in the life of nations” (Hegel 1975: 28). It cannot be said that Reason and Revolution develops a consistent attitude towards this Hegelian claim to have demonstrated a priori the rationality of the historical process. At the start of his chapter on Hegel's philosophy of history, Marcuse writes,

> Being, for dialectical logic, is a process through contradictions that determine the content and development of all reality. The Logic [i.e. Hegel's Science of Logic] had elaborated the timeless structure of this process, but the intrinsic connection, between the Logic and the other parts of the system, and, above all, the implications of the dialectical method destroy the very idea of timelessness.

(RR: 224)

This statement strongly suggests a contradiction internal to Hegel's system which the system itself cannot process: the very contradiction whose explosive potential eventually led to the disintegration of the Hegelian school. But Marcuse does not seem to be especially conscious of the problem he has highlighted. Rather, throughout the book his interpretation of Hegel passively registers this contradiction, by oscillating between the suggestion that Hegel conceives the world process itself as rationally structured in an objective sense, and an insistence that, for Hegel, it is human thought and agency which imbue the world with reason. Thus, on the one hand, Marcuse writes,

> The notion designates the general form of all being, and, at the same time, the true being which adequately represents this form, namely, the free subject. The subject exists, again, in a movement from lower to higher modes of self-realization. Hegel calls the highest form of this self-realization the idea.

(RR: 162)

On this account, the “free subject” is simply the supreme expression of the objective rationality of the “notion” – of conceptuality as the articulated structure of being. On the other hand, Marcuse also contends that, according to Hegel, “all modes of being attain their truth through the free subject that comprehends them in relation to its own rationality” (RR: 70 – my emphasis). This inconsistency is encapsulated in Marcuse's juxtaposed claims that the implication of Hegel's philosophy is that “reason cannot govern reality unless reality has become rational in itself” (RR: 7) and that “thought ought to govern reality” (RR: 6 – my emphasis). At the same time, a third strand of interpretation in Reason and Revolution promotes the view, reminiscent of the Left Hegelians, that “Philosophy reaches its end when it has formulated its view of a world in which reason is realized” (RR: 28). After this point, the task of philosophy is taken over by “social theory and social practice” (ibid.).

In fact, Marcuse alternates inconsistently between three basic possibilities identified by Michael Theunissen, in his classic analysis of the debates concerning the relation between
theory and praxis which erupted in the wake of Hegel (see Theunissen 1970: 36). For, in Marcuse’s ambiguous account, historical reality: is simply the given, which oppresses the individual until it is made intelligible by rational, but subjective comprehension (Theunissen’s first possibility); embodies a progressive realization of reason, as evidenced by the level of reconciliation of individual and universal already achieved within bourgeois society (his second possibility); has to be radically transformed as a result of the determinate negation of philosophy – in its culminating Hegelian form – by Marxian theory (the third possibility). All three of these options appear compressed awkwardly together in Marcuse’s statement that

Hegel was the last to interpret the world as reason, subjecting nature and history alike to the standards of thought and freedom. At the same time, he recognized the social and political order men had achieved as the basis on which reason had to be realized. His system brought philosophy to the threshold of its negation.

(RR: 252)

Marcuse’s difficulties in proposing a consistent interpretation of Hegel are not irrelevant to his reading of Schelling’s Spätphilosophie. His main accusation is that Schelling labels Hegel’s philosophy as “negative” because it “negated” – namely, it repudiated any irrational and unreasonable reality (RR: 325). Schelling supposedly objects to negative philosophy because “The matters of fact that make up the given state of affairs, when viewed in the light of reason, become negative, limited, transitory – they become perishing forms within a comprehensive process that leads beyond them” (ibid.). Correlatively, Schelling’s positive philosophy is portrayed as inclined towards empiricism, and hence as involving an uncritical “orientation of thought to matters of fact and the elevation of experience to the ultimate in knowledge” (RR: 327).

