CHAPTER 6

Schelling's Absolute Idealism

1. The Blinding Light of 1801

All the growing forces in Schelling's intellectual development in 1799 and 1800—his sympathy for Spinozism, his belief in the autonomy and omnipresence of nature, and his argument for the priority of the *Naturphilosophie* over the *Wissenschaftslehre*—came to their culmination in his *Darstellung meines Systems,* which was published in May 1801.[1] Schelling now naturalizes the absolute, or he absolutizes nature, so that the absolute is identical with the universe itself. This was the final triumph of *Naturphilosophie,* which had now become identical to the standpoint of reason itself, representing the *entire* principle of subject–object identity. *Naturphilosophie* was no longer just the equal partner to transcendental philosophy, still less the handmaiden to the *Wissenschaftslehre.* Rather, it had usurped the title of *philosophia prima,* of which the *Wissenschaftslehre* is only the result.

With the *Darstellung meines Systems* Schelling finally comes into his own. True to its title, this work represents *his* philosophy in contrast to Fichte's. While Schelling did not exclude the possibility of Fichte's still agreeing with him,[2] he also made it plain that he was no longer toeing a master's line. If the possessive adjective in the title was not a formal act of repudiation, it was still a declaration of independence.[3]

Schelling himself regarded the *Darstellung meines Systems* as the fulfillment of all his previous work. He later wrote that it was the beginning of his true and proper system, and that it was the result of a great illumination.[4] In the preface to the work he gives us some hint about the nature of this inspiration. For several years now, he explains, he had expounded one and the same philosophy from two sides, from the angles of both transcendental and natural philosophy (IV, 107). He now puts forward the single system that

these different expositions have presupposed but not articulated. Transcendental and natural philosophy are merely opposed poles of the single true system; and with his present exposition he now finds himself in "the indifference point," which each has constructed from opposing directions (108).

Judging from the preface, Schelling's "great light" seems to have consisted in the insight that the absolute is neutral, the indifference point of the subjective and objective. After that illumination, all his earlier work seemed like complementary expositions of this absolute standpoint. The absolute could no longer be merely the ego, as Fichte once thought, because as the pure identity of subject and object, it is the center of both transcendental and natural philosophy, and so no more subject than object, no more ego than nature. This interpretation is not only suggested by the preface to the *Darstellung;* some forty years later, Schelling explained the development of the *Identitätssystem* in similar terms.[5]

But, in one respect, this explanation is surprising and misleading. The problem is that Schelling again seems to demote *Naturphilosophie* to the status of a subordinate standpoint within his system, and he says—quite falsely—that he has always seen it as one of the opposed poles of philosophy. What Schelling's explanation omits, of course, is the remarkable development of his doctrines in 1799 and early 1800 when *Naturphilosophie* gained *priority* over transcendental philosophy. The very dialectic of that development meant that the standpoint of *Naturphilosophie* became that of the indifference point itself and not merely one subordinate standpoint within it. I will attempt to unravel this apparent inconsistency in the next section.

Schelling's account of his intellectual development is misleading for another reason. He wrote that his present system did not represent any change in his views, but that he had it "always before his eyes" (IV, 107–108). It was as if his entire intellectual growth had been continuous and consistent, a constant and sure progress toward the development of his current doctrines. This was another oversimplification, a shortsighted attempt to see purpose and order in a career notable for its protean changes. It was indeed legitimate to see some pattern in his past, to see some anticipation of the principle of subject–object identity. Thus the *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* foresaw a critique of pure reason above both dogmatism and idealism; and the *Einleitung zu dem Entwurf* conceived transcendental and natural philosophy as opposing poles of the principle of subject–object identity. But, in considering only these points, Schelling took an anachronistic and selective

view of his own past; he was abstracting from many other phases of his development that did not fit such a tidy pattern. He was willfully ignoring, for example, his earlier view of *Naturphilosophie* as an applied part of transcendental philosophy, his preference for idealism over dogmatism in *Vom Ich als Princip* and in the *Abhandlungen,* and his statement in the preface to the *System des transcendental Idealismus* that, because of their complementarity, transcendental and natural philosophy would *not* be able to form a unity. The path toward the *Darstellung meines Systems* was not always the smooth transition, the organic development, that Schelling wanted it to be. Rather, it demanded some change from his former views, not only in the weaker sense of *reformulating* them but also in the stronger sense of *renouncing* them.

