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“As From a State of Death”: Schelling’s Idealism as Mortalism

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ABSTRACT

If a problem is the collision between a system and a fact, Spinozism and German idealism’s greatest problem is the corpse. Life’s end is problematic for the denial of death’s qualitative difference from life and the affirmation of nature’s infinite purposiveness. In particular, German idealism exemplifies immortalism – the view that life is the unconditioned condition of all experience, including death. If idealism cannot explain the corpse, death is not grounded on life, which invites mortalism – the view that death is the unconditioned condition of experience. In “Philosophical Letters,” Schelling critiques idealism, arguing that death symbolizes the regulative ideal of a philosophical system’s derivation, our striving for which unifies our rational activity. I interpret Schelling’s critique as explaining how death puts philosophy into question, an idea he develops in the *Freedom* essay and Berlin lectures. Death is not a problem to be solved by a system, but represents philosophy’s highest yet unrealizable end.

KEYWORDS

Schelling; Fichte; life; death; intellectual intuition; immortalism; mortalism; purposiveness; liveability

If we understand a philosophical problem as “the collision between a comprehensive view (be it hypothesis or belief) and a particular fact which will not fit into it” (Jonas 2001, 9), we should expect no greater problem for Spinozism and German idealism than the human corpse. That the *living die* is a problem for a view in which it is a “figment of the human imagination” that the organic and inorganic differ in kind, in which death introduces no qualitative change into nature because bodies are simply recombinable arrangements of matter.¹ That the *living die* is a problem for a view in which the absolute is an infinite purposive activity.² Transition into death is intelligible in Spinoza’s view only if he can show

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¹See Spinoza (2002), 1 App.

²See Fichte (1994a): “the only thing that exists in itself is reason, and individuality is something merely accidental. Reason is the end and personality is the means; the latter is merely a particular expression of reason, one that must increasingly be absorbed into the universal form of the same. For the *Wissenschaftslehre*, reason alone is eternal, whereas individuality must ceaselessly die off” (505); and Schelling (1994a): “By virtue of the self-affirmation of the absolute, whereby the latter eternally conceives the universe in itself and is the universe itself, the particulars of the universe, too, are granted a double life, a life in the absolute – which is the life of the idea, and which accordingly was also characterized as the dissolution of the finite in the infinite and of the particular in the universal – and a life in itself – which, however, is only proper to the [particular] merely to the extent that it is simultaneously dissolved into the universe, [for] in its separation from the life in God the latter is a mere semblance of life” (6:187); and Hegel (1977): “the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself” (S32); and (1969): “In the genus process, the separated individualities of individual life perish; the negative identity in which the genus returns into itself, while it is on the one hand the process of generating individuality, is on the other hand the sublation of it, and is thus the genus coming together with itself, the universality of the Idea in process of becoming for itself. In copulation the immediacy of the living individuality perishes; the death of this life is the procession of spirit” (12.191).

how *distinctly living* being can be extinguished, and in the German idealists' view only if they can show how distinctly living being can be *extinguished*. If the idealists are correct to cast Spinozistic matter as determined (efficiently and *ad infinitum*), inert (moving or at rest unless impinged), and dead (organized, but not self-organizing), the exception to Spinoza's rule is mortal matter – but this is exactly the exception to their rule that matter is fundamentally active, dynamic, and living. Both rules grapple with the same problem: as a Spinozist, I must explain how, in dying, what I lose is *life*; as an idealist, I must explain how, in death, life is what is *lost*.

In “Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism” (1795/1796), Schelling charges Spinozism and idealism with the task of deriving the *a priori* conditions of experience from an unconditioned condition or first principle (1980a, 327).³ Their common goal is to realize their respective principles as systems of such conditions at play in judgment, that is, to cognize the unity of a first principle and the totality of judgeable phenomena. The phenomenon posing the deepest obstacle to this unity is the corpse: now dead and once living, its feet lie in two different worlds for which derivational completeness demands a common ground. In light of this problem, it becomes crucial to see that German idealism exemplifies what I call *immortalism*, the view that a systematic conception of purposiveness or life serves as the unconditioned condition of the possibility of experience. By construing the self-determination of the I (Fichte), the self-generation of the Absolute (middle Schelling) or the self-development of the Concept (Hegel) as experience's unconditioned condition or transcendental ground, idealism aims to deduce derivative conditions of experience, including experience's cessation. A vindication of this view entails that death is unconditionally conditioned by life thus construed, and so has no (or, at least, no ultimate) explanatory role to play in accounting for the possibility of experience. But the opposite results if idealism cannot overcome the problem of the corpse; for then death is not grounded in life, but rather puts the normative enterprise of experience into question. If so, idealism must contend with what I call *mortalism*, the view that a systematic conception of mortality or death serves as the unconditioned condition of the possibility of experience.

