

TEXTS IN GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

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*On the  
History of  
Modern  
Philosophy*

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F.W.J. von Schelling

F. W. J. VON SCHELLING

# On the History of Modern Philosophy

Translation, Introduction, and notes

by

Andrew Bowie

PROFESSOR OF EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

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## On the History of Modern Philosophy

*On the History of Modern Philosophy* is a key transitional text in the history of European philosophy. In it F. W. J. von Schelling surveys philosophy from Descartes to German Idealism and shows why the Idealist project is ultimately doomed to failure. The lectures trace the path of philosophy from Descartes through Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi to Hegel and Schelling's own work. The extensive critiques of Hegel prefigure many of the arguments to be found in Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida.

This is the first English translation of *On the History of Modern Philosophy*. In his introduction Andrew Bowie sets the work in the context of Schelling's career and clarifies its philosophical issues. The translation will be of special interest to philosophers, intellectual historians, literary theorists, and theologians.

# TEXTS IN GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

*General Editor:* RAYMOND GEUSS

The purpose of this series is to make available, in English, central works of German philosophy from Kant to the present. Although there is rapidly growing interest in the English-speaking world in different aspects of the German philosophical tradition as an extremely fertile source of study and inspiration, many of its crucial texts are not available in English or exist only in inadequate or dated translations. The series is intended to remedy that situation, and the translations where appropriate will be accompanied by historical and philosophical introductions and notes. Single works, selections from a single author, and anthologies will all be represented.

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## Translator's Preface

The diversity of German Idealist and Romantic philosophy has still to be fully appreciated in the English-speaking world. In the light of the revival of interest in the philosophy of German Idealism there is an obvious need for more translations of work from this tradition. Too much discussion of modern European philosophy still takes place on the basis of the limited number of already translated texts and therefore neglects questions posed by other texts that have as yet not been translated. F. W. J. von Schelling's *Lectures On the History of Modern Philosophy*, translated here for the first time, are a crucial addition to the list of works of nineteenth-century German philosophy translated into English. The *Lectures* are particularly valuable because they outline most of the key philosophical ideas of Schelling's later work, virtually none of which has appeared in English. The later Schelling, while remaining true to some of the aims of German Idealist philosophy, rejected central aspects of that philosophy. In so doing he was probably the first to establish many key themes in European philosophy that reappear in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, and others.

The *Lectures* were not published until after Schelling's death, and he did not, as far as we know, prepare a definitive version for publication. However, the distinguished Schelling scholar Horst Fuhrmans is sure that the text is authentic, even if its exact date is not certain (the date would seem to be either 1833–4 or 1836–7). The text translated here was compiled by K. F. A. Schelling, Schelling's son, from his father's own manuscript of the *Lectures*, to which he appended a few relevant supplementary texts from other work by his father. I have taken the text directly from the edition of Schelling's works prepared by K. F. A. Schelling, which appeared between 1856 and 1861, soon after Schelling's death in 1854, and which has been the standard text of Schelling's work ever since. Virtually all the extant Schelling manuscripts, including the manuscript of the *Lectures*, were destroyed during the Second World War, in the air raids on Munich in

July 1944 (a few texts survived in Berlin). I have made no attempt to produce a new edition of Schelling's text, a task that must be left to the editors of the new edition of Schelling's works,<sup>1</sup> working on the basis of surviving lecture notes made by others at Schelling's lectures. The *Lectures On the History of Modern Philosophy* are unlikely to appear in that edition for some considerable time.

The use of the existing text, instead of a modern edition with a critical apparatus, is not necessarily a disadvantage: decisions about what is the "real" text of an author can be made on the basis of many differing criteria. The present translation is of the text which was available to Schelling's successors, and it is undoubtedly the work of Schelling himself. The reliability of the text is testified to by its substantial correspondences to versions of Schelling's account of modern philosophy from other sources, such as lecture notes made by members of his audience in the late 1820s, the 1830s, and the 1840s, and other parts of the son's edition. Every effort has been made to provide an accurate translation of the original and to explain, in translator's notes, obscurities that might hinder understanding. Whenever there was the serious possibility of any ambiguity I have added the German text in brackets. The only omissions in the translated text are of the son's own occasional cross references to other parts of his edition, which are of little or no help, even to a reader of the German original. I have tried to preserve Schelling's sentence structure as far as possible, and most of the idiosyncratic typographical emphases have been reproduced in italic and boldface type.