2. Objective Idealism

The *Darstellung meines Systems* has an important place in the history of German idealism. It is the first *systematic exposition* of 'objective' or 'absolute' idealism, the first *technical exposition* of the '*En kai pan,*' that pantheistic *credo* that had become so popular in Germany in the 1790s. What Hölderlin, Schlegel, Novalis, and Hülsen had left in fragments—what they regarded as a mystical insight transcending conceptual articulation—Schelling would now try to rationalize and systematize.[6] Like Hegel after him, Schelling complained about the lack of rigor and form among his contemporaries. It is not enough to leave the insight into the one and all on the level of intuition and feeling, he argued, because it is also necessary to objectify and embody it, to give it a strict scientific form.[7] Some kind of intuition is necessary to *begin* philosophy, of course, but it is not its resting point and should never replace the business of conceptual elaboration. Hence the method of the *Darstellung meines Systems* would be the most rigorous possible: it would proceed *more geometrico* like Spinoza, starting from self-evident propositions and definitions and then proving every proposition from preceding ones. The result was a disciplined parade of numbered paragraphs, an exposition as dry and routine as anything from Christian Wolff.

True to its pantheistic *credo,* Schelling's treatise is essentially a defense of a *monistic rationalism* or a *rationalistic monism.* The whole work is a demonstration of three fundamental propositions: that there is a single, indivisible substance, which is identical with the universe itself; that this substance does not transcend reason but is identical with the fundamental law of reason,

which is the principle of identity, $A = A$; and that the principle of identity expresses the complete unity of the subjective and objective, the ideal and real, the mental and physical. The first part of the work (§§1–50) consists in an argument for these three propositions, while the second part (§§51–159) attempts to develop the details of *Naturphilosophie* from them.

The obvious historical ancestor for Schelling's rationalistic and monistic vision of the world was, of course, Spinoza. Sure enough, in his preface Schelling pays explicit homage to him. He explains that it is not only the method but the doctrines of Spinoza that are closest to his own. Schelling had now come full circle. Although in his Fichtean days he once told Hegel "*Ich bin Spinozist geworden!*," that was more an expression of his sympathy for Spinoza than a statement of doctrinal affiliation; then Schelling's goal was to write the *antithesis* of Spinoza's *Ethica,* the main work of dogmatism. Now, however, Schelling considers Spinoza the apostle of the principle of subject–object identity itself, the first spokesmen for that broader view of the universe that encompasses the *unity* of the subjective and objective, the truth of *both* dogmatism and criticism.[8]

Although the *Darstellung meines Systems* is the first system of absolute idealism, it is striking that Schelling refuses to discuss the whole issue of idealism versus realism. The reason for his resistance to enter into this quagmire is sensible enough: "for what is idealism and realism, and what is also a possible third system of both, is just that which is unclear and needs to be investigated" (109). He insists that the terms 'idealism' and 'realism' have only the meaning that he assigns to them in the context of his system, and that their proper sense will emerge only at the end of his exposition. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, that the work does not contain any concluding definitions or final summary. The reader simply has *to infer* Schelling's meaning from the various contexts in which he uses his terms.

Despite his refusal to give an introductory account, Schelling does not hesitate to suggest how his idealism differs from Fichte's. These are only *possible* differences, he insists, because he does not want to beg any questions in advance. Accordingly, his explanation is very schematic: while Fichte uses the term 'idealism' in a *subjective* sense, he uses it in an *objective* one. In its subjective meaning idealism is the statement that the ego is everything (*das Ich sey Alles*); in its objective meaning it signifies just the converse: that everything is the ego (*Alles sey = Ich*) and there is nothing but the ego (IV, 109). Schelling says that these views are clearly opposed, but that both can be described as 'idealism.'