We would expect a post-idealist like Heidegger to espouse mortalism and, thereby, to invert the Socratic view that philosophy prepares us for death. However, against standard accounts of the grounding role that German idealism assigns to life, I argue that, in both his early and later phases, Schelling precedes Heidegger by holding that a systematic conception of death prepares us for philosophy. In Schelling's mortalist view, the idea of death represents the ideal of a philosophical system's complete derivation, our striving for which individuates and unifies our finite rational activity. Only striving for this ideal endlessly – as a regulative ideal – can sustain critical philosophy. Thus, while German idealism under Fichte, Hegel, and, for a brief period, Schelling himself absolutely privileges life, it is as an internal critic of this tradition that Schelling challenges its master concept. His critique of Fichte's *Jena Wissenschaftslehre* – the seed for this challenge⁴ – initiates an account of how death puts us into question, that is, how what he calls “annihilation” and “transition to not-being” ground systematic accounts of experience. I reconstruct the development of Schelling's mortalist argument for the unliveability of a system's complete derivation,

³Whether the Spinozist should accept this challenge is, of course, debatable.

⁴For a more complete account of Schelling's critique of Fichte than I can offer here, see Bruno (2014).

its desirability notwithstanding, by drawing on the “Letters” in §§I-II, the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809) in §III and the 1841/1842 Berlin lectures in §IV. Anticipating my reconstruction, I note the claim he voices through the priest in *Clara, or On Nature’s Connection to the Spirit World* (1810) that no system can overcome the problem of the corpse: “Philosophers may very well say: there is no death, nothing in itself fades away; here they assume an arbitrary explanation of death and dying. However, what we others call it still remains, nevertheless, and words can no more explain this than they can explain it away” (2002, 30). Death is not to be explained by a philosophical system, but is to be conceived as the very ground of systematizing. We will see that, for Schelling, this means philosophy is never without its mortal presupposition.

I

Two major problems drive Fichte’s Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*: the sceptical threat that knowledge is only of appearances and divorced from what there is in-itself; and the nihilistic threat that purposes are incoherent because existence is grounded on a purposeless substance or “Not-I”.⁵ For the sake of unity, Fichte seeks to ground a system on a first principle and, for the sake of purposes, posits a principle of purposiveness. Hence, he writes at the end of his tenure in Jena: “something stable, at rest, and dead can by no means enter the domain of what I call philosophy, within which all is act, movement, and life” (1994b, I:381). For the Spinozist, beings persist unless they are moved; they are not self-moving. But only what moves itself is alive. How, then, can the idealist maintain that “all” within the domain of philosophy is alive? It cannot, on pain of nihilism, be due to something conditioned by purposeless substance, but must owe to something unconditionally purposive, a principle with absolute explanatory primacy. Fichte calls this principle “the I.”

In *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797/1798), Fichte describes the I as “vital and active, something that generates cognitions out of itself and by means of itself,” and instructs the idealist “to observe this activity ... as a single, unified activity” (1994a, I:454). Here, the idealist does not observe the activity of a finite self, which Fichte explicitly and repeatedly distinguishes from the I.⁶ The latter explains the possibility of the former as a purposive being. Hence, in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796/1799), he understands the I “as reason as such or in general, which is something quite different from personal I-hood” (1998, IV/2:220). The I is a general activity of self-movement – an activity Fichte also calls “life” (1987, 111) – of which I must find myself to be a particular instance. Thus, my “first demand” as a philosopher is to make myself intelligible (see 1994a, I:422–423), namely, by apprehending the I as a principle of purposiveness.

⁵This threat is first voiced by Jacobi. Although he does not coin “nihilism” until his “Open Letter to Fichte” (1799), he discusses annihilation in *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (1785, 1789), analysing the concepts – absolute grounding, infinite efficient causation, the absence of final causes – that will inform his neologism; see Jacobi (1994), 189, 209–210, 362; and compare *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism* (1815), 317–318. While Jacobi attributes nihilism to Fichte in the “Open Letter,” his initial target is Spinoza. In his view, Spinozism entails nihilism because it explains things by efficient causes, which comprehensively entails mechanism, which entails that final causation or purposiveness is incoherent (362).

⁶See Fichte (1994a), 530n. See also (2000): “One would hope that these two quite distinct concepts, which are contrasted here with sufficient clarity, will no longer be confused with one another” (54).

I apprehend the I by reflecting on my capacity for thought in what we might call an “act experiment.” I can think the wall; but I can also think myself thinking the wall. When I do, “the thinking subject and the object of thought cannot be distinguished from each other in the way they could be while I was still thinking about the wall When I think about the I my activity is self-reverting . . . It consists in an act of intuiting” (Fichte 1998, IV/2:29). In thinking myself thinking, my act of thought is its own object – unmoved by anything else, it is self-moving. Thus, my act of self-movement instantiates the general activity named “I.” Fichte calls this act “intellectual intuition” (1998, IV/2:31), a cognition that proves the reality of my purposiveness and, thereby, the reality of idealism’s first principle. In this, I refute the dogmatist or, rather, I show how she refutes herself. She posits the Not-I, a principle whose consequences preclude the possibility of purposive agency and thus *of her very capacity intentionally to posit it*. It is this performative contradiction that gives the lie to her system.