However, Schelling’s concern is far less with protecting the “given state of affairs” from criticism than with the character of the “comprehensive process” – that is to say, the epochal development of human self-consciousness, as expressed in the successive stages of mythology, revealed religion and philosophy. From his point of view, there are two main difficulties with Hegel’s conception. The first is that logical connections imply an inflexible necessity. Insofar as Hegel is committed to the view that his Science of Logic maps out a priori the basic categorial structure of any empirical domain, he cannot – in the last analysis – accommodate the free agency manifested in historical processes. Secondly, Hegel takes pride in the circular character of his system, as the definitive solution to the problem of philosophical foundations:

What is essential for science is not so much that the beginning should be something purely immediate, as that the whole of science should be in itself a circular movement, in which the first also becomes the last and the last the first.

(Hegel 1989: 71)

But this cyclical structure is incompatible with the future-directed, open-ended character of our modern historical consciousness, which we earlier saw emphasized by Habermas. Following Hegel’s own practice of using inherited religious language to characterize the ultimate ground of reality, Schelling argues that Hegel’s God is one who

only ever does what He has always done, and who therefore cannot create anything new; His life is a cycle of forms in which he perpetually externalizes Himself, in order to return to Himself again, and always returns to Himself, only in order to externalise Himself anew.

(Schelling 1994: 160)
But what about Marcuse’s second main criticism – that Schelling’s conception of “positive philosophy” involves a “struggle against metaphysical apriorism” (RR: 327) and an empiricist capitulation before the given? As far as the first aspect of this criticism is concerned, Marcuse completely ignores the fact that Schelling late system includes its own “negative philosophy.” Schelling fully accepts the need for an a priori thinking of being, which dialectically generates the system of categories structuring our efforts to make the world intelligible. But he differs from Hegel in his claim that the application of these concepts, in an interpretation of the dynamics of the natural world and the history of human consciousness, follows different epistemological principles from the process of production of these concepts. In short, in positive philosophy’s employment of the categories generated by negative philosophy, we are confronted with the facticity of a world of which we have to make sense – with “the pure that” (das reine Daß – a nominalized conjunction) (SW II/1: 587), which can never be entirely reduced to the sense which we make of it.

Schelling’s positive philosophy is based on a wager. Or, put less dramatically, it is driven by a commitment to the reality of freedom, a commitment which opens a perspective in which history appears as the struggle to overcome what he terms “the blindly being” (das Blindseiende) or “un-pre-thinkable being” (das unwordenliche Sein) (e.g., PO: 154–165) – the invasive facticity of sheer, pre-modal existence. This account of positive philosophy explains how, for Schelling, there can be an experience of the non-empirical – namely, of freedom. For freedom, while not phenomenologically available “in itself,” can be experienced in the overcoming of necessity, of the compulsion of blind being. This conception also points towards what Schelling, in his late philosophy, understands by “God.” For God is simply the inaugural act – an act which, by definition, must itself be absolutely free – that opens the possibility of something other than ontological compulsion. As Schelling puts it: “God is indeed nothing other than this will; this will not to be blind being...” (Schelling 1998: 117). From this standpoint, any circular, rationally closed system such as that of Hegel cannot transcend blind being towards willed purpose and meaning, but simply reproduces ontological coercion in the automatism of its logical structure. Rather than equating freedom and reason, as Hegel does, Schelling asserts that reason can serve the ends of freedom – but only when it is deployed in making sense of something other than itself.