These remarks are cryptic and confusing, but their general sense is plain enough if we place them in the context of Schelling's polemic against Fichte.[9] Both statements equate the ego with everything, which is what makes them both forms of idealism. What makes them opposed to one another is the position of subject and predicate. In the subjective meaning the ego is the subject and the universe is its predicate; in the objective meaning the universe is the subject and the ego the predicate. The logical form is crucial because, in eighteenth-century logic, the subject stands as the *reason* or *ground* for its predicate. The conflict between idealism and realism then concerns which term is more fundamental: the universe or the ego? In making the universe the subject rather than predicate in his formula for objective idealism, Schelling was reversing the order of logical priority from subjective idealism. The universe was now the ground or explanans of the ego, and not conversely, as in the *Wissenschaftslehre.*

Another formulation for the difference between subjective and objective idealism appears in an earlier work of Schelling's, his *Einleitung zu dem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie,* which he wrote shortly before the *Darstellung meines Systems* (III, 272). Here Schelling does not explicitly use the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' idealism, and his main concern is only to explain the difference between transcendental and natural philosophy. Still, he makes a contrast very similar to that which appears in the preface to the *Darstellung,* though he now replaces the term 'I' with 'reason' (*Vernunft*). He explains that both these disciplines attempt to explain the *rationality* of nature, that is, its conformity to law or systematic order. But there is a fundamental difference between them: whereas transcendental philosophy sees rationality as the product of the activity of the ego alone, natural philosophy regards it as the result of the activity of nature itself. *Naturphilosophie* ascribes rationality to nature because it holds that nature acts for ends, that it is not purely mechanical but also organic, having a systematic structure developed from its own intelligent activity. According to the view of natural philosophy, then, rationality is inherent in nature itself, implicit within its purposive activity, and not simply imposed on it by the understanding.

If we read Schelling's doctrine of objective idealism in this context, then it essentially consists in the central thesis of *Naturphilosophie.* Objective idealism is then the view that reason is *within* nature itself, that its rationality is not created by the transcendental ego alone but is inherent in the purposive activity of nature itself. The difference between subjective and objective idealism then reflects two opposing theories about the *ontological status* of rea-

son itself, or about the sources and conditions of its existence. The main question at stake between these forms of idealism is whether rationality is something that we create and impose on the world, or whether it is something that exists within the world itself and is reflected in our own activity. Is human reason the lawgiver of nature, as Kant maintains, or is nature its own lawgiver, so that it is autonomous, as Schelling claims? That, in short, is the issue between subjective and objective idealism.

These formulations of objective idealism reflect Schelling's intellectual development around 1800 when he gave *Naturphilosophie* priority over the *Wissenschaftslehre*. They both equate objective idealism with the standpoint of *Naturphilosophie*, which begins with the independent reality of nature and derives the ego from it (rather than conversely). The first formulation makes the universe the fundamental term and the ego derived, corresponding to Schelling's "physical proof of idealism," which attempts to derive the self-consciousness of the ego from the laws of nature. The second formulation places reason within nature itself rather than the ego, corresponding to Schelling's claim that the principle of subject–object identity exists properly and primarily within nature itself and only secondarily in the self-consciousness of the ego.

How, though, do these formulations square with Schelling's frequent statements that the system of identity gives *equal standing* to both transcendental and natural philosophy? If we take these statements seriously—as we must—then the meaning of objective idealism should comprise *both* the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the realism of *Naturphilosophie*. This reading of objective idealism as a *synthesis* of idealism and realism seems to be confirmed by Schelling's statement in the preface to the *Darstellung* that he has now arrived at the indifference point of transcendental and natural philosophy. It acquires even more plausibility when we consider how, in his later works, Schelling continues to describe idealism and realism as subordinate perspectives within the standpoint of absolute identity.[10]