In the “Letters,” Schelling acknowledges our capacity for “withdrawing from temporal change into our innermost self, which we divest of every exterior accretion. There, in the form of immutability, we intuit the eternal in us . . . It is this intuition which first convinces us that anything *is*, strictly speaking, while everything else merely *appears*” (1980a, I/1:318). Withdrawal from sensible intuition of appearances to intellectual intuition of the I is a function of thinking the ground of appearances. During the “identity philosophy,” Schelling embraces intellectual intuition by arguing that this thinking yields absolute cognition.⁷ But in this text, and in texts after the identity philosophy, he warns of such an argument’s tendency for depersonalization. Withdrawing to the “eternal” or absolute and positing it as a first principle is a depersonalized act if it claims to cognize a point at which “the intuiting self [*anschauende Selbst*] is identical with the intuited” (I/1:319), for this is to disown what is distinctive of selves:

No proposition can be more groundless, by its very nature, than the one which asserts an absolute in human *knowledge*. Just because it affirms that which is absolute, no further ground can be given for the proposition. As soon as we enter the realm of proofs, we enter the realm of that which is conditioned and, vice versa, entering the realm of that which is conditioned – we enter the realm of philosophical problems. (I/1:308–309, italics mine)

The identity of intuiter and intuited is a relation between a self and the “absolute” or unconditioned condition. It is an immediate relation, lest it be mediated by something else and this condition be conditioned. An immediate relation furthermore cannot be proven, as this would mean its mediation by another relation. Yet we could only know this relation by means of proof; for, to transcend the realm of proof would be to abandon the realm of the “conditioned,” the distinctively problematic realm in which selves pursue knowledge. It would be to arrive where “all is intelligible” – a night in which all cows are black.⁸ By

⁷For an account of the explanatory role served by intellectual intuition during Schelling’s identity philosophy, see Bruno (2013).

⁸Most scholars overlook this when citing Hegel (1977, §16), whose famous bullet Schelling dodges before and after the fact: “One does not even yet have [the existence of the universal subject-object] as something which is really thought, that is, as something which has been logically realized; it is rather from the very beginning merely what is *wanted*; ‘the pistol from which it is fired’ is the mere wanting of that which is, which, though, in contradiction with not being able to gain possession of that which is, with not being able to bring it to a halt, is immediately carried away into the progressing and pulling movement, in which being behaves until the end as that which is never realized, and must first be realized” (1994c, 151).

professing knowledge of the immediate relation between self and absolute, the act of intellectual intuition purports to surpass our conditioned realm.

For Schelling, this is to profess to surpass our form of life:

We awaken from intellectual intuition as from a state of death. We awaken through reflection, i.e., through a forced return to ourselves. But no return is thinkable without resistance, no reflection without an object. We designate as alive an activity directed at objects alone and as dead an activity losing itself in itself. Man ought to be neither lifeless nor merely living. His activity is necessarily intent upon objects, but with equal necessity it returns into itself. The latter distinguishes him from the merely living (animal) being, the former from the lifeless. (Schelling 1980a, I/1:325)

We are reflective beings in that, unlike “merely living” beings, we are aware of ourselves as intentional subjects that exclude and are excluded by objects. It is because we are self-consciously resistant and resisted that “resistance” distinguishes selfhood.⁹ As Schelling puts it: “activity without any object, an activity to which there is no resistance, never returns into itself. Only through a return to one’s self does consciousness arise. Only a restricted reality is actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] for us” (I/1:324). Intellectual intuition purports to remove resistance by cognitively accessing the unrestricted reality of the I, that is, of purposive activity. By Schelling’s lights, this is to profess “an activity losing itself in itself,” whereby one loses oneself as resistant and resisted.¹⁰ This is why one “ought” not to profess it: it is an inauthentic play of lifelessness, feigning death. Another performative contradiction thus emerges: while the Spinozist refutes her non-purposive system by her capacity to posit its first principle, the Fichtean undermines his intellectual intuition by his *vitality*, whose definition by self-conscious resistance renders such an act unliveable.

Schelling continues:

Intuition as such is usually explained as the most immediate experience; correctly, so far as it goes. Yet, the more immediate the experience, the closer to disappearance. Even sensuous intuition, as long as it is only what it is, borders on nothingness. Should I maintain it *as* intuition I would cease to be I; I must grasp myself with might in order to save myself from the abyss of intuition. Still, as long as intuition is intent upon objects, that is, as long as it is sensuous intuition, there is no danger of losing oneself. The I [*Das Ich*], on finding resistance, is *obliged* to take a stand against it, that is, to return into self. However, where sensuous intuition ceases, where everything objective vanishes, there is nothing but infinite expansion without a return into self. Should I maintain intellectual intuition I would cease to live: I would go ‘from time into eternity.’ (Schelling 1980a, I/1:325)

An object impresses itself on me in sensible intuition, a relation I mediate by how I conceive of it. I “return” to myself by reflecting on the fact that while I conceive the object one way, it can sustain other ways of being conceived. In reflection, then, I grasp myself as taking a stand on something that stands up to me. But if resistance defines our cognitive grasp of the world, sensible intuition under the guidance of concepts is essential to life. This blocks any intuition whose immediacy would annihilate self-conscious resistance and, with it, the vital difference between subject and object. However philosophically desirable, cognizing the absolute or unconditioned condition of experience in intellectual intuition is incompatible with our form of life.