Marcuse in effect admits that there is a problem with Hegel’s thought in this regard when he concedes that “in Hegel’s system all categories terminate in the existing order” (RR: 258). There is no need to underscore the discrepancy between this statement and his incessant attempts, throughout the first part of his book, to persuade his reader of the critical, indeed revolutionary potential of Hegel’s dialectical concept of reason. More significant is Marcuse’s assertion that “The transition from Hegel to Marx is, in all respects, a transition to an essentially different order of truth, not to be interpreted in terms of philosophy” (ibid.). For, at this point in Reason and Revolution, Marcuse re-enacts the response to Hegel which Schelling, in his first lecture in Berlin, feared would be that of his younger contemporaries. If anything deserves to be labelled as “positivist,” it is surely this out-and-out rejection of philosophy. Ironically, the damage done to Marxism by the assumption that philosophy could be supplanted entirely by a materialist theory of history is precisely what the Frankfurt School originally set out to repair.

Marcuse’s conception of Schelling’s historical role could not be more different from that proposed by Habermas. In an essay called “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices,” Habermas returns to the role which Schelling’s thought played in subverting German Idealism from within, as it were, and paving the way for later philosophical developments. From an early stage of Schelling’s thinking, Habermas suggests, he was preoccupied with the question:
Schelling and the Frankfurt School

Should matter, to which innerworldly beings owe their finitude, their concretion in space and time, and their power of resistance, be determined purely negatively as nonbeing? Must not matter, into which the Ideas are impressed and in which they fade into mere phenomena, be conceived as a principle that runs contrary to the intelligible – not merely as privation, as a residue that is left over after the removal of all determinate being and all good, but as an active force of negation that first generates the world of appearance and evil?

(Habermas 1992: 123)

Habermas goes on to claim that in Schelling's

remarkable polemic against the bias towards the affirmative, against the apotheosis and harmonization of the unruly, of the negative, there also stirs an impulse to resist the danger of idealist transfiguration.

(ibid.)

This commentary provides an excellent résumé of what Theodor Adorno – the most complex thinker of the first-generation Frankfurt School – found significant in Schelling's thought, on the evidence of his philosophical masterpiece, Negative Dialectics.

Adorno's Response to Schelling

Clearly, as the title of the book suggests, Adorno's principal interlocutor is Hegel. But the notion of “negative dialectics,” as Adorno develops it, represents an attempt to push dialectical thinking beyond the limit which, he argues, was imposed by Hegel's insistence on the circular closure of his system. In this enterprise, Schelling becomes a useful ally, because of his view that reality resists complete subordination to what Hegel himself terms “the omnipotence of the concept” (die Allmacht des Begriffes) (Hegel 1989: 662). In short, Adorno draws on Schelling's philosophy not as a substitute for Hegel, but rather as a valuable corrective, one that foreshadows what he terms the “transition to materialism” (ND: 192–194):

If dialectics were to close completely on itself, then it would already be that totality which leads back to the identity principle. Schelling perceived this interest against Hegel, and thereby exposed himself to ridicule for the abdication of a mode of thought portrayed as taking flight to mysticism. The materialistic moment in Schelling, which attributed something like a driving force to the material in itself, may play a role in that aspect of his philosophy.

(ND: 182)

Of course, the attribution of a “driving force” to the material dimension of things is not compatible with metaphysical materialism, with the doctrine that everything that happens in the world is reducible to a “redistribution of microphysical states” – to use an expression of W. V. O. Quine – and that the subjective, experiential dimension of reality is, at most, epiphenomenal. But Adorno would regard such a totalizing view as simply the mirror image of the idealism it purports to oppose. By contrast, what he finds in Schelling is a conception of what we might call the “proto-subjectivity” of the material. Thus, in Negative Dialectics, Adorno writes,