The source of the confusion rests with the very terms Schelling warns us against, namely 'realism' and 'idealism.' These terms are ambiguous because they can describe the standpoint of absolute identity itself or the subordinate perspectives contained within it. The standpoint of absolute identity can be described as *realism* because it maintains that the absolute is the universe as a whole, the one and all, of which consciousness is only one mode; it can also be regarded as *idealism* because it sees the absolute as reason, as the idea of all ideas, and holds that everything is a manifestation of it. There is also,

however, a realism and idealism *within* or *subordinate* to this standpoint because there are complementary manifestations or appearances of the absolute, and realism and idealism each describe one of them. Realism considers its appearances from the infinite to the finite, from unity to difference; and idealism treats its appearance from the finite back to the infinite, from totality back into unity.[11] Schelling himself would later draw attention to these ambiguities by distinguishing between an absolute and relative idealism, and a general and more specialized *Naturphilosophie*.[12]

If we consider these ambiguities, then Schelling's position is perfectly consistent. When he says that *Naturphilosophie* represents the absolute standpoint itself he is *not* denying that there is another kind of subordinate standpoint within it that can be described as idealism. He is simply making two claims, both of them perfectly compatible: that the absolute is the universe as a whole, nature in itself, and that it appears in two forms, one of which can be described from an idealistic standpoint and another from a realistic one.

The main point at issue between subjective and objective idealism is where we place the principle of subject–object identity: whether in nature or in the ego itself? In either case we can speak about two aspects or manifestions of the principle. If subject–object identity is in nature, then the subjective and objective, the mental and physical, are different attributes or appearances of a single universal substance. If, however, subject-object identity is in the ego, then the subjective and objective, the mental and physical, are different attributes or appearances of a single subject.

The crucial point to keep in mind, however, is that the realism and naturalism of *Naturphilosophie* does describe the absolute standpoint itself, for the absolute is now the universe as a whole, nature in itself, the *natura naturans,* which subsists apart from consciousness and explains its very possibility according to necessary laws. Relative to this realism and naturalism the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* assumes a merely subordinate status as the *relative* idealism within the absolute standpoint.

All this brings us to a significant conclusion: objective idealism is not a *synthesis* of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and *Naturphilosophie* after all. Rather, it is nothing less than the standpoint of the *Naturphilosophie* itself, an absolute or transcendental realism and naturalism.[13] Schelling calls his position *objective* idealism precisely because of this realism and naturalism, and precisely because it places reason outside the subject as the structure of the universe as a whole or nature in itself. It is indeed no accident that he later virtually identifies the standpoint of *Naturphilosophie* with absolute idealism itself.[14]

3. The Kantian–Fichtean Interpretation

It should be obvious by now that Schelling's absolute idealism—and Hegel's in the years of his collaboration with Schelling—cannot be the same as the transcendental or critical idealism of Kant and Fichte. In their early Jena years, Schelling and Hegel were indeed very anxious to distinguish their doctrine from Kant's and Fichte's, and they were tireless in their attempts to spell out their differences with them. These amount to two fundamental distinctions. First, they contrast their *objective* idealism with the *subjective* idealism of Kant and Fichte. Kant's and Fichte's idealism is *subjective* because it regards reason as the product of the transcendental subject, or because it limits subject–object identity to transcendental self-consciousness. Schelling and Hegel maintain that their idealism is objective, however, because it sees reason as the intelligible structure of reality itself, and subject–object identity as the archetypical structure of the absolute itself. In short, objective idealism holds that reason is not created by or imposed on reality by the transcendental subject but is inherent in nature itself; it sees the rational or the intelligible not as the form of consciousness but as the form of being itself. Second, they distinguish their *absolute* idealism from the *relative* idealism of Kant and Fichte. Relative idealism attempts to derive the objective from the subjective, the real from the ideal, as if one appearance or aspect of the absolute has priority over the other; but absolute idealism maintains that the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, are only different appearances or aspects of the absolute, and that both have an equal and independent standing. For this reason, Schelling and Hegel sometimes claim that Kant's and Fichte's idealism is still caught in the realm of appearances.[15]