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I should like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for enabling me to complete my work on Schelling in Tübingen. I am very grateful indeed to Manfred Frank, whose essential work in restoring the philosophical reputation of Schelling was my main inspiration for undertaking this project, and whose friendship, advice, support, fine wines, and congenial company made the work in Tübingen all the more enjoyable. Liz Bradbury's company, forbearance during my protracted absences, persuasive defenses of Hegel, and support in the midst of crises were vital. Raymond Geuss took on the project and made vital editorial suggestions, as well as persuading me to write a separate book on Schelling, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (London, 1993). Peter Dews and I discussed many of Schel-

*The Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, im Auftrag der Schelling-Kommission der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, edited by H. M. Baumgartner, W. G. Jacobs, H. Krings, Stuttgart, 1976-.

ling's ideas in Tübingen, to my great profit. Anglia Polytechnic University in Cambridge kindly gave me leave of absence to take up the Humboldt Fellowship. Andrew Benjamin, Phil Blond, Rüdiger Bubner, Matthew Festenstein, Heidrun Hesse, David Isaac, Nick Jardine, Chris Lawn, Peter Middleton, Julian Roberts, Cara Ryan, Birgit Sandkaulen-Bock, Simon Schaffer, Gianfranco Soldati, Bob Stern, Martin Swales, Nick Walker, other members of the Philosophisches Seminar at Tübingen, and many others were invaluable interlocutors at various times. Henry Merritt restored my faith in computer technology in a crisis and helped speed the completion of the work. My thanks go to the copy editor, Christie Lerch, for making me aware of some of the problems in my original version of the translation and for her careful attention to all aspects of the manuscript. My parents, as always, were enormously encouraging and supportive.

Andrew Bowie



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# Translator's Introduction

## REASSESSING SCHELLING

The reputation of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) in the English-speaking world has depended almost exclusively upon his early work, which influenced both the English Romantics and other philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic currents in the first half of the nineteenth century. The work of the later Schelling has, in contrast, been largely ignored by philosophers and has been seen as of interest mainly to theologians, with the result that its specifically philosophical import has not been appreciated. In the light of the recent growth of interest in German Idealism and its links to the rest of modern philosophy, it is important that some of the work of the later Schelling should become available to an English-speaking public, particularly in view of recent enthusiastic reassessments of Hegel. The best text through which such an audience can approach the work of the later Schelling is the lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, translated here for the first time, which contain the most extended of Schelling's critiques of Hegel. The Lectures (as I shall refer to them) are one of the most significant works of nineteenth-century German philosophy, and their influence has yet to be adequately appreciated.

Because the Lectures deal with figures such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, who are already familiar to those in both the analytical and European traditions, they enable one to gain an idea of Schelling's own philosophical perspective in his later period. The date of the Lectures has not been finally established. They were for a long time assumed to have been given in 1827, but this cannot be the case, given the access we now have to notes taken at Schelling's lectures at the University of Munich in that year (Schelling 1990). The probable date is 1833–4, but there is also evidence to suggest 1836–7. Parts of the text of the Lectures, particularly those relating to Hegel, were adopted almost verbatim in the lectures Schelling gave under the title *The Philosophy of Revelation* in 1841–2 at the University of Berlin, when he took over what had, until 1831, been Hegel's chair

of philosophy. Towards the end of the 1830s Schelling did reduce the role in his system given to the historical review of philosophy that makes up the Lectures (see Fuhrmans' introduction to Schelling 1972), but the Lectures can still be regarded as an integral part of the late work. The real importance of the Lectures lies in their critique of Hegel in the light of the later Schelling's understanding of the history of philosophy since Descartes. In this introduction I shall describe Schelling's perspective on the history of modern philosophy by outlining certain aspects of his work as a whole, in order to suggest why the later Schelling deserves our renewed attention.<sup>1</sup>

The recent revival of interest in German Idealism has been fuelled by the widespread rejection of philosophies which entail a subject-object duality and a notion of cognition which depends upon assuming a mind separate from the rest of the world. The suspicion that the mechanistic, objectifying forms of explanation that came to dominate natural science and philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century are seriously inadequate has led to a reconsideration of some of the major philosophical positions of the early nineteenth century. German Idealism has a somewhat paradoxical status in this respect. On the one hand, it is seen as a form of totalising metaphysics that merely conjured away, rather than overcoming, the modern problem of the relationship between thought and being that was revealed by Kant's critique of previous metaphysics. On the other hand, German Idealism is seen as that strand of modern philosophy which began to develop a methodologically defensible way of overcoming the split between consciousness and the world. This latter perspective offers most for a reassessment of the work of Schelling.