⁹Compare Schelling (2000): “There is no consciousness without something that is at the same time excluded and contracted. That which is conscious excludes that of which it is conscious as not itself. Yet it must again attract it precisely as that of which it is conscious as itself, only in a different form” (I/8:262).

¹⁰Compare Schelling (1994a): “Without opposition [there is] no life. Indeed, such [opposition] inheres in man and in all existence” (I/7:435).

II

After excluding absolute cognition from the *ground* of a philosophical system, Schelling – in the “Letters” and from the *Freedom* essay onward – goes on to exclude it from the *completion* of the same. In this, he continues to target German idealism’s obsession with vindicating a systematic conception of life. In the “Letters,” he gives a three-step argument for the incompleteness of any system, specifically, for the impossibility of the complete, organic self-realization of any system.

The first premise holds that judgment must realize an unconditioned condition or first principle as a system of the *a priori* conditions of experience. It is not enough to avoid Agrippan scepticism – the threat that justification is circular, arbitrary or regressive¹¹ – by postulating a first principle grounding all justifiable knowledge; for this faces the problem of empty formalism – the threat that such a principle lacks reality because it lacks the matter whose unity it is meant to inform.¹² Deriving a system of conditions is required in order to supply this matter, that is, to show that one’s principle actually constitutes a systematic order. This is why, in the Fourth Letter, Schelling asserts the criterion that judgment must “be preceded by an absolute unity” and must “terminate in an absolute ... doctrine” (1980a, I/1:296–297). To avoid Agrippan scepticism, the absolute unity promised by a first principle must be postulated; to avoid empty formalism, the absolute doctrine of a unified system of conditions must be derived.

The second premise holds that judgment presupposes the resistance between subject and object definitive of selfhood, a premise for which, independent of his critique of Fichte, Schelling has a sub-argument.

First, contingency attends every stage of a system’s derivation. As Schelling puts it: “Every *system* bears the stamp of individuality on the face of it, because no system can be completed otherwise than *practically*, that is, subjectively” (1980a, I/1:304). Systems are practical tasks for subjects, fuelled by no more (but no less) than our freedom to construct and defend them. Support for this premise is found in the Ninth Letter when Schelling says the “whole sublimity of [one’s] science has consisted in just this, that it would never be complete. He would become unbearable to himself the moment he came to believe that he had completed his system. That very moment he would cease to be *creator* and would be degraded to an instrument of his own creature” (I/1:306). A system, then, is a contingent creation whose total realization cannot be claimed without disowning one’s role in realizing it. Such a finished product would be necessary because it would be conditioned by nothing, *not even one’s role in its creation*. It is yet another performative contradiction to claim to create that which undermines one’s freedom to create it. A system’s derivation is therefore never more than contingently valid.¹³

¹¹See Schelling (1980b): “Either our knowledge has no reality at all and must be an eternal round of propositions [that is, circularity], each dissolving into its opposite [that is, arbitrariness], a chaos in which no element can crystallize [that is, infinite regress] – or else there must be an ultimate point of reality on which everything depends, from which all firmness and all form of our knowledge springs” (I/1:162).

¹²See Schelling (1980b): “[Reinhold’s] theorem of consciousness automatically vanishes as a principle of philosophy. For it is clear that through it neither subject nor object is determined, except logically, so that the theorem has no real meaning, at least as long as it is supposed to be the ultimate principle. No philosopher has pointed out more emphatically this lack of reality in the theorem of consciousness than Salomon Maimon” (I/1:208n).

¹³Hence, Schelling (1980a) assigns scepticism an essential philosophical function (I/1:306–307). Contrast his position in the identity philosophy (2001, 4:366).

Second, the freedom on which philosophical thinking rests and the necessity at which it aims would coincide in a complete system. Specifically, they would

be *united* in the absolute: *freedom* because the absolute acts by unconditional autonomy, and *necessity*, because it acts only according to the laws of its own being, the inner necessity of its essence The absolute, if represented as realized (as existing), becomes objective; it becomes an object of *knowledge* and therewith ceases to be an object of *freedom*. And nothing is left for the finite subject but to annihilate itself *as* subject in order to become identical, through such self-annihilation, with that object. (Schelling 1980a, I/1:330–332)

German idealism responds to the Spinozism controversy ignited by Jacobi by demanding that philosophy begin with freedom – if not the freedom to intellectually intuit the absolute unity promised by a first principle, then the freedom to postulate such a unity.¹⁴ This marks the “autonomy” by which the absolute’s articulation as a system of *a priori* conditions commences, where such conditions comprise the absolute’s structural “laws.” While the absolute begins with freedom, freedom strives for the “inner necessity” of a complete and lawful “object of *knowledge*.” We saw that such an object would be conditioned by nothing, not even the “stamp of individuality.” It is in this respect, then, that the union of freedom and necessity “ceases to be an object of *freedom*,” for then it ceases to be *something to do*. No longer a practical task for subjects, a “realized” absolute would efface the resistance between subject and object. Such a “lifeless” prospect leads us to infer from these sub-premises the main argument’s second premise, that the continued activity of judgment presupposes the self-conscious resistance that is constitutive of our reflective life.