If we consider the full implications of both these points, it becomes clear that Schelling's and Hegel's absolute idealism, at least in its initial formulation from 1801 to 1803, is not even a *radicalized* version of Kant's and Fichte's idealism. According to this neo-Kantian interpretation, absolute idealism is transcendental idealism *without* the thing-in-itself and the given manifold, and *with* the unity of apperception universalized, so that it refers to the single transcendental subject within all individual and empirical subjects.[16] In Schelling's and Hegel's terms, however, this would still be a form of subjective or relative idealism, because it sees the subject as the source of reason, and because it attempts to derive or reduce the objective down to the subjective, one of the mere aspects or appearances of the absolute. It makes no difference here if this subject is conceived as universal and tran-

scendental rather than individual and empirical, or indeed if it is considered absolute or infinite instead of finite; the result is still the same because this would be to make the absolute subjective or ideal when Schelling insists that it is neither subjective nor objective, neither ideal nor real, but the *indifference point* of both.

The main stumbling block of the neo-Kantian interpretation is that absolute idealism involves a form of *transcendental* realism and naturalism completely at odds with the Kantian–Fichtean tradition. This is not an *empirical* realism and naturalism, which is valid only from *within* the absolute standpoint and limited to only one of its partial perspectives, namely, its real or natural pole where the infinite appears as the finite. Rather, absolute idealism includes a *higher* realism and naturalism, because it equates the absolute with the universe as a whole, and because it begins with the independent reality of nature to derive *transcendental* self-consciousness.

This higher realism and naturalism is especially evident from Schelling's identification of the absolute standpoint with *Naturphilosophie.* This identification was not a passing moment in Schelling's development, a mere stage on the way toward the system of identity, because it reappears frequently in his writings from 1801 to 1804. Its persistence is apparent in several respects. First, Schelling continues to identify the absolute with nature in itself or the *natura naturans.* This is his formula for the absolute in itself, the indifference pole of the subjective and objective, and not only one pole or appearance of the absolute.[17] Second, Schelling continues to identify the doctrine of absolute idealism with the standpoint of *Naturphilosophie,* which, he says, expresses not one side but the whole principle of subject–object identity.[18] Third, Schelling does not abandon but develops in detail his program for the *"physical explanation of idealism,"* which will derive the self-consciousness of the Kantian–Fichtean 'I' from the powers of nature as a whole.[19] It is especially in this regard, in this attempt to develop a naturalistic account of the Kantian–Fichtean 'I,' that Schelling breaks most sharply from the Kantian–Fichtean tradition. His aim is to reintegrate the transcendental 'I' into nature, to take it outside its self-sufficient noumenal realm and to show how its reason is the expression and manifestation of the rationality inherent in nature itself.

All this does not mean, of course, that the absolute is somehow objective, completely transcending the realm of consciousness, and existing apart from and prior to it. This would be a serious mistake because Schelling and Hegel made it one of their chief aims to combat the illusion that the absolute is

somehow beyond us, existing on its own in some supernatural and heavenly realm. This was one form, and indeed the worst, of that dualism between the subjective and objective which it was the central purpose of the philosophy of identity to overcome. They were explicit that, as the whole of all reality, the absolute had to include the realm of consciousness within itself, and that this realm is indeed one of its necessary manifestations. They even give pride of place to the Kantian–Fichtean 'I' by making it the highest potency, the greatest organization and development of all the powers of nature. The 'I' was indeed that point where the absolute became self-conscious in the finite world, "the magical formula with which the world reveals itself."[20] But for all its importance—even though it is the highest manifestation of the absolute—the 'I' is still only *one* of its manifestation. It is indeed the *terminus ad quem* and culmination of the *Identitätsystem,* but not its *terminus a quo* or foundation.

