Dialectics and the Transcendence of Dialectics: 
Adorno's Relation to Schelling

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The influence of the thought of the great German Idealist philosopher G.W.F Hegel on the thought of Theodor Adorno, the leading thinker of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, is unmistakeable, and has been the subject of much commentary. Much less discussed, however, is the influence of Hegel’s prominent contemporary, F.W.J. Schelling. This article investigates the influence of Schelling on Adorno, and the sometimes striking parallels between fundamental motifs in the work of both thinkers. It argues that Adorno’s critique of Hegelian (and indeed of his own, negative) dialectics, his conception of the relation between nature and spirit, and his philosophy of history (amongst other aspects of this thought) owe a considerable debt to Schelling. Furthermore, when adequately explicated, Schelling’s position on a range of problems which confronted German Idealist philosophy often prove intrinsically preferable to those of Hegel.

**KEYWORDS:** dialectics; German Idealism; Adorno; Schelling; Hegel

As the title of his most important completed philosophical work, *Negative Dialectics*, makes clear, the thought of Theodor Adorno, the leading theorist of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, stands in an intimate relation to that of Hegel. In the preface to the book, Adorno suggests that Hegel’s dialectical thinking was unparalleled in its ability simply to follow the immanent development of its objects, and therefore in its precision and content-directedness. Yet although Hegelian dialectic operates by means of a procedure that its originator termed “determinate negation”, it culminates in a comprehensive and affirmative philosophical position – in

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effect, an assertion of the basic rationality of the world as it stands. It is such accommodationism, which he regards as transfiguring the intolerable, that Adorno sets his face against: ‘The book would like to liberate dialectics from this kind of affirmative essence, without any loss of determinateness’.2 In this respect, Negative Dialectics can be located within the line of post-Hegelian thinking that endorses Hegel’s method, while seeking to apply it in such a way as to break through what are perceived as the constraints of the Hegelian ‘system’. Such a characterization fits the thought of many of the ‘Left Hegelian’ intellectuals who came to prominence in Germany in the 1830s and 1840s. But it could also be applied – to take just one example – to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre in the twentieth century.3 In fact, Adorno’s procedures bring him closer in many respects to the Left Hegelians than to the twentieth-century contemporaries such as Sartre, since his aim is to avoid raising any objection to Hegel’s systematic claims from an external standpoint. Rather, he regards Hegel’s thought as pushing immanently beyond its own declared culmination, and explicitly refers to the Left Hegelians as his predecessors in this regard:

Left-Hegelianism was not a development in intellectual history that went beyond Hegel and distorted him through misunderstanding, but rather, faithful to the dialectic, a piece of the self-consciousness of his philosophy, which it had to renounce in order to remain philosophy.4

An important reservation needs to be flagged about describing Adorno’s work in this manner, however. Adorno does not regard dialectics as a ‘method’, if we take this to mean a *modus operandi* that can be applied indifferently to

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2Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 9 (hereafter ND, followed by page number). I write ‘completed’ because Ästhetische Theorie, which Adorno did not finish, and which was published a year after his death, in 1970, is possibly even more profound – an incomparable philosophical response to the twentieth-century artistic modernism and a leading contender for the title of the greatest treatise on aesthetics since Hegel.

3In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre reworks Hegel’s dialectic of recognition, while rejecting what he takes to be his predecessor’s notion of a supra-individual mind; in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he concludes that ‘history constantly totalises itself’, but that this totalization is ‘without a totalizer’. In other words, for reasons analogous to those brought forward in the earlier book, he again seeks to dispense with any equivalent for the Hegelian notion of ‘Geist’. This may be the place to note that the semantic field of the word ‘Geist’, which plays a pivotal role in German Idealism, extends between the English terms ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’, and hence also between individual and collective connotations. Since ‘Geist’ is effectively a term of art for the German Idealists, who consistently exploit its range of overtones philosophically, I shall generally translate it as ‘spirit’ throughout this article, even when ‘mind’ might suggest itself as more idiomatic.

4Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, 308. (hereafter DSH followed by page number). Adorno states that Hegel’s thought had to avoid a further reflective turn in order to ‘remain philosophy’ because the Left Hegelians tended to see their thinking as standing in a new, post-philosophical relation to praxis. For the classic discussion of this issue see Theunissen, *Die Verwirklichung der Vernunft*. 
various materials. Rather, he considers Hegel’s greatness to lie in his ability to immerse himself cognitively in objects and situations, and to articulate the logic of contradiction that determines the development of their structures, without importing any extraneous presuppositions. What Adorno finds most admirable in Hegel, a strength to which philosophy in general should aspire, is ‘the constructive force that enters fully into what is, without relinquishing itself as reason, critique, and the awareness of possibility’ (DSH, 259).

At the same time, Hegel’s unprecedented achievements in this regard come at a price:

Hegel is able to think outwards from the thing itself, to surrender passively to its authentic content, as it were, only because the power of the system relates the thing to its identity with the absolute subject. Things themselves speak in a philosophy that puts all its effort into proving that it is itself one with them. (DSH, 255)

In the ‘Preface’ to the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel himself laid down the basis of this procedure in his famous declaration that, ‘In my view, which can be justified only by exposition of the system itself, everything depends on grasping and expressing the True not only as Substance but also as Subject’ (Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 9–10).

However, Adorno does not criticize even this – so it would seem, metaphysically extravagant – claim from an external standpoint, but rather endeavours – applying the Hegelian procedure to Hegel himself – to retrieve its underlying truth. For him, Hegel’s insistence on the ultimate – or, as the German Idealists liked to say, ‘absolute’ – identity of substance and subject has philosophical heft in a number of respects. Firstly, it expresses a long-term historical tendency towards the increasing domination and regimentation of all that is non-subjective – in the first instance, external nature – by human subjects. Secondly, Hegel’s conviction that philosophical truth (the identity of substance and subject) can ultimately be stated and confirmed only in the form of a fully articulated and logically coherent system gives unintended expression to the increasingly pervasive and coercive integration that Adorno perceives in the long-term development of human society. Inadvertently, Hegel reveals the profound complicity of contradiction and system, rather than demonstrating how the former eventually unfolds into a harmonistic version of the latter. Enforced social integration – which for Adorno is enacted through the remorseless extension of means-end rationality and the market principle – generates antagonism; and that antagonism in turn intensifies the need for repressive control. As he puts the matter,

The force of the whole which … [Hegel’s idea of positivity] … mobilizes is no imaginary product of spirit, but the force of the real nexus of delusion into which every individual thing remains clamped. (DSH, 324)
Adorno’s interpretation of Hegel is, in this regard, often taken as one expression of his general critique of ‘identity-thinking’: of the ruthless subsumption of qualitatively diverse particulars under monetary and conceptual universals, which he regards as deeply entwined historically with capitalist commodification and the exclusionary thrust of instrumental reason. Hegel went as far, perhaps, as any thinker still committed to the basic project of Western metaphysics could, in acknowledging what Adorno terms the ‘non-identical’ – that which cannot be reduced to any of – or indeed the sum of – its predicative identifications. But ‘for all the emphasis on negativity, diremption, non-identity, Hegel actually takes cognizance of that dimension only for the sake of identity, only as an instrument of identity’ (DSH, 375). At the same time, Adorno knows full well that blunt assertions of non-identity, for example, of the irreducible difference of the material and the mental, or of substance and subject, lead to philosophically intractable difficulties. Some version of ‘non-identity … for the sake of identity’ – or of what the Idealists themselves termed ‘the identity of identity and non-identity’ – is required in order to acknowledge the depth of the ontological, epistemological and moral splits that characterize our world, without allowing our efforts at philosophical comprehension to disintegrate into a string of unmanageable dualisms. Indeed, Adorno’s ambivalence towards this issue often threatens to become paradoxical and aporetic. Thus, he remarks in the penultimate sentence of his Three Studies on Hegel that ‘dialectics could become consistent only in abandoning consistency, as a result of following through on its own logic’ (DSH, 375). To put this in another way, Adorno finds himself confronted with the dilemma of how to conserve the immense advantages of Hegelian dialectic, in its ability to immerse itself, apparently without reserve, in the subject matter, without positive commitment to Hegel’s conception of identity – as opposed to a diagnostic reading of it, as the expression not of a timeless metaphysical truth, but rather of a disastrous historical one.