Both, body and spirit, are abstractions from the experience of them, their radical difference is something posited. This difference reflects the historically achieved
Hegel too regards nature as implicitly spirit. But, in his case, this status is conferred by the fact that nature is an embodiment of the logical idea – the first stage on its dialectical journey towards concrete self-consciousness. Hence, in the “Introduction” to Part Two of the *Encyclopaedia*, which expounds his philosophy of nature, Hegel insists that “What we engaged on here is not a matter of imagination, not a matter of fantasy; it is a matter of the concept and of reason” (Hegel 1970: 2). From Adorno’s perspective, however, this assertion of the primacy of conceptuality and reason simply reaffirms the dominance of human subjectivity over nature, under the guise of aiming for a reconciliation of the two. By contrast, Schelling’s vocabulary of “longing” (*Sehnen*) and “desiring” (*Begehren*) portrays nature as obscurely driven to seek a self-consciousness which is finally achieved at the level of human existence. The anthropomorphic language characteristic of Schelling’s middle period, and prominent in the quotations from *The Ages the of World* which Adorno supplies at this point in *Negative Dialectics*, stresses the affinity between the natural and the human, without basing such kinship on nature’s status as an imperfect, externalized version of dialectical structures which will eventually reach their full self-comprehension as absolute spirit.

It is not surprising that Adorno specifically quotes *Die Weltalter* (“The Ages of the World”) at this point. For this project, on which Schelling worked intensively between 1811 and 1815 – though it was never published in his lifetime – is often regarded as the high point of his development of proto-materialist insights and his critique of idealism. By contrast, the late philosophy, which begins towards the end of 1820s, when Schelling explicitly draws a distinction between “positive” and “negative” philosophy, is regarded by some commentators as a retreat, involving a revival of theological motifs which his earlier thinking had challenged. We have textual evidence, however, for Adorno’s respect for the “utmost exertion of thought” embodied in Schelling’s late philosophy (Adorno 1978: 69). And this admiration is scarcely surprising, given Adorno’s personal closeness to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who was himself profoundly interested in and influenced by Schelling’s late thinking (see Tillich 1974). Tillich supervised Adorno’s Habilitation (or second doctorate) on Kierkegaard, and the two thinkers co-taught seminars at Frankfurt University in the early 1930s, before they were driven out of Germany by the Nazis. On Tillich’s death, Adorno paid a moving tribute to him at the start of his 1965/66 lecture course on negative dialectics (see Adorno: 2008: 2–4). But, beyond these suggestive biographical details, can specific echoes of Schelling’s late thought be detected in Adorno’s mature philosophy?

It is a commonplace that *Negative Dialectics* seeks to develop a conception of dialectics which avoids the closure of Hegel’s dialectical thinking. It is not so frequently understood, however, that this project necessarily puts dialectics itself in question – or, at least, makes dialectical thinking unsuitable for Adorno’s unqualified endorsement. The difficulty lies in the fact that, for Hegel, dialectical movement reaches its conclusion when the contradictions which push it forward have been resolved. Contradictions violate the law of identity and it is this which gives them their driving force. Hence, the end of the dialectical movement must be a principle which is fully identical with itself – in which even form and content coincide. Of course, Hegel develops a complex conception of identity, which includes contradiction within itself. But it includes contradiction as a subordinate moment, and it does so precisely in order to avoid becoming self-contradictory in terms of its ultimate principle. This principle is what Hegel calls the “absolute Idea.”

402
By contrast, Adorno is suspicious of the telos of full self-identity – since he believes that any achieved identity involves an element of compulsion. But this does not entail that he is content to dwell in unresolved contradictions – which would be the Hegelian objection to such a position. Rather, for Adorno identity and contradiction are the basic, mutually supporting features of a mode of thinking that reflects and expresses the compulsion inherent in the past and present organization of human social life, based, as it is, on the domination of nature and – by extension – of human beings treated as simply part of nature. This is why he writes, early in Negative Dialectics, that “in view of the concrete possibility of utopia, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. A right state of things would be freed from dialectics – no more system than contradiction” (ND: 11 – my emphasis). At the end of the book he repeats the point: “Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective nexus of delusion, and has not already escaped it” (ND: 406). Dialectics is such self-consciousness, a “copy of the universal nexus of delusion” as well as “its critique” (ibid.), because it logically mirrors opaque social compulsion at the level of reflective thought.