4. The Interpretation of Subject–Object Identity

Some of Schelling's accounts of absolute idealism virtually equate it with the doctrine of subject–object identity, the principle that the absolute is neither subjective nor objective but the complete indifference of both. What did Schelling mean by this principle? And what role did it perform in his *Identitätssystem?*

We have already seen that the purpose of this doctrine is to surmount that dualism between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the intellectual and empirical, the subjective and objective, which had been such a problem in the Kantian tradition. But to say this much is not to say very much. It is not enough to say that the theory surmounts dualism, as if it were sufficient simply to postulate the identity of the subjective and objective; we need to know *how* this principle overcomes this dualism, and indeed what right someone has to postulate such an identity in the first place. In short, our task is to be more precise about how Schelling thinks that his principle explains the unity of the ideal and real, the mental and physical. What model of explanation does this principle apply to the relationship between the mental and physical?

This question goes to the very heart of the *Identitätssystem.* Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to it. It is in just this respect that Schelling's doctrine becomes very vague and complex. There are three possible interpretations of Schelling's principle, corresponding to three different models of the

unity of the subjective and objective. Each of these interpretations finds some support in the texts, but there is also some evidence that counts against them. What is worse, these interpretations are in some respects incompatible.

The Dual-Aspect Doctrine

According to this interpretation, to say that the absolute consists in subject–object identity means that the subjective and objective, the ideal and real, or the mental and physical are simply different *attributes, perspectives, or explanations* of one and the same thing. This means that there is no *real* opposition between these terms in the sense that it does not describe different properties of reality itself, let alone distinct substances. Rather, there is only an *ideal* opposition in the sense that it exists only for reflection, for our way of explaining things. The principle of subject–object identity is then something like a cosmic dual-aspect doctrine, according to which idealism and naturalism, the mental and physical, are incomensurable but equally valid ways of explaining the world. This kind of dual-aspect doctrine differs from that prevalent in the philosophy of mind only in its subject matter: the whole universe rather than just a single person.

This interpretation seems to follow immediately from several characteristic Schellingian doctrines: that the absolute is pure identity, that all opposition is purely ideal, and that the whole absolute can be described according to the principles of idealism or realism.

The historical antecedent of this doctrine is Spinoza's theory that the mental and the physical are different attributes of a single universal substance (at least on a subjectivist reading of Spinoza's concept of an attribute). It is striking evidence in behalf of this interpretation, then, that Schelling explicitly endorses Spinoza's doctrine, and sometimes uses his language of attributes.[21] When one considers that Spinoza's distinction between thought and extension belongs only to the *natura naturata,* and that he regarded extended and thinking substance as one and the same thing viewed under different attributes, Schelling argues, then one must recognize that Spinoza did hold that the absolute is the unity of ideal and real.

There are, however, difficulties with this reading, which does not apply easily to all of Schelling's texts. First, Spinoza's dual-aspect doctrine forbids any interaction between the mental and the physical, which are regarded as completely independent forms of explanation of one and the same thing.

This is a residual form of dualism in Spinoza's doctrine that Schelling does not want to share. The whole point of his *Naturphilosophie* is to explain the *interaction* between the mental and physical by regarding each as an *expression* or *embodiment* of the other. Second, Schelling sometimes writes as if idealism and realism both describe real aspects, appearances, or "uniformations" (*Ein-bildungen*)[22] of the absolute itself, so that they are not only different forms of explanation of one and the same thing (as they are on at least one reading of Spinoza's attributes). Third, by 1804 Schelling became critical of Spinoza's dual-aspect doctrine on the classical grounds that it cannot explain the origin or necessity of its modes.[23]

The Hylozistic Interpretation

According to this reading, the principle of subject–object identity of the *Identitätsystem* must be understood in the context of Schelling' general theory of life in his *Naturphilosophie*. The principle of subject–object identity then simply states that the subjective and objective, or the mental and physical, are essentially one and the same in themselves because they are only different manifestations, expressions, and embodiments of a single reality—namely, living force. The absolute of the *Identitätssystem* is essentially the single living force of the *Naturphilosophie,* but it is that force as it is in itself, prior to its manifestations in the potencies of nature. The purpose of the principle of subject–object identity in the *Identitätssystem* is indeed the same as that of the theory of life in the *Naturphilosophie:* to explain the possibility of knowledge by surmounting all forms of dualism.