Before going any further, I would like to take a brief detour in order to show what might be philosophically compelling about a formula which could well be dismissed as a piece of mystifying jargon, particularly by those not familiar with the problematic of German Idealism: ‘the identity of identity and non-identity’. I will do so with reference to the work of Thomas Nagel, and in particular his recent book, Mind and Cosmos, which deploys a variety of arguments in order to oppose the ‘currently standard materialist form of naturalism’, and whose standpoint Nagel himself suggests may have affinities with that of German Idealism (Nagel, Mind and Cosmos, 43). Nagel is persuaded that the existence of natural phenomena that are ‘both subjectively mental from the inside and objectively physical from the

\[5\]In the Science of Logic, Hegel describes this concept as the ‘first, purest, that is, most abstract, definition of the absolute’ (74).
outside’ (Nagel, ‘The Psychophysical Nexus’, 234) – human beings, of course, are the most ready-to-hand example – requires far-reaching revisions in our approach to the theoretical explanation and comprehension of reality. Scientific naturalism, Nagel asserts, has failed either to eliminate conscious experience as an intrinsic feature of the world, or to find some functional or causal explanation that would establish its secondary or epiphenomenal status. Nagel does not deny the intimate connection of bodies – and more specifically brains – and minds. Indeed, he argues that all the evidence points to the connection being a necessary one. However, he contends, the connection cannot be conceptually necessary, for in this case we could cash out one type of process – whether mental or physical – theoretically in terms of the other. This does not seem to be possible: observations of physical processes alone (e.g. brain processes) give us no indication as to their associated phenomenology; and modes of subjective human awareness suggest nothing about what might be simultaneously – and of necessity – occurring in the brain. This means that whatever kind of entity or process turned out to underlie and explain the connection, ‘it would not be simply an extension of our existing ideas of mind and matter, because these ideas do not contain within themselves the possibility of a development through which they “meet”’ (Nagel, ‘The Psychophysical Nexus’, 234). Furthermore, since Nagel considers that emergence, the supposed fact that consciousness appeared at a certain point of cosmic development as a product of purely physical processes, ‘remains fundamentally inexplicable’ (Nagel, Mind and Cosmos, 56), he proposes that we take seriously

an answer that accounts for the relation between mind and brain in terms of something more basic about the natural order. If such an account were possible, it would explain the appearance of mental life at complex levels of biological organization by means of a general monism, according to which the constituents of the universe have properties that explain not only its physical but its mental character.

(Nagel, Mind and Cosmos, 56)

It is difficult to imagine, though, how we could ever conceptualize such underlying gap-crossing properties, given that currently we experience no overlaps at all, that – as Nagel himself says – ‘it seems clear in advance that no amount of physical information about the spatiotemporal order will entail anything of a subjective, phenomenological character’ (Nagel, ‘The Psychophysical Nexus’, 201).

My suggestion is that the formula ‘identity of identity and non-identity’ provides a better specification of Nagel’s position than the rather crude label ‘monism’, which he applies to his own view. This is because the irreducibility of the mental to the physical, and vice versa, seems to be just as undeniable – and essential to what each is – as the fact that accepting their metaphysical duality results in an explanatory dead end. Thus, whatever
the ultimate principle of reality turns out to be, it will have to reconcile the identity and the non-identity of mind and matter – reveal them to be identical in their lack of any metaphysical overlap, their irreducible difference. Indeed, as the German Idealists sought to show, it is not elements which are relatively different, for example water and wine, but only what is absolutely non-identical that can be – absolutely speaking – identical. In their view, this is the case not merely for mind and matter, but for all the basic oppositions which have plagued the history of metaphysics. As we have seen, Adorno is intent on opposing the formula of the identity of identity and non-identity, as construed by Hegel. But this leaves open the possibility that there may be other philosophical deployments of it within the orbit of German Idealism more consonant with Adorno’s aims, and which indeed may have influenced him. In the remainder of this paper my aim is to explore how far this description applies to the thought of Hegel’s school friend, collaborator and – later – rival, F.W.J. Schelling.

We can discern three strands in Adorno’s response to Schelling. On some occasions Adorno stresses the common problematic shared by the major thinkers of German Idealism. What unified this movement, he suggests, was a ‘new expressive need’:

Now mature, thought wants to do what it had previously done only unconsciously, to write the history of spirit, to become an echo of the hour that has struck for it. This is the difference between German Idealism, especially Hegel, and the Enlightenment, rather than what the official history of philosophy has designated as such: even more important than the self-critique of Enlightenment, the emphatic incorporation of the concrete subject and the historical world, the dynamizing of philosophical activity.

(DSH, 304)

Furthermore, within this intellectual ambience, the affinities between thinkers were so strong that many of their claims are interchangeable. ‘Even after the split between Schelling and Hegel’, Adorno points out,

one finds in both of them – in The Ages of the World on one side, in the Phenomenology on the other – formulations and whole trains of thought whose author is no easier to identify than in the writings of their youth.

(DSH, 301)

Frequently, however, Adorno highlights differences, and in particular the early Schelling’s methodological commitment to ‘intellectual intuition’ (the immediate, non-discursive awareness of an absolute ground of reality) comes off badly in comparison with Hegel:

The concept cannot jump over its own abstracting and classifying, its own severing and arbitrary nature. Hegel detested attempts to do so – such as, at
that time, Schelling’s – and with good reason. They betrayed what he most cared about, his dream of the truth of the matter itself, for the sake of an intellectual intuition that is not above the concept but rather below it, and, by usurping its objectivity, recoils into the subjectivity of mere opinion.

(DSH, 309)

Yet, at times, Adorno reverses this judgement, suggesting that the very feature of Schelling’s philosophizing that has so often attracted dubiety or scepticism may foster more ‘unregimented insight’ – for Adorno, a term of approbation – than Hegel’s commitment to dialectical rigour, which results in a repressive predominance of the concept of identity:

If dialectic were to close totally in on itself, it would already be that totality which can be traced back to the identity principle. Schelling perceived this interest, against Hegel, and thereby exposed himself to ridicule over the abdication of a thinking that takes flight into mysticism.

(ND, 183–184)

Similarly, in Adorno’s *Three Studies on Hegel*, one finds a hint that the dualistic traits of Schelling’s thinking, and especially the dualism of art and philosophy, might serve to block the tendency of Hegel’s totalizing thought to seek to achieve what can only be attained as aesthetic appearance (the harmonious integration of reality), thereby becoming an ‘arena for the illusion of absolute identity’ (see DSH, 367). If we were to try the synthesize the outcome of this ambivalent attitude to Schelling, and of Adorno’s shifting relative evaluations of the two thinkers, we could say: Schelling functions as a corrective to Adorno’s tendency to effect an over-simplistic reversal of Hegel’s positions (to propose a negative reading of Hegel’s affirmative claims, in the style we have already observed).