If our reflective life presupposes resistance yet aims at an “absolute doctrine” whose attainment effaces resistance, we can infer that judgment in the service of systematicity seeks what is beyond life. It is one’s activity of leaping into a system of one’s making, with the awareness that one’s life project aims at what is unliveable. This explains why, in the 1833/1834 Munich lectures, published as *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, Schelling lauds Jacobi for recognizing “the true character of all modern systems, namely, that they, instead of offering us what we really desire to know . . . offer only a tiresome substitute, a knowledge in which thought never gets beyond itself and only progresses within itself, whilst we really desire to get *beyond* thinking, in order, via that which is *higher* than thinking, to be redeemed from the torment of thinking” (1994c, 167). A realized system would relieve us of the striving that marks philosophical thinking. This is the sense in which, as a mortalist, Schelling grounds experience on death construed as a philosophical ideal. Death is not trivially unliveable insofar as we strive for it philosophically: it is not a mere demise because striving for it gives our systematic constructions *value*.

Further evidence that Schelling offers this systematic conception of death lies in the Eighth Letter when he identifies judgment’s satisfaction with its *cessation*: “Where all resistance ceases, there is infinite expansion The supreme moment of being is, for

¹⁴Speaking of the author of “Of the I,” Schelling (1980c), distancing himself from his early affirmation of Fichtean intellectual intuition, says in the “Anti-Critique” (1796): “Still less does he think of a universally valid philosophy, a philosophy of which only a wiseacre should boast However, since the philosophical public seemed to have ears only for first principles, his own first principle in regard to his readers had to be only a *postulate* [*nur ein Postulat sey*]. It demands the same free action as that with which, as he is convinced, all philosophizing must begin. The first postulate of all philosophy, to act freely, seemed to him as necessary as the first postulate of geometry, to draw a straight line” (I/1:243).

us, transition to not-being, the moment of annihilation. Here, in this moment of absolute being, supreme passivity is at one with the most unlimited activity” (1980a, I/1:324–325). We saw that the coincidence of freedom (“unlimited activity”) and necessity (“supreme passivity”) characterizes a realized system – and thus represents judgment’s satisfaction – and that this terminus is unliveable. Here, Schelling says the point of coincidence marks our “transition to non-being,” our passage from existence to death, our “annihilation.” In the Ninth Letter, he adds that all systems “are intent upon the dissolution of that contrast between subject and object, upon absolute identity.” Such is an identity that, having effaced resistance, is “no longer limited by objects” and therefore is “no longer accompanied by consciousness.” As Schelling puts it, all systems, idealism and dogmatism alike, are “bound for self-annihilation” (I/1:327). Again we hear that a complete system of the *a priori* conditions of experience would relieve us of our systematic desire and, indeed, our finitude. It is as much our *ending* as our *end* – an unliveable yet philosophically desirable goal.

Schelling’s mortalist argument for why judgment seeks annihilation allows us to conceive of death at a transcendental register in which it is not merely a biological state or process, but a condition of the possibility of *having lived a kind of life*. Since at any time the derived set of the *a priori* conditions of experience is contingently valid, one must strive without fulfilment for a life that could boast a system of necessary validity. Schelling is clear that the idea of such a life, since it cannot be lived, is regulative. He says idealism “can be spared the reproach of enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*] just as little as can dogmatism, if, like the latter, it transcends the vocation of man and tries to represent the ultimate goal as attainable” (1980a, I/1:326–327). Idealists and dogmatists are equally capable of leading the philosophical vocation if only they refuse to believe their systems can become objects of absolute knowledge. In this, they avoid “dogmatism [*Dogmatismus*], which uses the absolute as a constitutive principle for our *knowledge*” (I/1:333).¹⁵ “Dogmatism” refers to what in the Berlin lectures Schelling calls “dogmatizing,” which is the error of attempting to prove the absolute’s existence from its concept alone (2007, II/3:82). While the term sets a precedent for grasping Schelling’s later critique of German idealism, it crystallizes his early and continual view that a realized system is a regulative – because unliveable – ideal.¹⁶

III

Like the “Letters,” the *Freedom* essay offers a three-step argument for the impossibility of living the complete derivation of a unified system of the *a priori* conditions of experience.

¹⁵Schelling immediately adds: “while dogmatism uses it merely as a constitutive principle for our vocation.” Since idealism and dogmatism’s common *vocation* is to strive endlessly for what dogmatism illegitimately appropriates as *knowledge*, dogmatism’s association with a “constitutive principle” in this passage connotes nothing negative. It is noteworthy that, in the Marti translation of the “Letters,” *Dogmatismus* is consistently mistranslated as “dogmatism,” for this obscures both the text’s pluralist thrust and the term’s importance for the anti-completeness argument Schelling revisits after the identity philosophy. Also noteworthy is that F. I. Niethammer, editor of the *Philosophisches Journal* in which the “Letters” appeared, changed the text’s original title, which was “Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism.” Given that dogmatism lays claim to a *doctrine*, whereas criticism and dogmatism authentically eschew this as beyond the limits of *critique* – and given that Schelling ardently defends this Kantian distinction (I/1:301) – we might philosophically translate the text’s original title as “Philosophical Letters on Doctrine and Critique.”