This interpretation implies that there is a *real* difference between the subjective and objective, the mental and physical, although it is only a difference in degree rather than kind. There is a difference in degree in that the mental is the *highest* degree of organization and development of the living powers of the body, while the body is the *lowest* degree of organization and development of the living powers of the mind. This seems to be indeed the essence of Schelling's concept of quantitative differences, which played a central role in the *Identitätssystem* (see below, 4.7.3).

There is an important difference between this interpretation of the principle of subject–object identity and the Spinozist dual–aspect interpretation: Schelling's hylozistic account of nature demands teleology, the attribution of purposes to nature, which is expressly forbidden by Spinoza. Although Spinoza does conceive of substance in terms of power,[24] he does not think of

power as acting for ends, and still less does he consider its attributes as expressing different degrees of the development of this power.

There are some obvious advantages to this interpretation: it ensures continuity in Schelling's philosophical development; it accounts for how the ideal and real, the subjective and objective, are *real* aspects, appearances, or manifestations of the absolute; and it explains why Schelling analyzes the absolute in terms of quantitative differences.

The disadvantage of this interpretation is that it stresses the continuities of Schelling's development at the expense of its changes. It does not account for a major shift in his views from the *Naturphilosophie* to the *Identitätssystem,* because Schelling no longer writes of the absolute in terms of living force, and indeed he ceases to regard it as an activity. The absolute is not the force of all forces, the potency of all potencies; rather it is that in which all potencies are extinguished, the point of indifference that is potencyless.[25] Similarly, the dynamic, organic worldview of the *Naturphilosophie* begins to disappear in the static indifference point of the *Identitätssystem.* Rather than being the paradigm of the union of the mental and physical, the organic is now demoted to one form of the absolute, the real pole of the absolute as the highest potency of the natural world.[26]

The Platonic Interpretation

According to this reading, the principle of subject–object identity means that the absolute consists in reason, the archetype, or the idea, and this is neither mental nor physical, neither subjective nor objective, because an intelligible form is neither kind of entity or property. It is neither of them exclusively, but it is also both of them equally because it manifests or embodies itself in them. The mental and the physical are united on this model not because they are really one and the same thing, as in the dual-aspect theory, or because they are different degrees of organization and development of a single living force, as in the hylozistic model, but because they both instantiate or embody a single kind of law or rational structure.

The advantage of this interpretation is that it reflects the Platonic strands in the *Identitätsystem,* which later become explicit in *Bruno.* There are indeed clear passages in his later works where Schelling formulates the principle of subject–object identity expressly and entirely in Platonic terms.[27] He illustrates the union of the subjective and the objective, the ideal and the real, by the unity of universal and particular in geometric construction. While these

Platonic themes are not evident in the *Darstellung meines Systems,* the case could be made that they were already implicit from the very beginning.[28]

Which of these interpretions applies best to the *Identitätsystem?* Appropriately enough for a philosophy that wants to overcome all oppositions, all and none of them. The texts are so rich that they support each of them and do not give any single one the exclusive title to the truth. The *Identitätssystem* was essentially eclectic, a medley of various doctrines—Spinozist, Leibnizian, and Platonic—reflecting the different influences on Schelling.

It is difficult to see, however, the synthesis, the unity behind the manifold. To some extent these doctrines support one another; but to another extent they appear irreconciliable. Spinozism does not completely jibe with vitalism: for how does an eternal substance go outside itself, undergoing development like an organism? Nor does Spinozism go well with Platonism: for how does this single indivisible substance split itself into the plurality of forms? Finally, vitalism does not square with Platonism: for how does the active energy of life become the static eternity of the form? It is a sign of both the richness and poverty of Schelling's texts that they raise all these questions but provide no straightforward answer to them.