It should be noted that Adorno does not restrict these claims to Hegelian dialectics. Any mode of dialectical thinking – including negative dialectics – must operate in the force field between contradiction and identity, and, in this respect, it will exemplify compulsion. Hence, Adorno writes,

> It belongs to the destiny of negative dialectics that it does not remain tranquilly with itself, as if it were total; that is its configuration of hope.

(ibid.)

Adorno’s reference to “hope” makes clear that the transcendence of negative dialectics as such cannot itself be construed as a further dialectical move, for this would be self-contradictory – even though “the force required for the break-out accrues to dialectics from the context of immanence” (ibid.). But this subtle argument inevitably raises the question: what sustains hope that something might lie beyond even negative dialectics, and the social compulsion whose impress it inevitably bears? How could we imagine an alternative to – or anticipate breaking out of – the “objective nexus of delusion”? Adorno knows that to assert even the possibility of such a transcending movement would be an utterly feeble, negligible gesture, were there nothing in the here and now which offered a concrete anticipation – however fleeting and elusive – of the vistas it would open up. But where is such an experience to be found, or how could it be characterized? It is to these questions that the final part of Negative Dialectics, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” is devoted.

Adorno argues that in moments of what he calls “metaphysical experience” we do glimpse the transcendent – whatever may lie beyond the pervasive nexus of domination and compulsion. Metaphysical experience has affinities with what is evoked in the mystical traditions of religious thought (ND: 372), but also with what is opened up to us in great art – for example, the music of Beethoven (ND: 397). In philosophy, Kant’s postulates of practical reason, and the hope which they are intended to sustain, also point towards this dimension of experience (ND: 390–393). But, according to Adorno, the straightjacket of Kant’s theory of knowledge, or what he calls the “Kantian block,” transforms the term “metaphysical experience” into an oxymoron; the Critical Philosophy makes room for a dimension of hope or “rational faith,” but only at the cost of a strict elimination of any cognitive content. In the central sections of “Meditations on Metaphysics” Adorno argues repeatedly with this Kantian attitude, which he regards as an archetype of bourgeois complacency – the declaration of those matters most existentially urgent for human beings as speculatively off bounds. The character of metaphysical experience could perhaps best be described as an experience of the emancipation of the subject which, at the same time, does no damage to what Adorno
terms the “priority of the object” (ND: 183–186) – the fact that the objective world cannot be exhausted by our modes of apprehension of it. For Adorno, to be fully human we must acknowledge what transcends the human: “Subjectively liberated and metaphysical experience converge in humanity” (ND: 397).

A parallel between Adorno’s interrelating of negative dialectics and metaphysical experience, and Schelling’s interconnection of “negative philosophy” and “positive philosophy,” does not appear far-fetched. Indeed, Adorno specifically refers to dialectics as the “epitome of negative knowledge” (der Inbegriff negativen Wissens) (ND: 405). For both thinkers, dialectical thinking is “negative” because in its very form, in its impersonal rigor, it negates the element of spontaneity essential to freedom, and which is implicit – even if not immediately apparent – in genuinely historical processes. Furthermore, for Schelling – as for Adorno – modern reason reverts to the compulsive opacity of mythology (see Hutter 1996: 371–376) because it allows no breathing space between thought and being. Far from this resulting in the full control of the object by the subject, the upshot is the invasion of the subject by objective coercion. By contrast, “positive philosophy” does leave such a space. As Schelling puts it, “To go beyond being, and to come itself into a free relation to it, this is the authentic striving of philosophy” (SW, II/2, 33–34). Positive philosophy, then, does not equate making sense of being with achieving conclusive expression of a purported full rationality of being. It acknowledges being in its facticity, without submitting to this facticity, since its aim is precisely to reconstruct the historical narrative of the struggle to overcome blind being. In this sense, the transition from negative to positive philosophy achieves a coincidence of form and content by itself enacting the emancipation from blind being which is positive philosophy’s central concern. As Schelling explains,

In positive philosophy, negative philosophy triumphs; for it is the science in which thinking posits itself in freedom from all necessary content.