The overlapping stages of Schelling's philosophy began with his enthusiasm, in the mid-1790s, for Fichte's attempts to revise Kant's transcendental philosophy, which had given the primary role to the activity of consciousness in the constitution of the knowable world. Along with this went the beginning of Schelling's lifelong preoccupation with Spinoza. Towards the end of the century Schelling developed his *Naturphilosophie*, or philosophy of nature, which extended Fichte's notion of the activity of the subject into the idea of all of nature as "productivity". The *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800 considered art to be the medium in which the activity of thought and the productivity of nature could be understood as ultimately the same. The "identity philosophy", Schelling's attempt at a complete system which would demonstrate that "subject" and "object", the

<sup>1</sup> I have elsewhere given a much more detailed account of these issues, relating them to contemporary concerns (see Bowie 1993). I refer those who want more historical detail to Xavier Tilliette's monumental *Schelling. Une philosophie en devenir* (Tilliette 1970).

"ideal" and the "real", are only different degrees or aspects of the Same, concerned him in the early 1800s (and in many ways for the rest of his life). During this period he broke with Fichte, whom he regarded as failing to move beyond the sphere of self-consciousness to that consciousness's ground in a nature of which it is only one aspect. In the 1809 *On the Essence of Human Freedom* (the last substantial text published by Schelling in his lifetime), and in the 1811-15 *Ages of the World*, Schelling renounced the tendency towards a balanced polar relationship of the "ideal" (mind, subject) and the "real" (matter, object) that had been present in much of his preceding work and became concerned with understanding the ground of which the antagonistic principles that constitute the world are the consequence. Schelling's late work attempted to establish what he termed a "positive philosophy", of which the Lectures formed a part. The late philosophy began to develop in the 1820s, and he continued to revise it for the rest of his life. Positive philosophy sought to move beyond "negative philosophy", exemplified in Hegel's *Logic*, which explicated the forms of pure thought that determine *what* things are. The goal of positive philosophy was to come to terms both with the fact *that* things are and with the contingencies of the historical emergence and development of thinking. The ultimate aim of positive philosophy was to derive a philosophically viable religion from a reinterpretation of the historical development of Christianity. It was not least Schelling's failure to achieve this latter aim that led to many of the valid aspects of the later philosophy being ignored.

The story generally told about the history of German Idealism is that it was initiated by Fichte's critique of Kant, carried on by Schelling's criticisms of Fichte in his *Naturphilosophie* and identity system, and brought to (an albeit temporary) end by Hegel's development of a complete system of philosophy, on the basis of the philosophical articulation of the identity of subject and object. It is this story that now needs correction if we are to do justice to Schelling. Although Schelling aimed at many of the same goals as Hegel, his work is important precisely because it shows that Hegel's attempt to reach a final resolution in philosophy could not succeed. The divided world with which Schelling's later work confronts us makes a major contribution to modern philosophy in ways which are only now beginning to be explored.

#### MIND AND NATURE

Only in recent years has the period of German Idealism begun to be understood in sufficient depth for more adequate philosophical

judgements about it to become possible. One vital aspect of the context in which German Idealism arose is the "Pantheism controversy", which began in 1783 (see Beiser 1987). This was a theological controversy, involving most of the major thinkers of the period, about the interpretation and significance of Spinoza's philosophy. "Pantheism" can be interpreted in many ways, as Schelling shows in the Lectures, but one version of it entails the idea that God and nature are identical. For Spinoza, God was that which is cause of itself and whose essence involves its existence. To the extent to which things are explicable, they are so because they embody the intelligibility of God: "All things, I repeat, are in God, and all things which come to pass, come to pass solely through the laws of the infinite nature of God, and follow . . . from the necessity of his existence" (Spinoza 1955 p. 59). All finite things are explicable in terms of their dependence upon their causal relations to other things, which are in turn dependent upon their relationships to other things, *ad infinitum*. God is this infinity, in that He is not conditioned like everything else: His nature is the totality of those conditions, and He is therefore the first cause. The vital fact about Spinoza's philosophy in relation to Schelling is that it need not be understood merely as a theology: the dominant image of the world in modern science relies upon the idea that the task of scientific investigation is to reveal the chain of conditions which explains a particular phenomenon in nature via the principle of sufficient reason.