One example of this pattern is Adorno’s attempt to challenge the supremacy of ‘Geist’ in Hegel’s philosophy, central to which is his claim for what he terms the ‘priority of the object’. ‘Through the transition to the priority of the object’, he asserts, ‘dialectics becomes materialist’ (ND, 195). In using the term ‘materialist’ Adorno – inspired by the young Marx – does not refer a metaphysical view to the effect that only matter is ultimately real. Rather, his claim is that subjective experiences, and conscious mental events in general, cannot be separated phenomenologically from somatic processes, from our physical embodiment, and so from material nature. Adorno’s aim is not to assert the ontologically dependent or epiphenomenal character of the former with respect to the latter, however, but rather to break what he takes to be the idealistic impetus of the metaphysical tradition as a whole. Metaphysical materialism, on this account, is itself an expression of the claim to supremacy of mind; in so far as it assumes the capacity of conceptual thought to encompass and theorize the whole of reality under the
heading of a single principle it remains ‘idealistic’, regardless of its overt intentions. Consequently, in Negative Dialectics, Adorno – commenting on Marx – asserts that ‘The statement that consciousness depends on being was not an inverted metaphysics, but directed against the deceptive claim of spirit, that it is in itself [an sich], beyond the total process in which it finds itself as a moment’ (ND, 200).

At the same time, Adorno takes this conception of materialism – which might be termed ‘corrective’ or ‘therapeutic’ – as committing him to the view that the self-conscious subjectivity of human beings must have been generated originally by subjectless nature, since it is scarcely undeniable that – historically speaking – such subjectivity was not always an element of the ‘total process’. The attempt to explain this genesis poses deep difficulties for him, however, as is evident from Dialectic of Enlightenment, the work which Adorno co-wrote with fellow Critical Theorist, Max Horkheimer, during the Second World War. The interpretation of Homer’s Odyssey presented in the second chapter of this work is probably the closest that Adorno ever comes to offering specific account of the emergence of human self-consciousness and of the human capacity for reason. Mixing Freudian and Nietzschean elements into a reading of Homer, he suggests that the awareness of being a self – a conscious locus of experience – that endures over time was forged through a process of struggle, in which the human being had to constrain himself, forgo the gratification of acting on impulse, for the sake of survival.6 In Homer’s epic this process is dramatized through the various encounters in which Odysseus exploits his cunning to elude the deadly threats posed by mythic beings such as his one-eyed captor Polyphemus or the Sirens. In the latter case Odysseus has himself bound to the mast of his ship, and is thus prevented from hurling himself into the waters, lured by the irresistible song. This interpretation of Homer dovetails with Freud’s claim that the development of word-bound, instrumentally calculating thought represents a triumph of a ‘secondary process’, governed by the ‘reality principle’, over the clamour for immediate satisfaction of a more primitive ‘primary process’ oriented by the ‘pleasure principle’; for Freud this transition coincides with the emergence of the ego as a distinct mental agency (see Freud, ‘Formulations Regarding the Two Principles’). The Nietzschean strand of the argument appears in Adorno’s contention that the severity of the ‘introversion of sacrifice’ (the crippling of the human being’s natural spontaneity) that this process entails cannot be entirely explained in terms of the requirements for survival, but reveals an excessive element enforced by social domination.7

6I use the male pronoun because, for Adorno, this process has a gendered dimension, although I do not have space to go into the details of this issue here.
7For Nietzsche’s description of such a process, see Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality, Second Essay.
Unfortunately, Adorno’s explanation is circular. He writes, for example, that ‘the ego ... owes its existence to the sacrifice of the present moment to the future’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 40). But the notion of sacrifice invoked here presupposes that the proto-human being *already has* a capacity to restrain its impulses for the sake of later benefit, in other words has at least a rudimentary ego. *Negative Dialectics*, written two decades after *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, brings no improvement in this regard. In the later work Adorno alludes, for example, to a ‘sudden switch in the history of development [*entwicklungsgeschichtlicher Umschlag*] which created the open consciousness of human beings, and thereby an awareness of death’ (ND, 388). Yet he offers no commentary on how this shift could have occurred. Elsewhere in the book, he proposes that ‘the immediacy of the primary reactions was once broken in the formation of the I’ (ND, 178), but – again – attempts no explanation of how this process could get underway in the first place. The notion of the purposeful activity of an organism restricting its impulses for the sake of safety and ulterior success is evidently not sufficient for this purpose – after all, a dog waiting for a busy road to clear before picking up a bone can do that.

Adorno is no more successful in accounting for the origins of the human capacity to reason, understood as an ability not merely to calculate instrumentally, but also to reflect on the limits – and indeed the compulsions – of instrumental calculation. This reflective power cannot be explained as arising from our natural interest in controlling and dominating nature. Yet its possibility underpins Adorno’s hope that humankind might one day free itself from the straightjacket of ‘identity-thinking’: throughout *Negative Dialectics* he repeatedly refers to ‘critical self-reflection’, ‘philosophical reflection’, or the ‘self-reflection of thought’ as currently the only means of beginning to break the socio-historical impasse in which humanity finds itself (see, for example, ND, 8, 21, 358). Commenting on similar problems encountered by the styles of explanation favoured by contemporary evolutionary biology in attempting to explain the emergence of human rationality, as an openness to – and capacity to think about – genuinely objective features of reality, Nagel concludes that these approaches are self-undermining: the reasoning behind the theory that our reason is reliable because such reliability is conducive to survival cannot itself be legitimated in terms of such conduciveness. Hence, Nagel contends, we must regard the potential for reason as built into the fabric of the world from the beginning:

To explain not merely the possibility but the actuality of rational beings, the world must have properties that make their appearance not a complete accident: in some way the likelihood must have been latent in the nature of things.

(Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 86)
Adorno is not entirely consistent in this regard, however. At times he appears to concede the impossibility of deriving the mental from the material, while still striving to retain his emphasis on the priority of the object:

Spirit is just as little to be levelled down to being [Dasein] as the latter to the former. Yet the non-being moment of spirit is so interwoven with being that to pick it out cleanly would amount to objectifying and falsifying it. The controversy over the priority of mind or body proceeds pre-dialectically. It continues to drag along with it the question of a ‘First’. In an almost hylozoistic manner, it aims towards an ἀρχή [archē] which is ontological in form, even if the answer is materialist in content. Body and spirit are both abstractions from our experience of them, their radical difference something posited … Everything mental is, in a modified way, corporeal impulse, and such modification is the qualitative switch [Umschlag] into that which not merely is.

(ND, 202)

How can we make sense of the occurrence of such an abrupt reversal? Only by assuming that a spiritual potential is already latent in the natural. ‘Urge’, Adorno concludes, ‘is, according to Schelling’s insight, the anticipatory form of spirit [Drang ist, nach Schellings Einsicht, die Vorform von Geist]’ (ND, 202).

It is revealing, but also somewhat surprising, that Adorno refers to Schelling rather than Hegel at this point. After all, if we turn back a few pages in Negative Dialectics, we find him endorsing Hegel’s account of the genesis of human self-consciousness in the much discussed ‘Lord and Bondsman’ chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit. And this is scarcely surprising, since, interpreted in a certain way, Hegel’s narrative prefigures quite closely the Freudian–Nietzschean version of Homer to be found in Dialectic of Enlightenment. On Adorno’s reading, Hegel in this text develops the genesis of self-consciousness … out of the labour relation, and indeed from the adaptation of the I to the aims of this relation, as well as to the heterogeneous material. The origin of the I in the not-I is barely still concealed. It is sought in the real life process, in the regularities of the survival of the species, its provision with the means of life.

(ND, 198–199)

This account converges with the interpretation of Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness proposed by Charles Taylor in his well-known essay on Hegel’s philosophy of action. Here, Taylor explains that for Hegel

The ‘mental’ is the inward reflection of what was originally external activity. Self-conscious understanding is the fruit of an interiorization of what was originally external. The seeming self-coincidence of thought in which I am apparently immediately aware of my desires, aims, and ideas, that is
foundational to Cartesianism, is understood rather as an achievement, the overcoming of the externality of an unconscious, merely instinctive life.