¹⁶See Schelling’s (1969) Erlangen lectures (1820/1821): “In man there is no objective bringing forth [of the absolute subject] but rather just ideal imitation In him there is only knowledge The absolute subject is only there to the extent to which I do not make it an object, i.e., do not know it, *renounce knowledge*” (38).

The first premise holds that the systematic deployment of judgment expresses a kind of *desire*. Two premises form a sub-argument for this premise.

Its first premise states that a system is only possible if it rests on freedom:

Since no concept can be defined in isolation ... and only proof of its connection with the whole also confers on it final scientific completeness, this must be pre-eminently the case with the concept of freedom, which, if it has reality at all, must not be simply a subordinate or subsidiary concept, but one of the system's ruling centre-points. (Schelling 2006, I/7:336)

A concept's definition must be holistic: its determinacy depends on its relation to all other concepts within a systematic "whole." This criterion applies no less to the concept of freedom. But this concept cannot stand in a "subordinate" relation to other concepts: the threat of nihilism reminds us why this is so. It follows that freedom must stand in a grounding relation to all concepts within a system. As Schelling says, freedom's definition must be pre-eminent. Notice that, not only is a system in which freedom has any place grounded precisely on freedom, but, since a system must provide some place for freedom, *the only system possible* is one grounded on freedom.

Its second premise states that the philosophical exploits of freedom are not impersonal creations:

Freedom or conscious will is, however, the will of love, precisely because it is what it is: the revelation that results from it is action and act. The whole of nature tells us that it in no way exists by virtue of a merely geometrical necessity; in it there is not simply pure reason but personality and spirit ... The creation is not an occurrence but an act. (Schelling 2006, I/7:483–484)

We saw in the "Letters" that a philosophical system is a practical task for subjects – neither a minted coin nor a product our role in the creation of which we can disown. Here, Schelling describes the ineliminable stamp of "personality" on any system in terms of will. Whereas geometric necessity derives from purportedly fixed definitions and axioms, the will fuels its systematic creations with *personal* necessity: its creatures are contingent on desire or "love."¹⁷ It is in this sense that freedom consists in a personal (and otherwise groundless) desire that drives any "act" of "pure reason."¹⁸ Thus, if system rests on freedom and freedom consists in desire, we can infer the main argument's first premise, that judgment aimed at a system is ultimately the expression of a desire.

The second premise holds that judgment only expresses this desire through a sustained contradiction between freedom and necessity.¹⁹ We saw in the "Letters" that reconciling the freedom of philosophical construction and the necessity of the intended object of the same removes the resistance constitutive of selfhood. Here, Schelling says that "without the contradiction of necessity and freedom not only philosophy but each higher willing of the spirit would sink into the death that is proper to those sciences in which this contradiction has no application" (2006, I/7:403). This is not a claim about which scientific projects are worth pursuing in our conflict with ignorance. It is the claim that to resolve the contradiction

¹⁷Compare Gabriel (2009) on the contingency of necessity (51–52).

¹⁸Hence Schelling's (2007) charge that "the God of pure idealism, as well as the God of pure realism, is necessarily an impersonal being, of which the concepts of Spinoza and Fichte are the clearest proofs" (I/7:395). Fichte's idealism, no less than Spinoza's realism, depersonalizes necessity.

¹⁹Contrast Spinozistic and Fichtean depersonalization, which purports to reconcile freedom and necessity. Spinoza (2002) analyses them from the concept of substance (1Def7). Fichte (1994a) identifies them in the act of intellectual intuition (I: 445). For both, freedom and necessity coincide at a system's ground.

in question is to “pull oneself out of the conflict by renouncing reason” (2006, I/7:403). Since reason is an “act” of will, to renounce acts of will is to will nothing, which is why Schelling deems it “closer to flight than to victory” (2006, I/7:403).²⁰ This conception of death is perhaps more metaphorical than the annihilation depicted in the “Letters.” Nevertheless, after the identity philosophy, the *Freedom* essay’s contradiction criterion²¹ restores Schelling’s mortalist view that philosophy is lived as a *tension* between freedom and necessity, one felt as the striving for its resolution. Earlier, in *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), he locates their resolution beyond time: “Since God is the *absolute* harmony of necessity and freedom, and this harmony cannot be revealed in individual destinies but only in history as a whole, only history as a whole is a revelation of God – and then only a progressively evolving revelation” (2010, 44). Since no less than the cessation of history marks the harmonization of the freedom to philosophize and the necessity of a complete system of the *a priori* conditions of experience, it is no surprise that Schelling likens it to death.

If judgment ultimately expresses a desire that is sustainable only by a continuous contradiction between freedom and necessity, we can infer that it cannot survive the satisfaction of a system that resolves this contradiction. Insofar as judgment’s goal is unliveable, its practical task must remain incomplete. Again, this goal’s philosophical desirability means that it does not trivially transcend our form of life: the infinite end of one who desires systematicity is not merely unliveable, for its absence is significant for we who desire it.