In one of the most influential contributions to the Pantheism controversy, which plays a vital role in the genesis of German Idealism, F. H. Jacobi, whose later work Schelling criticises in the Lectures, raised the question of what happens if one tries to make the principle of sufficient reason the sole means of understanding the world. Jacobi suggests in relation to Spinoza that "we remain, as long as we grasp things conceptually (*begreifen*), in a chain of *conditioned conditions*" (cited in Sandkaulen-Bock 1990 p. 15). This chain blocks the route to that which has no condition, the *Unbedingte*, the Absolute, which Jacobi terms *Seyn*, "being". The hiatus between what can be explained causally and "being" is for Jacobi what allows him to sustain the notion of God, who is not, as in Pantheism, to be equated with nature's intelligibility, and who therefore cannot be known but only revealed. The problem which comes to concern Schelling and his contemporaries in the 1790s is precisely the relationship between a nature of causally related things in the knowable world and the Absolute. The Absolute need not be thought of as some strange, mystical entity: it is initially just the necessary correlate of the relative status of anything that can be explained causally.

The importance of Kant in this debate, and the main reason why he was attacked by Jacobi, lay in his denial that we can say anything positive about things in themselves. Kant argued that all knowledge is of "intuitions", which are organised by categories of the understanding. This meant we have no right to claim that we can *know* any more than the necessary connections of intuitions in the judgements of our understanding. The problem with this, as Jacobi suggested, is that it makes knowledge groundless. Kant, though, did not deny the *existence* of what was beyond the world of phenomena, in that the world "in itself" includes ourselves, who are free as noumena, even as we are determined as phenomena. The question that concerned German Idealism was how to understand the relationship of the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds.

It was J. G. Fichte who suggested, in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 and subsequent texts, that our cognitive and our practical aspects must have a common source if Kant's philosophy is to provide what Kant intended, a grounding of the possibility of knowledge and ethics that did not have to rely on theological support. Fichte's key move was to radicalise Kant's question as to how knowledge can explain itself. He argued that consciousness could not be understood in the same way as any aspect of the object world. The real question was how the mind came to the act of reflection upon its own functioning at all. If the mind were really a mechanism, it would be inexplicable why it came to reflect upon itself, because there could be no *reason* for it to do so. Nothing in a chain of cause and effect can explain why that chain should come to the point of thinking about itself as itself. For consciousness to reflect upon itself it must have a subject-object structure, but that structure is not sufficient to explain consciousness, because one needs a third aspect that establishes the identity of reflector and reflected. This ground must have an uncaused, absolute status, which Fichte attributes to the "I".

Subjectivity for Fichte, then, is a self-acting spontaneity which cannot be explained via a prior cause, because that would contradict its essential nature by putting it in a relationship of causal dependence. The structure of the world is, as it was for Kant, a product of the I: it does not, as had been thought in dogmatic metaphysics, depend upon the essence of things in themselves. Fichte, though, gives an account of the I which Kant could not and did not accept. Without such an account Fichte considers Kant's philosophy incomplete, in that its most fundamental aspect, self-consciousness, is unexplained. For Fichte, the I cannot be known as an object because it is itself the prior condition of objectivity. Access to this condition depends, therefore, upon an *action* of the I upon *itself*, in "intellectual intuition", where

the I as subject and the I as object are immediately identical. Kant thought that intuitions were what was *given* to the subject, and that there could be no intuition of the intelligible, or supersensible.

Schelling's initial philosophical enterprise can, somewhat reductively, be understood as an attempt to marry Fichte's I, which is the spontaneous cause of itself, to Spinoza's God, which is likewise *causa sui*. The reasons for attempting to do this derive from Schelling's understanding of the problems raised by Jacobi and Kant. Schelling wavers, in the work from 1795 to 1800, between a position very close to Fichte and a position closer to Spinoza, before clearly moving away from Fichte in 1801.