(PO: 153)

**Habermas as Interpreter of Schelling**

As we noted earlier, Jürgen Habermas’s 1954 doctoral dissertation already recorded his interest in the role played by Schelling in the disintegration of Hegelianism – in what Marx satirically described as the “decomposition of absolute spirit.” It was while researching the dissertation, devoted to Schelling’s philosophy, that Habermas encountered Karl Löwith’s *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, a book which has shaped his thinking ever since (Löwith 1991). Löwith’s classic deals precisely with the dramatic transformation of European philosophy which occurred in the wake of Hegel. Enthused by his reading, Habermas added a long initial chapter to his dissertation, dealing with thought of Bauer, Feuerbach, Stirner, Marx and Kierkegaard, as responses to the crisis of Hegelianism. However, the centre of gravity of the dissertation is not the late philosophy of Schelling, but rather the drafts of *The Ages of the World*, written between 1811 and 1815. One of its major claims is that the Weltalter texts develop a more convincing conception of finite, historically situated freedom than is offered by the other great Idealists, Fichte and Hegel (Habermas 1954: 303–318). This argument was reformulated and further developed in the major essay on Schelling which Habermas published in his 1963 collection, *Theorie und Praxis*: “Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling’s Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History.”

Schelling’s central idea, in *The Ages of the World*, is that ontological inconsistency arises within the absolute – or the ultimate source of reality – which can only be resolved by the emergence of a temporal world, structured by the tension between the dimensions of past, present and future. In contrast to Hegel, whose *Logic* begins with the indistinguishability of
thought and being, Schelling argues that the starting point must lie beyond the distinction between being and non-being. He therefore characterizes it as "the will which wills nothing," since an inactive will cannot be said to exist as will, but cannot be denied all existence either: the ultimate origin of things can be envisioned as a divine state of blissful, boundless unselfconsciousness (SW II/3: 16). However, this suspension cannot be maintained, and an ontological tug of war ensues, as the primordial will divides into a particularizing urge and a universalizing urge, each of which strives to embody the whole of being. Even the emergence of a third mode of willing – the residual, and therefore potentially reconciling commonality of the conflicting wills – collapses back into particularity. The result is what the later drafts of the Weltalterphilosophie describe as a frenzied "rotary movement" (rotatorische Bewegung) (Schelling 1942: 119) occurring in what can be termed "logical time."

Schelling's stroke of genius is to argue that this gyration madness is resolved by the actualization of a temporal world stretched across the dimensions of past (= the particularizing will), present (= the universalizing will) and future (= the reconciling will). This resolution is possible because temporality distributes the three vectors of being in a sequence where each has its place and its role. The point is that past, present and future cannot be represented as following one another along a supposed line of time. Para-temporally, they are both sequential and simultaneous. They "collaborate" to produce the happening of time, as the universalizing present strives to break away from the particularizing drag of the past towards a reconciling future. The consequence of this conception, however, is that God effectively ceases to be God – loses all sovereignty, and is entirely plunged into the maelstrom of the temporal process. This is the central meaning of the "contraction of God" – a notion Schelling derived from Jakob Boehme and the Lurianic Kabbalah, and which Habermas highlights in the title of his essay.