(Taylor, ‘Hegel and the Philosophy of Action’, 8)

Taylor, however, does not disguise the fact that, for Hegel, all ‘unconscious, merely instinctive life’ is already a manifestation of spirit, albeit prior to the stage at which spirit achieves full, or indeed any, self-consciousness. As we have seen, Adorno’s straightforwardly materialist attempts to provide an account of ‘origin of the I in the not-I’ are not convincing. But he also has no wish to render this formulation more plausible by reading it against the grain, so as to suggest the tacit metaphysical pervasiveness of spirit (thereby endorsing Hegel’s version of the identity of identity and non-identity). What we now need to understand is how a reference to Schelling, backed up by two substantial citations from The Ages of the World, could help at this juncture.

To begin to answer this question it will be useful to look at a passage in the ‘Introduction’ to the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History where Hegel provides what he calls an ‘Abstract Determination of the Nature of Spirit’. Here, Hegel asserts that the ‘essence’ of spirit is freedom, that freedom is the ‘unique truth of spirit’ (Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, 30). To be free, Hegel continues, is to be with – or at home with – oneself (Bei-sich-selbst-sein), for only thus can one escape dependence on anything external, and in the case of spirit this Bei-sich-selbst-sein takes the form of self-consciousness. We can distinguish in any consciousness, Hegel further explains, what (was) is known and that (daß) it is known; in self-consciousness, however, these two coincide. What this entails, more specifically, is that ‘Spirit knows itself, it is the judging of its own nature, and it is simultaneously the activity of coming to itself and so producing itself, of making itself into what it is in itself [an sich]’ (ibid., 31).

This conception of the self-production of spirit – through the transition from a state of being an sich to being für sich – addresses the problem of deriving the I from the not-I (since the not-I is already spirit an sich). But it does so at the cost of a subreption. In the extract just quoted Hegel suggests that spirit knows itself as the activity of producing itself, and that this activity is precisely its knowing of itself. This structure, he claims, fuses the Was and the Daß of self-awareness – what is known and that it is known. But the sheer fact that self-conscious spirit exists cannot be equated with the activity of its own self-production, since we can always ask why this activity itself exists. In other words, the pure Daß of spirit cannot be fully cashed out in terms of spirit’s self-relation – and this remains true even if we can legitimately think of spirit as slowly and laboriously retrieving itself from its own immersion in nature. Spirit, in other words, can never be in total command of itself – its own facticity escapes it. It is clear why such a
conclusion would be congenial to Adorno, in his attempt to resist Hegel. It also corresponds to the philosophical conception which – via many stages – Schelling eventually attained.

In the second draft of the unpublished project called ‘The Ages of the World’ (‘Die Weltalter’), which Schelling worked on between 1810 and 1814, the draft from which Adorno quotes in Negative Dialectics, Schelling begins his genesis of spirit with what he calls ‘pure freedom itself that does not grasp itself … the serenity [Gelassenheit] that thinks about nothing and rejoices in its nonbeing’, alternatively the ‘will which wills nothing’, or – most concisely – ‘eternity’ (Schelling, ‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813]’, 134). The contrast with Hegel, who – in the Phenomenology – seeks to show how self-consciousness emerges via the animal appetite (Begierde) which relates organic life to itself though the mediation of its environment, is evident. But what explains this difference? We have just observed that the sheer fact that self-consciousness exists cannot be equated with the reflexive activity of consciousness. But the same point can also be put the other way around: no self-relating structure, simply as such, can give rise to that bare awareness of the self’s actual existence – ‘bare’ in the sense of supplying no information concerning what this existence consists in – which, as Kant’s theory of the transcendental unity of apperception already implied, is the central feature of self-consciousness. Sophisticated self-relating systems, no matter how complex, for example computers that monitor their own operations, have no self-consciousness. The philosophical difficulty is that, as Dieter Henrich once put the issue,

If I did not already have the capacity to relate to myself, no study of any self-relations in the world, not even those which (seen from a third-person perspective) are my own, could lead me to the conclusion that I exist, and that I necessarily find myself in such a relation.

(Henrich, Fluchtlinien, 148)

In response to this problem Schelling – while employing different formulations at different stages in his work – consistently posits an immediate intimacy of the self with itself, which necessarily precedes any conceptual explication of self-consciousness (while not cancelling the need for the latter). Arguably, Hegel’s deep suspicion of immediacy, for all its philosophical benefits, vitiates his genetic theory of self-consciousness in this regard.8

We are now in a better position to understand the philosophical intentions behind Schelling’s phrase, ‘will which wills nothing’. Firstly, will is always already self-related: to will is to be at least potentially aware of what one is

8This point is made clearly, with constant reference to Schelling, in Frank, Der Unendliche Mangel an Sein, 75–102. Frank draws attention to similarities between Adorno and Schelling, on page 57n.
willing – otherwise we would not be dealing with will, but blind instinct or drive (conversely, it is arguable that an exclusively contemplative consciousness could never become self-conscious); ‘will’ therefore implies a primordial self-acquaintance. As a dawning urge it can anticipate the self-consciousness of spirit, without being spirit already, in the Hegelian sense of displaying – even if only tacitly – conceptual or logical structure. Secondly, the will is not an entity and, if it is entirely quiescent, it is not even an activity. But at the same time the will, as understood by the German Idealists (following Kant), is an unconditioned capacity to begin, to bring into being. This means that we can refer to an absolute origin of things, and since we are referring neither to an entity nor an activity, we do not raise the spectre of the principle of sufficient reason. To use a formula Schelling often employs in other contexts, the ‘will which wills nothing’ is ‘not nothing, yet as nothing’ (e.g. Schelling, ‘Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie’, 515). Finally, placing the ‘will which wills nothing’ at the very beginning of things satisfies the requirement, recently emphasized by Nagel, that a kernel of rationality be regarded as present in the cosmos ab origine – but it does so in an interestingly dissident way. This is because reason can be seen as dependent on will (without spontaneity, and therefore the possibility of responsibility for one’s thought and action, there can be no reasoning, as opposed to mechanical calculation), but the reverse relation does not apply. In other words, Schelling does not regard the world as intrinsically, but only potentially rational, and – as we will see in more detail later – this enables him to avoid the kind of cosmic optimism to which, arguably, even Nagel falls prey.9

The question Schelling now faces, however, is not how such a will ever could, but why it ever would move towards self-consciousness. His answer is: ‘Everything that is something without actually being it’ – and this is the case with a will which is not yet engaged in willing – ‘must by nature seek itself’ (Schelling, ‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813]’, 137). Thus ‘eternity is unconsciously impelled to seek itself’ (ibid.). This impulsion – the ‘urge’ or Drang to which Adorno refers, by contrast with Hegel’s Begierde – sets in motion a movement in what can best be described as in ‘logical time’. The ‘pure, unmitigated will’ (ibid., 134) seeks to grasp itself as something – but this move is inherently self-thwarting, since, as Schelling says, ‘Free will is just this ability to be something along with the ability to not-be it’ (ibid., 132). Hence, the pure will has to adopt a different guise and assert itself again, as that which contrasts with any specification, which is opposed to its own ontological contraction into particularity. But the more it overcomes its defining opposite, the more it loses itself, dissipates again into pure will. Hence the two modes of the will – which Schelling also refers to as ‘being’ (Seyn) and ‘being-ness’ (Seyendes) – become locked in a relation of simultaneous interdependence and antagonism, a tension

9For a critique of this feature of Mind and Cosmos, see O’Grady, ‘Review of Nagel’. 
between the subjective and the objective dimensions, of the kind which typifies the relation between self-consciousness and its associated object-consciousness. According to Schelling this struggle can only be quelled by the emergence of a third will that is able to ‘express’ a non-competitive togetherness of the two other wills, and this is what Schelling calls ‘spirit’.