In this period Schelling's philosophy already has an ontological focus which is also vital in the Lectures. This focus is evident if one compares his approach to an issue that appears in two texts of 1795, *On the I as Principle of Philosophy or on the Absolute in Human Knowledge*, and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*. The issue is Kant's question as to how synthetic *a priori* judgements are possible. They were possible for Kant because of the synthetic activity of the subject in judgements of the understanding. Schelling maintains, however, that there is a more fundamental problem, that of why there is a realm of judgement, a world of appearances, at all. If judgement consists in syntheses of appearances, it must depend upon a prior *separation* of what is joined again in the judgement, otherwise there would be nothing that required synthesising. In *On the I*, Schelling reformulates Kant's question in Fichtean terms: "How is it that the absolute I goes out of itself and opposes a not-I to itself?" (I/1 p. 175). The absolute I, following Fichte, is that which is the subject and object of itself in the sense described earlier, which splits itself in order to know itself. For Fichte, we are aware of the demand to overcome the not-I via the dictates of Kant's moral law, understood as the demand to realise freedom, the essence of the I, in the world of objective nature. The apparent absurdity of Fichte's idea that the world should be understood as an absolute I can be tempered if one considers the difficulty of explaining the fact that we experience the resistance of the object world. Without that which can feel compelled, which Fichte regards as the freedom of the I manifest in practical reason, how could one assert that there is such a resistance? Freedom is thus necessarily prior to what opposes it. If there were no such priority, it would become impossible to know how the world becomes intelligible at all, because something that offered no resistance of any kind would be unknowable. What is revealed here at the level of individual consciousness, in the feeling of resistance of the world, is used by Schelling to explain how it is that the not-I, the world of conditioned natural objects, must also involve what is present in the conscious I.



In Schelling's view, knowledge itself is, as it was for Kant, the result of the necessary linking of phenomena expressed in judgements. What makes knowledge (and practical reason) possible, though, cannot itself be of the same conditioned status. This is one of the most important contentions of German Idealism. Schelling maintains, in line with Fichte, that the condition of knowledge, the "positing" of the I, must have a different status from what it posits: "nothing can be posited by itself as a thing, i.e. an absolute thing (*unbedingtes Ding*) is a contradiction" (I/1 p. 166). The argument depends upon a play on one of the words for "absolute", *unbedingt*. Things can be determinate only in relation to other objects, but they also depend upon what posits them *as* something, the subject. The subject is therefore *unbedingt*, *unthinged*, "absolute". The requirement, taken over from Fichte, that the prior condition of objectivity is the subject, separates Schelling from Spinoza for most of his career. There is, though, a serious problem in understanding the Absolute in terms of subjectivity. In the *Philosophical Letters* Schelling reformulates the question he had asked in *On the I* as follows: "*How is it that I step at all out of the Absolute and move towards something opposed (auf ein Entgegengesetztes)?*" (I/1 p. 294).

Stepping out of the Absolute involves what must be conceived of as the undifferentiated One somehow ceasing to be One. This introduces relation into the Absolute, which seems to contradict its essence. The relations in scientific knowledge are understood in terms of the principle of sufficient reason, which makes links, in the form of statements of identity, between what appears opposed. Jacobi's point was that the "negative" dependence of particular things on other particular things for their determinacy meant that there must be a positive ground, which he termed "being", that could not be understood in the same way as those particular things were understood. Schelling's friend at the Tübingen seminary, Friedrich Hölderlin, realised that such an argument revealed a major problem in Fichte's idea that the Absolute should be understood as an absolute I. For it to be an absolute *I* it must entail consciousness. However, if the absolute I contained all reality, it could not have anything opposed to it as an object and therefore could not be conscious. Consequently, Hölderlin argued, one has to understand the structure of the relationship of subject to object in consciousness as grounded in "a whole of which subject and object are the parts", which he, in the manner of Jacobi, termed "being" (see Bowie 1990 p. 68). This meant that any attempt to explicate the Absolute in reflexive terms, as a cognitive relationship of subject to object, was doomed to failure. A development of this argument became the core of Schelling's objections to Hegel. Schelling's problem was to reconcile this view with his conviction that Fichte had shown the inherent fault in Spinozism, its failure to explain sub-