Effectively, Schelling's Weltalterphilosophie turns Hegel on his head. For Hegel, finite things are doomed to transience, since they can never adequately instantiate their conceptually defined, normative essence. Particular entities are merely non-self-subsistent abstractions from the overall world process, which is the only ultimate reality. As Hegel states in the Encyclopaedia Logic, "the truth of the finite is...its ideality...This ideality of the finite is the most important proposition of philosophy, and for that reason every genuine philosophy is Idealism" (Hegel 1991: §95). In Schelling, by contrast, it is the actual world stretched out across the three dimensions of time that holds in check the contradictions of the rotary movement – contradictions which are not susceptible to any ideal or logical resolution. In Hegel, in other words, circularity represents the ultimate escape from linearity (Hegel's "bad infinite"), whereas in Schelling we escape from the compulsive nightmare of circularity into the directional movement of time. Not only this: according to Habermas, Schelling foreshadows Marx, because the remainderless contraction of God into the historical process results in the dominance of the past over the present, of the particular over the universal, the material over the ideal. Human history can be seen as a struggle to overcome this dominance of the material principle – driven by the anticipation of a reconciliation of the material and the spiritual, or what the young Marx called "the realized naturalism of the human being and realized humanism of nature" (Marx 1992: 350).

In "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism," Habermas also draws on Schelling to launch his own critique of Hegel, arguing that the latter's conception of his system as a circular structure is vulnerable both to a theoretical and to what might be termed an "existential" objection. The theoretical objection focuses on the problem that one must attain the standpoint of pure thought, beyond the shapes of consciousness in which the subject is confronted with an object other than itself, in order to commence the self-reflexive process of thinking unfolded in the Logic. True, the Phenomenology of Spirit sets the stage for that standpoint, by culminating in the realization that being is the self-articulation of the
concept – der Begriff – or of universal reason. But the shift to that vantage point itself, as Hegel emphasizes, involves a new ascetic act in which “the freedom that abstracts from everything…grasps its own pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking” (Hegel 1991: §78). However, the reasons for undertaking this act, and indeed even for considering it as feasible, will necessarily be prior and external to the self-confirming system which the Logic is supposed to initiate, once the inaugural move has been made. As Habermas puts it, “A beginning of the system is not systematically conceivable” (“Systematisch ist ein Anfang des Systems nicht denkbar”) (DITM: 50).

The existential objection focuses on Hegel’s claim that his philosophy is distinguished by its capacity to confront the “the pain, the difficulty and the labor of the negative” (Hegel 1977: 10). Habermas argues that if the system is indeed circular, then this claim rings hollow, for such suffering becomes inevitable and perpetual, hard-wired into reality, and in this sense its sting is drawn. As Hegel himself writes,

For the sake of the freedom which the concept attains in it, the Idea also has within itself the hardest opposition; its tranquility consists in the sureness and certainty with which it eternally generates and eternally overcomes this opposition and in it converges with itself.

(Hegel 1989: 759)

In Habermas’s depiction, this prospect of an endless cycle, in which “salvation” comes only from “the sacrifice of fulfillment itself” (DITM: 50), in which “Eternal life is actual only as redemption from eternity through (immortal) death” (DITM: 50), fills Schelling with horror. Truly to take the pain and negativity of existence seriously means to be driven by the desire for their final overcoming. But such an overcoming is only conceivable if the distress can be traced back to an event, rather than following with inevitable logical from the structure of reality: only if history has a contingent beginning can it have an emancipatory end. For Schelling, this beginning occurred as human beings, in awakening to self-consciousness, fell under the sway of selfhood, and hence of the particularity of the natural world in general. The result was the “false unity” – the domination of the material over the spiritual – which has characterized human history, and which must in turn be overthrown. As Habermas points out, Hegel is fully aware that internal contradiction can cause a unity to fall part. But, in this case, there occurs only a diremption into abstract moments, until a new reconciling unity is achieved. What his Logic cannot accommodate is the thought of a “positively posited false unity” (DITM: 63) of the kind which has defined human history up until now.