So spirit for Schelling, unlike for Hegel, is not the process of the unfolding of reality into concrete, self-comprehending subjectivity, but a third mode of ‘will’ which reconciles the conflict of the two preceding wills, with which it also contrasts. An analogy may help to make clear what Schelling has in mind. We cannot appreciate a poem by attending to the words merely as sounds or as marks on the page. At the same time, if we attempt simply to transcend the aural and visual physicality of the poem, and to articulate its supposed meaning in purely conceptual terms we will equally have missed the point. To hear or read and fully respond to poetry involves holding sound and sense in an equilibrium in which neither overwhelms the other. This balancing is what Schelling calls ‘spirit’, and – in much of his work – he stresses its vulnerability and instability. In fact, the dialectical dance of the three wills (in the vocabulary of the Weltalter) or – as he more enduringly calls them – the ‘potencies’ (i.e. fundamental possibilities or dimensions of being), provides the basic conceptual framework for much of Schelling’s thought. We can see how, in this way, Schelling is able to endorse the ‘priority of the object’, to use Adorno’s term (since spirit is dependent on the duality of being and being-ness, and being-ness only emerges through its contrast with the material specificity of being), while avoiding the impasse towards which Hegel steers, in his attempt to generate the existence of the ‘I’ from self-relating activity. We can also see how Schelling has devised a version of a fundamental structure – the ‘identity of identity and non-identity’ – in which the meta-identity does not ultimately subsume the related elements that stand under its aegis in a monistic fashion. Schelling’s thought therefore potentially offers an answer to the dilemma

10I translate ‘das Seyende’ as ‘being-ness’ for the following reason. Just as – in German – ‘das Schwierige an etwas’ is what makes a certain thing difficult, its difficultness, so ‘das Seyende’ is what endows something with being. So although the term looks like a nominalized present participle, what Schelling gestures towards by means of it is close to what Heidegger means by ‘das Sein’, whereas ‘das Seyn’ in Schelling approximates to what Heidegger intends by ‘das Seiende’. Since there is an understandable contemporary tendency to read Schelling through Heideggerian spectacles (Schelling is, in a sense, the originator of the modern notion of the ‘ontological difference’, made famous by Heidegger) this terminological crossover has led to all kinds of confusions. In particular, the rendering of ‘das Seyende’ as ‘thing-that-is’ in the English translation of the 1813 draft of Die Weltalter, to which I am making reference, is completely erroneous.

11For an outstanding and influential interpretation of the theory of the three wills or principles of being in Schelling’s Weltalter, see Hogrebe, Prädikation und Genesis. Hogrebe’s idea is that Schelling takes the propositional structure through which we articulate being linguistically as his clue to the three basic modes of will. Hence, Hogrebe terms them ‘pronominal being’, ‘predicative being’ and – the principle of reconciliation – ‘propositional being’.
which we found Adorno facing, in endorsing Hegel’s practice of philosophical cognition while rejecting the conception of absolute identity which undergirds it, and in seeking to assert the priority of the object without simply inverting Hegel’s objective idealism into an implausible materialist genesis of mind. Schelling’s metaphysical claim – in contrast to Hegel – is not that everything is ultimately spirit, at different levels of reflexive explicitness. It is rather that spirit expresses the ultimate compatibility and interrelation of the material and the mental, of object and subject. As he writes,

there is opposition as well as unity; opposition is free with respect to \([gegen]\) unity, and unity with respect to opposition; or unity and opposition are themselves in opposition.

(Schelling, ‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813]’, 146)

Now, this seems to contradict what we have taken to be the key Idealist formula of the ‘unity of unity and opposition’, a formula which Schelling himself often produces elsewhere.\(^ {12} \) But, adding a further twist, Schelling immediately goes on to say that ‘this would be the most excellent and perfect unity, since the conflicting elements are free and yet at the same time one’ (ibid., 146). This complex thought anticipates Adorno’s many attempts at a non-Hegelian formulation of the notion of reconciliation: ‘Utopia would be beyond identity and beyond contradiction, a togetherness of the disparate’ (ND, 153).

When Adorno asserts that \(Dasein\) and \(Geist\) are not to be reduced to one other, nor to be derived from some monistic principle that precedes and includes them, when he stresses the ‘non-being’ moment of spirit by contrast with \(Dasein\), his moves are reminiscent of Schelling. For both, the ‘priority of the object’ is far from incompatible with acknowledgement of a moment of sovereignty in spirit, once this is understood correctly. Schelling, for example, remarks that

\[\text{It is, in truth, only the ignorant who still look with scorn upon the physical; but even this contempt will soon come to an end and the saying will once again prove true, that the stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone.}\]

(Schelling, ‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813]’, 119)

\(^{12}\) In ‘On the Nature of Philosophy as Science’, Schelling affirms that ‘the true system can only be one that establishes the unity of unity and opposition…’ (Schelling, ‘On the Nature of Philosophy as Science’, 210) An early statement of the underlying argument can be found in Schelling’s \(Bruno\), 139: ‘For things that are absolutely and infinitely opposed can only be united infinitely. And what is infinitely united can never split itself up in any way; therefore what is absolutely self-identical and absolutely indivisible must, for this very reason, be absolutely opposed to itself.’
Similarly, for both it is precisely when spirit, as that which springs from but transcends the world of objects, seeks to become total, dominating and absorbing its counterpart, that it finds itself reduced to a manifestation of objective compulsion – that is, ceases truly to be spirit. Counter-intuitive though it may seem, Adorno suggests in *Negative Dialectics* that ‘The moment of independence, of irreducibility in spirit may well harmonize with the priority of the object’ (ND, 382); this is in large part because spirit has ‘a moment of independence, of the unalloyed, that is set free precisely when … it does not devour everything and reproduce from out of itself the subjection of everything to death’ (ND, 363). To put this in another way, what Adorno terms *Dasein* or the ‘object’ corresponds to Schelling’s first will or potency, but he employs the term ‘Geist’ in two different ways, which correspond to Schelling’s second and third potencies. There is spirit that is permeated by compulsion, by virtue of its insistence on dominating the object, and there is spirit that is capable of reflecting on and rising above such compulsion, which would correspond to spirit in Schelling’s sense. Significantly, at one point in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno refers to the constituting subject, which becomes objectified in the very process of elevating itself above what is, as ‘ein Dasein zweiter Potenz’ (‘a *Dasein* of the second potency’ – ND, 178).

Furthermore, beyond these local correspondences, it could be argued that the basic structure of Adorno’s thought reiterates that of Schelling’s, by virtue of a crucial feature of *Negative Dialectics*, which is all too infrequently noted or explored. *Negative Dialectics* is far from being a straightforward endorsement of dialectical thinking – even in its negative guise. For Adorno, dialectics, as a mode of thought driven by the logical compulsion to resolve contradictions, is inevitably contaminated by the coercion inherent in its object. As he puts the matter, in the closing pages of the book:

Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective nexus of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*], and has not already escaped from it. To break out from it is, objectively speaking, its goal. It acquires the strength to achieve this break-out from the nexus of immanence [*Immanenzzusammenhang*]; Hegel’s dictum, that dialectics absorbs the strength of the opponent, should be applied, one more time, to dialectics itself; not just in the dialectically singular case, but – in the last instance – to the whole. By means of logic dialectics grasps the compulsive character of logic, hoping that it will yield. For that compulsion is itself mythical illusion, enforced identity.