IV

The coincidence, depicted in the *Freedom* essay, of the lifeless resolution of freedom and necessity with the attainment of philosophy’s highest end anticipates the Berlin lectures’ idea of history as an endless proof of a first principle. In Munich, eight years prior to these lectures, Schelling makes a remark that might sound cryptic in the absence of the reading of the “Letters” offered above. He says the absolute “is only thought in the last moment (take good note of this expression!)” (1994c, 152). The absolute is of course thinkable in philosophy’s first moment, namely, when I postulate a first principle. But since, *contra* Fichte, this is never a cognitive act, the *true* thought of the absolute can only come later – indeed, as Schelling’s remark suggests and as he argues in Berlin, it can only come after history. The consequence is that a complete proof of the first principle of philosophy exceeds the temporal bounds of life.

Published in English as the *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, the Berlin lectures defend the necessity of a double method for post-Kantian philosophy: the negative method of regressing from existence to the unconditioned condition or first principle of our experience of it; and the positive method of progressing via experience to this principle’s full realization. This distinguishes Schelling’s project from Hegel’s; for, if negative philosophy is strictly a “withdrawal back into its limits,” it contrasts with Hegelian negativity, which

²⁰Compare Heidegger (1985): “The question of the compatibility of system and freedom ... is not only an ‘object’ of philosophy ... but is in advance and at bottom and finally the *condition* of philosophy, the open contradiction *in* which it stands and which it brings to *stand*, brings about again and again Philosophy is intrinsically *a strife between necessity and freedom*. And in that it belongs to philosophy as the highest knowledge to know itself, it will produce from itself this strife and thus the question of the system of freedom Schelling wants to say we are not philosophizing ‘*about*’ necessity and freedom, but philosophy is the most alive ‘*and*,’ the unifying strife between necessity and freedom. He doesn’t just ‘say it,’ *he enacts* this in the [*Freedom* essay]” (57–58).

²¹Compare Gabriel’s (2009) mythology criterion (77).

“is driven beyond its limits: it does not exclude the positive, but thinks it has subdued it within itself It puffs itself up to be the positive, whereas according to its final rationale it can only be negative” (Schelling 2007, II/3:80). Why is Hegel’s method in fact merely negative? What does it lack?

According to Schelling, the German idealist project takes itself to have regressed from existence to a principle that is intelligible without remainder because, like a seed, it is the means to its own realization. But existence is precisely this principle’s remainder, for “there could very well be nothing that exists” (Schelling 2007, II/3:59). In other words, there is no guarantee that this principle should condition anything, that is, that it must have something to condition. Schelling therefore enlists a method that can begin with that which is conditioned – namely, the fact of existence – and progress experientially to a proof of its conditioning principle’s reality. But an opposing problem arises: any such proof must confront the absurdity of this fact, the absurdity that there is anything rather than nothing.²² We only avoid this dual threat by adopting the reciprocal method of showing, negatively, that the experience of existence is made rational by a first principle and, positively, that this principle is made real via experience.

Schelling’s double method structurally parallels the reciprocal relation Kant mandates in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) between the pure concepts of the understanding that condition the possibility of experience, and the sense experience that proves the applicability, and hence the reality, of these concepts.²³ The former is a way of avoiding Hume’s charge – about which Kant is explicit – that we are not entitled to these concepts; the latter, of avoiding Maimon’s charge – which Kant anticipates – that these concepts are empty forms. In the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, Kant says reason proves its principles,

not directly from concepts, but rather always only indirectly through the relation of these concepts to something entirely contingent, namely **possible experience** Thus no one can have fundamental insight into the proposition ‘Everything that happens has its cause’ from these given concepts alone But although it must be proved, it is also called a **principle** and not a **theorem** because it has the special property that it first makes possible its ground of proof, namely experience, and must always be presupposed in this. (Kant 1998, A736–737/B764–765)

This passage gives three criteria for proving the reality of a principle (such as “all events are caused”) and the pure concept on which it rests (such as “causality and dependence”). It must be *indirect*, *incomplete*, and *reciprocal*. First, a principle’s proof must relate to possible experience since we lack direct “insight” into a principle’s significance.²⁴ Second, a proof cannot be given from the mere analysis of concepts, but depends also on matter given in sensation. Since what is so given is “entirely contingent,” such a proof lacks necessity and hence completeness. Third, since a principle rests on a pure concept that makes possible the very experience to which it relates in its proof, this relation is reciprocal: a principle both grounds and depends on its proof such that, while a series of causal conjunctions lends proof to the principle “all events are caused,” it is only of causal conjunctions on the assumption of this principle. Like my intention to move, the categories give shape and structure to experience and, like my actual movement, experience proves the categories’ reality.

²²As Schelling (2007) asks: “Why is there anything at all? Why is there not nothing?” (II/3:7).

²³For an account of Schelling’s parallel and its Maimonian roots, see Bruno (2015).

²⁴See Kant (1998): “Only in the case of the categories is there this special circumstance, that they can have a determinate significance and relation to any object only by means of the general **sensible condition**” (A244–245/B302).

It is Maimon who alerts Schelling to the empty formalist threat to philosophy's first principle, a threat he registers in the "Letters" and the Berlin lectures.²⁵ To avoid it, he demands reciprocity between negative and positive philosophy and, in this, follows Kant's threefold criterion for proof.