This Schellingian critique of Hegel has remained an element of Habermas’s thinking throughout his career. It is noteworthy, because it differs from the far more familiar, indeed clichéd objection that Hegel endows the historical process with too much purposiveness and meaning. It also clearly sets up a resonance with Adorno’s statement that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things.” At the same time, however, Habermas shares something of Marcuse’s hostility towards Schelling’s Spätphilosophie. Already in his doctoral dissertation he had argued that the authentic philosophy of finite freedom is to be found in Schelling’s middle-period works, and that late Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy is unviable, since positive philosophy can only reiterate pointlessly, at an empirical level, the transcendental structures determined by its negative counterpart. In his 1963 essay on Schelling, Habermas repeats this unfavourable contrast between Schelling’s middle-period and late thought in even greater detail. Either negative philosophy must culminate in a dialectical articulation of the meaning of being, as does Hegel’s Logic, or it is entirely redundant – simply a barrier to a supposed confrontation with bare existence, whose baleful consequences are finally played out in the philosophy of Heidegger (DITM: 75–76).
There is an irony in this Habermasian response to late Schelling, however. For by the 1970s Habermas was himself beginning to advocate a bipartite conception of “post-metaphysical” philosophical activity, divided between the roles of “placeholder” and “interpreter.” As “placeholder,” philosophy pioneers quasi-transcendental projects of “rational reconstruction” (the elucidation of the conditions of possibility of human capacities such as linguistic communication) which can inspire – and productively collaborate with – research programmes in the human sciences. As “interpreter,” philosophy is oriented towards the “lifeworld,” the web of tacit knowledge and normative assumptions which guides our everyday social interaction and perception (see Habermas 1992: 1–20). It is difficult not to discern in this division of labour an after-echo of Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy. And the parallels have become ever more pertinent as Habermas has increasingly placed religion at the centre of the lifeworld context which philosophy seeks to interpret.

For example, in his lecture on *Faith and Knowledge*, Habermas repeats the critique of Hegel which has been central to his thought ever since the beginning, in the context of the latter’s claim to provide a conceptual equivalent for the pictorially expressed truths of the Christian tradition:

Hegel makes the death of the Son of God on the Cross central to a mode of thinking that seeks to incorporate Christianity as a positive shape of consciousness… Even the absolute must externalize itself as the other of itself, since it only experiences itself as absolute power when it works its way out of the painful negativity of self-limitation. In this way, religious contents are sublimated into the form of the philosophical concept. But Hegel sacrifices the dimension of the future held open by the history of salvation to a world process revolving in itself. Teleology is ultimately bent back into a circle.

(Habermas 2005: 334)

If this statement is indeed intended as a criticism of Hegel, it implies that there is a truth contained in the notion of a “history of salvation” (Heilsgeschichte) which cannot be fully recuperated in conceptual terms. And in fact, Habermas’s account of the relation between religion and philosophy in the late phase of his thought, which depicts philosophy as engaged in a translation effort which may never entirely exhaust the “meaning-generating resources” (Habermas 2017: 105) of religion, repeats very precisely Schelling’s portrayal of the role of positive philosophy in relation to a “revelation” whose epochal hegemony – as opposed to disclosive power – he regards as a thing of the past. As he declared in his first cycle of Berlin lectures: “Revelation must contain something which goes beyond reason, but something which we cannot have without reason” (PO: 98).

One of the defining features of the Frankfurt School – across its successive generations – has been a determination to highlight the constraints and reifications of modern reason, without thereby renouncing reason altogether. Marcuse’s evaluation of the relation between Hegel and Schelling comes to grief precisely because he fails to follow through on this complex intention. By contrast, the uptake of Schelling’s philosophy in the work of both Habermas and Adorno suggests that the thinker who dismantled German Idealism from within should be accredited as a significant precursor of the programme of the Frankfurt School.

**Abbreviations**

Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* = ND
Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* = PDM
Habermas, “Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism” = DITM
PETER DWEWS

Marcuse, Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory = RR
Schelling, Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42 = PO
Schelling, Sämtliche Werke = SW, followed by part and volume number.

References

NB: The author has frequently altered the English in citations from works originally in German.


——— (1977) "Einleitung des Herausgebers", in Schelling, Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42.


Further Reading