(ND, 398)

In a final move, then, dialectics is obliged to turn against itself; and if the aim is release from the coercive nexus of immanence, then escape must surely be in the direction of the transcendent – of what Schelling, in the *Weltalter*, evokes as ‘eternity’. This move beyond dialectics is the topic of the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*, entitled ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’.
Adorno’s culminating reflections deal with ultimate questions of life, death, hope, and despair. But the chapter as a whole is organized around what he describes as a ‘question of the philosophy of history’: whether ‘metaphysical experience’ is still possible (ND, 365). The term ‘metaphysical experience’ refers to a process of break-out from the structures and strictures through which subjectivity moulds and denatures the world – constraints which Adorno finds paradigmatically embodied in Kant’s transcendental conditions of experience. Kant is the key figure in these mediations since – especially in his practical philosophy – we find him chafing against limits he has himself imposed on the range of human experience. In Adorno’s view, Kant’s attempts to catch at least a glimpse beyond his own ‘block’ reveal the truth that, severed from any connection to the unconditioned, finite knowledge is itself condemned to wither:

For its part, the island of knowledge, of which Kant prides himself on having taken the measure, becomes entangled with the untruth that he projects onto knowledge of the boundless. Impossible to attribute a truth to knowledge of the finite, which for its part is derived from the absolute – in Kantian terms: from reason – which knowledge cannot reach.

(ND, 377)

At the same time, in Adorno’s view, Hegel’s attempt to resolve these inconsistencies in Kant, by fully articulating the unconditioned or the absolute as immanent process, is no improvement. As he writes,

[Kant’s] anti-idealistic doctrine of the absolute barrier and the idealistic doctrine of absolute knowing are not so inimical to one another as they thought; the latter also ends up with the result – if one follows the train of thought of Hegel’s Phenomenology – that absolute knowing is nothing other than the train of thought of the Phenomenology itself – in other words, has nothing transcendent about it.

(ND, 379)

By contrast, for Adorno, although we can have no confidence of access to the transcendent, ‘No light falls on human beings and things in which transcendence is not reflected’ (ND, 396).

None of this means, of course, that Adorno advocates the abandonment of dialectics. Rather, his aim is to maintain a delicate balance between negative dialectics and the transcendence of dialectics. Epistemologically and methodologically this stance corresponds to Schelling’s enduring view that a moment of immediate intuition is the precondition of – but does not obviate the need for – conceptual explication. In The Ages of the World, for example, Schelling denies that it is possible ‘to abolish all duality in one’s self so that we would only be inward as it were, living entirely within the celestial realm, knowing everything immediately’ (Schelling,
‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813’], 115), since ‘All experiencing, feeling and intuiting is in and of itself mute and requires a mediating organ to gain expression’ (ibid., 118). In short, ‘All science must pass through dialectic’ (ibid). But dialectic is not an end in itself – ‘just as speech depends on rhythm, science depends on dialectic for accompaniment and support’ (ibid., 120).

There is one important respect, however, in which the Weltalter project, the focus of much of Adorno’s interest in Schelling, and the topic of an advanced seminar he gave in 1960 (see Adorno, ‘Zur Einleitung in die “Weltalter”’), fails to provide a precedent for the philosophy developed in Negative Dialectics. We have seen that, for Adorno, dialectic operates as an expression of real duress, of socio-historical compulsions and their internalized psychological equivalents, which must be transcended if society and humanity, in the emphatic sense, are ever to be achieved. Adorno is aware, however, that the original entry of humankind into this coercive condition cannot be entirely explained in terms of survival needs calling for the application of instrumental reason. More specifically, the undeniable rationality of the human aspiration to gain control over nature cannot explain why the achievement of such ascendancy was not undertaken as a collective social endeavour, rather than also assuming the form of the social domination which, historically, has always been intertwined with domination of nature. Hence, Adorno reflects,

If in fact history turns out to be a permanent catastrophe, then we cannot simply reject the conjecture that something terrible must have happened to mankind right at the start, or at a time when mankind was becoming itself, and that this terrible event is like those that have been handed down to us in the myths about original sin and similar stories in which the origins of mankind and the growth of reason are associated with some disaster from the remote past.

(Adorno, History and Freedom, 55; see also ND, 315)

It is only the conjecture of a primeval ‘fall’, then, which can help to make sense of the fact that human history is an inverted history, in which spirit has been pervaded and reified by the very natural compulsion from which it sought to free itself. Schelling’s Weltalter project, by contrast, has no analogue for this notion of a fall or inversion characterizing human history. There Schelling writes that ‘the principles of being in simultaneity are the potencies of becoming in succession’ (Schelling, ‘Die Weltalter [second draft, 1813’], 177). What he means by this is that the conflict between three fundamental thrusts of being – towards singularization, towards universalization, and towards the compatibilization of these two – can be pacified by the transformation of these impulsions into the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. Time cannot be understood on the analogy of simple progress along a line, for Schelling; the present consists in a
process of breaking away from the past in anticipation of a future. Hence, the
dimensions of time are both (para-temporally) simultaneous or eternal and
successive, enabling the potencies to retain their separateness and yet form
a progressive, integrated structure. The existing drafts of the Weltalter
project deal, then, with the prospects for resolving a conflict intrinsic to
being as such. They do not address the possibility a perversion of the
proper relation of the potencies subsequent to the shift from logical to real
time. Yet the thought of such a dislocation is far from alien to Schelling.
On the contrary, it pervades his work, both prior to and subsequent to the
Weltalter.

For Axel Hutter, this exceptionalism of the Weltalter project is a signal of
failure, indicating that Schelling has not yet succeeded in differentiating ade-
quately between the domains of nature and history (see Hutter, Geschich-
tliche Vernunft, 117–123). For it is only on the basis of such a distinction
that one can seek to theorize how human history – which should have
been the domain of self-conscious freedom – has been disfigured by the
prevalence of natural compulsion, has taken the form of what Marx
termed Naturgeschichte. In fact, the monumental working out of such a
theoretical project – the endeavour ‘to write the history of spirit’, which
for Adorno, as we saw, defines German Idealism – is to be found in Schel-
ling’s Späphilosophie, the final stage of his thinking, which takes shape
from the late 1820s onwards. Adorno was evidently familiar with this
phase of Schelling’s work, since he remarks on the ‘utmost exertion of
thought’ exemplified by the Philosophy of Revelation – the final part of
the late system – in Minima Moralia (69). In the concluding section of
this article, then, I will examine – against the background of a strong pre-
sumption of influence – the echoes between Schelling’s Späphilosophie
and Adorno’s negative dialectics.13

As we have already noted, what Schelling calls the ‘potencies’ played a
central organizing role in his thought from an early stage, and continued
to do so, through many subsequent developments and refinements, right
up to the end. One sign of this increasing sophistication is that, in the Spät-
philosophie, he employs a greater variety of terms, with different nuances, to

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13It is plausible to conjecture that Schelling’s influence on Adorno was also mediated by the
theologian Paul Tillich, who supervised Adorno’s Habilitation thesis on Kierkegaard at the
University of Frankfurt. Tillich wrote his philosophical doctorate on the history of religion
in Schelling’s positive philosophy, and his theological doctorate on mysticism and guilt con-
sciousness in Schelling (see Tillich, The Construction of the History of Religion and Mysticism
and Guilt Consciousness). Adorno once described himself as having been for many years Til-
llich’s ‘unofficial assistant’; in the summer semester 1932 they co-taught a seminar on Lessing
and in the winter semester 1932/33 another on Simmel, before both being driven out of
Germany by Hitler. See the moving obituary tribute to Tillich which Adorno paid at the begin-
ing of his lecture course on ‘Negative Dialectics’: Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialek-
tik, 10–13.
evoke what logically precedes the differentiation of the potencies. One such term is ‘the pure that’ (das reine Daß). In his 1850 ‘Treatise on the Source of the Eternal Truths’ (‘Abhandlung über die Quelle der ewigen Wahrheiten’), Schelling states:

the what [Was] is different in each thing, the that [Daß], according to its nature, and therefore in all things, only one; in the great common entity which we call nature and the world, there reigns a single that [Daß] which excludes all plurality from itself.