First, we cannot directly prove a first principle's reality since we lack intellectual intuition. We must prove it via sense experience: "it is vital for [reason] to have a control through which it can demonstrate that what it has found *a priori* is *not* a chimera. This control is experience" (Schelling 2007, II/3:62). This avoids the tautology to which Schelling thinks German idealism is susceptible: regressing to a first principle or '*prius*' is no more probative than the ontological argument for God's existence, for if something's concept contains its existence, "the proposition *that it exists* is certainly nothing other than tautological" (II/3:157).²⁶ Leaving open whether the *prius* exists, idealism only shows how it would exist given its concept or "whatness." Its existence or "thatness" can only be sought in "*completely transcendent being*" (II/3:127) – in that which must outstrip the unconditioned condition if the latter is to have a conditioned. Second, without consulting experience, we make the "dogmatizing" (II/3:82) error of attempting to prove existence from concepts alone. Since the principle to be proved grounds existence as a whole, that to which our proof relates must be "all of experience." Hence, our proof "is not just the beginning or a part of a science ... [but] the entire science, that is, the entire positive philosophy" and is therefore "*never finished*" (II/3:131). The *relatum's* immensity makes our proof coextensive with lived history, entailing the unliveability of its completion.²⁷ Third, since there could be nothing, and since it is not obvious why there is not nothing, neither the *prius* nor existence is sufficient for our proof. It is as one-sided to think the *prius* is essentially real as it is to think existence is essentially rational. If the *prius* is *empty* without the continuous experience of its reality, and if experience is *blind* without presupposing the condition on which it is possible, then negative and positive philosophy must reciprocally – and endlessly – support each other.²⁸

The possibility that nothing exists and the absurdity that anything exists lock negative and positive philosophy into a derivation that is permanently open to future contradiction.²⁹ The whole of history is accordingly the record of our attempt to derive a system whose completion must lie beyond the temporal bounds of life. This is why, in the final Berlin lecture, Schelling calls existence or "being" "the inverted idea, the idea in which reason is set *outside* itself. Reason can posit being in which there is still nothing of a concept ... only as something that is absolutely *outside itself* In this positing, reason is therefore set outside itself, absolutely ecstatic" (Schelling 2007, II/3:162–163). Being outstrips the history of reason's proof of the *prius*. By excluding determination by any

²⁵See Schelling (1980a), I/1:310 and (2007), II/3:150.

²⁶This targets Schelling's (1994b) own formulation of the absolute at the height of the identity philosophy, in *System of the Whole of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Nature in Particular* (1804), as "that whose ideal includes *its Being* [and] whose idea is thus the immediate affirmation of Being" (6:147).

²⁷Compare Schelling (1980a): "[the question] why is there a realm of experience at all? ... can be answered only in such a way that it *can never again be asked*" (I/1:311, italics mine).

²⁸See Schelling (2007): "as little as the *a priori* excludes the empirical, to which it rather has a necessary relationship, just as little is the empirical free from the *a priori*, having rather a significant amount of the same in itself [...]. The essence [of the empirical] is, in the consummation of this science, something to be comprehended *a priori*, but that it exists, that it is empirical, is only to be realized *a posteriori*" (II/3:102–103).

²⁹See Schelling (2007): "the object of the positive philosophy is the object of a proof that is, while of course sufficient at earlier levels, nonetheless still incomplete; there could always arise in a resulting stage a contradiction of an earlier postulate. In this context, even the present is no limit, but is here a view that still opens onto a future that will also be nothing other than the progressive proof of the existence of the power [i.e. thinking] that rules over being" (II/3:131–132).

concept, it represents the inversion of reason's determining activity, that is, its *deactivation*. The complete proof of the *prius* would therefore set reason "outside itself." And nothing is more external to the rational standpoint – nothing more ec-static – than death.

V

A mortalist for much of his life, Schelling assigns great significance to a systematic conception of death. Construed as the unconditioned condition of experience, death signals an ideal – the cessation of judgment, the end of history, the inversion of reason – for which any philosophical system strives. My reconstruction of Schelling's mortalist arguments to this conclusion reveals a sustained opposition to the immortalist thrust of Fichte's and Hegel's idealisms – and of his own identity philosophy – and offers an interpretive framework for understanding his remarks about relief from the "torment" of thinking and the "last moment" of thought. Within this framework, we can discern a unique view about how rational life functions toward death, a view in which death is not merely a biological event or process, but a humbling principle that grounds and guides systematic thinking. By explaining philosophical activity in this manner, death is not explained away, as the priest fears in *Clara*, but has the explanatory power of making sense of a life lived in pursuit of what must be its annihilation.³⁰ Schelling's mortalism accordingly avoids Spinozism and German idealism's shared mistake of treating the corpse as a problematic fact to be reconciled with a comprehensive view. Rather than deny either that the corpse is lost *life* or that it is life *lost*, it acknowledges that the corpse individuates the examined life by putting it into question.

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³⁰Compare Schelling (1980a): "You are right, one thing remains, to *know* that there is an objective power which threatens our freedom with annihilation, and, with this firm and certain conviction in our heart, to fight *against* it exerting our whole freedom, and thus to go down" (I/1:336).

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