We observed earlier that, in the case of self-consciousness, Hegel explicitly claims that the Was and the Daß are fused. Schelling denies that such a fusion can ever occur, except in the instance we call ‘God’. And even here, as we shall see, the divinity of the Daß cannot be asserted a priori. We can construe this rebuttal as an expression of the qualified return to Kant which characterizes Schelling’s late phase, and in particular of his renewed respect for the constraints which Kant places on the capacity of a priori thought to fathom the unconditioned. Schelling accepts Kant’s contention that no merely logical transition can establish the reality of necessary being, on the model of the ontological argument for the existence of God. However, he does not conclude from this that philosophy cannot or should not begin from necessary being – a chain cannot dangle in mid-air, after all – but rather that we cannot attain this starting point by purely logical or rational means. In the ‘Dialectic’ of the Critique of Pure Reason Kant states that ‘The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things, is for human reason the true abyss’ (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 574 [A613/B641]). The idea of a necessary being presses itself upon us as metaphysically unavoidable, yet it makes no sense, since it violates a transcendental condition: that to exist is to be dependent on a prior cause. Schelling responds, however, that there is no basis for taking the abyssal character of this concept as indicating a constraint on what can be the case, rather than a limit on what can be thought. His alternative proposal is that ‘The pure being prior to every concept is the concept of reason set outside of itself’. In turning itself inside out, in acknowledging its own breakdown when confronted with das reine Daß, ‘reason liberates itself from itself, it liberates itself from necessary movement into free thinking’ (PO, 157).

What the later Schelling terms ‘positive philosophy’ begins, then, from an ‘ecstasy’ of reason. We have a primordial openness to being which precedes any concept. In contrast to his earlier Weltalterphilosophie, however,

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14 Schelling, Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42, 157 – hereafter PO followed by page number.
15 For further discussion of this aspect of Schelling’s thought see Hogrebe, Prädikation und Genesis, 118–126.
Schelling no longer terms what this reversal of reason reveals ‘the will that wills nothing’, but rather das Blindseyende (‘blind being-ness’) or das zufällig Notwendigexistierende (‘contingently necessary existing-ness’). The shift of terminology may at first sight seem obscure, but the train of thought that it signals is the following. We do not in fact begin with the knowledge that the ‘absolutely transcendent’ (PO, 146) is freedom or pure will in a quiescent state. All we have is the naked awareness of existence – or rather, sheer existence invades our extroverted consciousness. Schelling calls this ‘blind being-ness’ or the ‘contingently necessary existing-ness’ because pure existence precedes every concept. This means that it cannot be deduced from any concept, and therefore cannot be regarded as fulfilling any purpose. However, in so far as we seem to detect traces of meaning and purpose in the world, we can make the following hypothesis.

Das Blindseyende became the potency of potencies (‘potentia potentiae’ – PO, 162, 178) giving rise to the dialectic of the three principles, of the fundamental drives or directions of being. As we know, in logical time, the first two principles are structured and held in equilibrium by the third principle, namely spirit. However, the freedom through which das Blindseyende was transformed into the basis of the potencies made a morally – but not logically – necessitated move to manifest itself, to make itself know by creating a real world outside logical time, a cosmos structured by the potencies. When human beings first emerged from the real developmental process triggered by this decision, they occupied a position which could be described as that of unselfconscious spirit, dependent on and maintaining a balance between the first two potencies. However, they were almost irresistibly tempted to seek to appropriate the first potency, to mobilize it in order to enhance their own power, to become self-grounded. The result was what Schelling – anticipating Adorno – calls the ‘catastrophe’ (Katastrophe) (PO, 206) or the ‘overthrow’ (Umsturz) (PO, 205). Ever since, human history has been – to a greater or lesser extent – under the thrall of the first potency. As Schelling explains in the Philosophie der Offenbarung, ‘That principle is ground (basis) of human consciousness, given over, subordinated to it, if it remains in its in-itself [Ansich]; if it is set in motion, it is a power that transcends and subjugates human consciousness’ (PO, 202). The result of the catastrophe is that the potencies, lacking mediation, are set at war with one another, and – in particular – that the second potency (conceptuality and thought) ceases to be an expression of free existing-ness, and becomes ‘that which is forced to work’ (das Wirken-müssende) (PO, 208), in other words, which is compelled to struggle to hold back the unleashed force of the first potency, while repeatedly falling victim to it. The catastrophe inaugurates what Schelling calls the ‘false time’ (falsche Zeit) (PO, 208) of the world we inhabit. Spirit – dethroned – now has only the status of an anticipated and hoped-for future. It is das Seynsollende (that which ought to

16For further discussion of Schelling’s conception of the historical process, and its relation to Adorno, see Dews, The Idea of Evil, 192–195.
be), as opposed to the first potency (das Seynkönnende – that which can be) and the second potency (das Seynmüssende – that which has to be).\(^{17}\)

Spirit remains to be realized in more than partial, anticipatory form, and there is no a priori guarantee of this realization. Indeed, we have no irrefragable warrant that the world is a product of freedom at all, and therefore possesses the ontological independence required to become a stage for the enactment of finite freedom, as opposed to being simply a necessary emanation of das Blindseyende. Freedom, as Schelling emphasizes, is metaphysically inaccessible, and the occurrence of free action is not something which can be ascertained purely empirically – though we can experience what we take to be its footprint in the world, in an operation which he terms ‘metaphysical empiricism’ or ‘a priori empiricism’ (PO, 145, 147). This means that Schelling’s writing of the history of spirit, like Kant’s idea for a universal history, has an irreducibly moral, future-oriented dimension. As Schelling states, ‘This whole philosophy … is only ever an ongoing process of knowledge, and only a proof for those who are willing to keep thinking forward. There belongs to it not just a thinking, but also a willing’ (PO, 147). The ‘positive philosophy’, then, develops a practically oriented narrative hermeneutics of the realization of freedom in human history. But what is the actual outline of the history that Schelling recounts?

Schelling divides human history after the ‘catastrophe’ into two fundamental phases: the stage of mythology and the stage of revelation. In mythological consciousness the development of thinking is driven by a necessity that is opaque to the subjects of such consciousness. Or, to put this in another way, mythological consciousness is beside itself, ‘ecstatic’, but does not return to itself after the ecstatic moment, as does reason. Schelling’s claim is that images and narratives of mythical gods do not refer to the potencies, but are the potencies actually playing out their dialectical conflicts in the human mind; human beings have no rational control over what they are thinking, or insight into why they are thinking it. Rather than human beings thinking myths, then, it would be more accurate to say that, for Schelling, myths think themselves – in his neologism, they are ‘tautegorical’ – and indeed think their own interrelations and evolution, in the consciousness of human beings. As he puts it, the ‘representations of mythology are creations of a necessary process, or of a natural consciousness given over to itself, over which no free cause exercises an influence’ (PO, 250). From Schelling’s perspective, it would not be quite accurate to say that ancient peoples believed

\(^{17}\)It may not be immediately obvious why Schelling designates the first potency as das Seynkönnende, since he often equates this potency with the material dimension of being. The point is that, at the start of the sequence of potencies, there is nothing to hold to hold back the pure capacity to be (das Seyende) from immediately realizing itself as the opaqueley singular aspect of being (das Seyn).
their myths, since the notion of ‘belief’ suggests at least the possibility of reflective distance from the objects of credence, whereas this was lacking. The ancients were in thrall to their myths, and committed all manner of acts repulsive even to their own habitual moral sense under their ideological dominance.18

By contrast, when we reach the stage of revelation, human consciousness returns into itself; it is emancipated through coming to understand itself as in relation with that absolute freedom for which the ‘world-historical’ term is ‘God’ (PO, 190). For Schelling the lynchpin of this transition is the life and death of Christ, who reveals what it means to live and think as a truly free human being. But it should be stressed that Schelling’s aim, in his philosophy of revelation, is not to justify the dogmatic content of Christianity. It is rather to render the phenomenon of the emergence of the Christian religion and its historical impact philosophically intelligible, starting as far as possible from the New Testament sources, which Schelling takes to be the documentary traces left by human beings struggling to make sense of a staggering, world-changing event (see PO, 259). At times this requires a challenge to existing theological interpretations of Christian doctrine as inadequate and even incoherent.19 Furthermore, it should not be assumed that, after the turning point of revelation, history is set on course for the steadily advancing realization of freedom. This is, after all, the ‘false time’ of the world after the catastrophe – and the power of nature repeatedly obliterates the glimmers of comprehension in which human beings grasp themselves as both rational and free. There can be no guaranteed or automatic progress because actual being and reason are not to be equated. After all, ‘if reason is the entirety of being in each being, where is unreason to be derived from? Reason … can never transform itself into the other of itself; it is precisely that which is unalterably equal to itself’ (PO, 256). Indeed, in Schelling’s view, it is precisely the fusion of being and reason characteristic of modern rationalism which threatens the process of emancipation. This is made clear in his diagnosis of what he terms ‘negative philosophy’ – the prelude, in Schelling’s final system, to the ‘positive philosophy’ we have considered so far.

It should be emphasized that Schelling’s designation ‘negative philosophy’ is far from being predominantly depreciative. Starting with Descartes, the thought of the modern period detached itself from dependency on the content of positive religion – this is one of the senses in which it can be regarded as negative – and thereby took a step towards emancipation. As Schelling remarks, ‘Already implicit in the beginning that Descartes made

18For an interpretation of ancient Babylonian ritual prostitution in this sense, see Schelling, Philosophie der Mythologie, 249–260. For an insightful and lucid guide to Schelling’s philosophy of mythology, see Beach, The Potencies of God(s).
19For a superb, comprehensive treatment of Schelling’s Christology, see Danz, Die philosophische Christologie.
was the fact that philosophy is seeking a content for itself, the impulse towards an independent and positive content’ (Schelling, Grundlegung der Positiven Wissenschaft, 122). However, in negative philosophy, the striving for such content falls short. More specifically, we can distinguish in everything actual between what it is and that it is. The former dimension allows me to have a concept of it, the latter allows me to encounter it or register its existence. As Kant emphasized, concepts can function without intuitions, but intuitions have no status in consciousness without concepts. Schelling’s version of this doctrine is the claim that ‘Cognition is a recognition (of what is already contained in the concept) [Das Erkennen ist ein Wiedererkennen (dessen, was schon im Begriff enthalten ist)].’ (PO, 99). What he terms the ‘purely rational’ (reinrational) philosophy of the modern age can therefore unfold logically the conceptual structure of being, but it cannot account for why anything exists, or for the actual development of what exists – as Kant acknowledged in his own way, with the doctrine of the Ding an sich. True, the deployment of the ontological argument by modern rationalism, from Descartes via Spinoza to Leibniz, can be seen as an attempt to make good this deficiency, by building a logical bridge from thought to being. But Kant showed that the bridge is irreparable. In this sense, as Axel Hutter has put it, Kant’s critique of reason represents for late Schelling ‘a presentation of negative philosophy in the mode of a critical limitation of its validity’ (Hutter, Geschichtliche Vernunft, 131). For Schelling, Hegel’s dialectical thought plays a distinctive role within this story. Hegel’s Logic represents a prolongation of Kant’s transcendental – metaphysically abstemious – philosophy into a new theory of being, which has ceased to acknowledge its own negative status.20

How does Schelling’s historical schema compare with that of Adorno? For the Critical Theorist, too, as we have seen, human consciousness is dominated in its early stages by myth, and mythical thought is driven by an obscure compulsion, embodies the overawing, uncomprehended dominance of natural forces. However, Adorno does not explicitly theorize a transition from myth to revelation. Rather, escape from entrapment in the cyclical repetition of myth, through the loophole opened by instrumentally rational action, merely introduces a different kind of compulsion, in which the spontaneity of the self is crippled for the sake of power over nature. The break-out from the illusion of myth is genuine enlightenment – but nonetheless emancipated reason reverts to mythical compulsion. Here, Adorno echoes Schelling’s critique of reinrationale Philosophie – his corresponding expression for which is ‘identity-thinking’. So not surprisingly, Adorno’s and Schelling’s critiques of Hegel, and of the claim to self-sufficiency of dialectics, also converge. For Adorno dialectic is the ‘embodiment of

20 An illuminating account of Schelling’s critique of Hegel is provided by Hermanni, ‘Hegel als Episode?’
negative knowledge”; it will ‘accept no other beside itself; even in its negative form its drags along with it the imperative of exclusivity derived from its positive form, from the system’ (ND, 397). In short, dialectic is ‘an impress of the universal nexus of delusion’, as well as being its critique (ND, 399).

It would be erroneous, however, to assume that, because Adorno thinks in terms of a direct transition from myth to enlightenment, he has no sense for the word-historical significance of Christianity. Perhaps it is a failing that, unlike Hegel and Schelling, he allots religion no systematic place in his philosophy of history. After all, he recognizes that Christianity, beyond its dogma, embodied an impulse to ‘cancel the all-penetrating coldness’ – the coldness of like for like, violence for violence, remorseless instrumental calculation – which, in Negative Dialectics, he describes as the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, the principle which eventually made Auschwitz possible (see Adorno, ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, 99, ND, 355–356). Furthermore, it can be argued that Adorno’s basic concept of emancipation reveals significant affinities with Schelling’s philosophical Christology. For Schelling interprets the doctrine of the incarnation, the unity of God and man in Christ, in the following way: Christ can be considered as divine precisely insofar as he was able to renounce the hard-wired, obsessive human striving to be divine, to attain a position of total sovereignty over oneself and over the world. In other words, Christ was indeed truly human, since he abandoned divinity, to the point of dying on the Cross – but it is this very abandonment that is the realization of his path-breaking, divine freedom (see PO, 285–299). This structure of thought occurs again and again in Adorno. For him, it is insofar as spirit seeks total domination that it distorts itself, becomes the opposite of itself. Spirit can only become what it truly is by abandoning its ambition to seek dominion as spirit. As Adorno puts it:

In spirit what merely is becomes aware of its own deficiency; leave-taking from being that remains stubbornly stuck within itself is the source of that aspect of spirit through which it severs itself from its own nature-dominating principle … The aspect of spirit which is hostile to life would be simply loathsome, were it not to culminate in self-reflection. The ascESIS it demands of others is false, but its own is good: in its self-negation it steps beyond itself. (ND, 385)

For both Adorno and Schelling, then, the theory of emancipation revolves around the same fundamental thought. In the preface to Negative Dialectics, Adorno recalls having felt this thought to be his task, ever since he first began to trust his own intellectual impulses: ‘to use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity’ (ND, 10). Indeed, if one were to try to sum up the triangular relationship between Adorno, Hegel, and Schelling, one could say that Hegel is primarily a philosopher of reconciliation, even – paradoxically – at the expense of
liberation, whereas Adorno and Schelling, while not denying the intimate connection between the two processes, are first and foremost philosophers of a breakthrough to freedom.

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