

The Unconditional within the System: The Early Schelling's Response to Jacobi's Nihilism

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Jacobi introduced nihilism into philosophical discussion and diagnosed it as the structural fate of systematic philosophy, which posed the central challenge to the early Schelling's thought. While inheriting Jacobi's critique of rational inference, Schelling refused to resort to faith and instead sought to ground the unconditional within the system. Between 1795 and 1796, Schelling proposed two different transcendental-philosophical projects: in *Of the I*, he defined the absolute as the "absolute I" or the original identity of the subjective and the objective; the "Treatise Explicatory" took spirit's activity as its point of departure, treating the original identity of representation and object as the immediate ground of knowledge, so that the unconditional comes to appear within the system through the generative activity of spirit. Despite their different paths, both projects constitute Schelling's systematic response to nihilism.

Keywords: Schelling – Jacobi – nihilism – the unconditional – transcendental philosophy

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi formally introduced "nihilism" (*Nihilismus*) as a philosophical concept into modern philosophical discussion in his *Letter to Fichte* of 1799, where he diagnosed Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* as the

paradigmatic realization of the nihilism inherent to all systematic philosophy.¹ In his view, any systematic philosophy that attempts to reduce being to conceptual inference necessarily tends toward nihilism: when the unconditional is demoted to the logical endpoint of a system, and when God is reduced to an abstract entity, the foundations of morality, freedom, and meaning collapse along with it. This diagnosis is not merely a critique of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* but points to the fundamental predicament of the entire rationalist tradition. How can philosophy ground the unconditional without abandoning systematicity? This question, explicitly raised by Jacobi, forms the background of early Schelling's philosophical exploration. In short, the question of how to overcome the threat of nihilism without retreating to faith is what drove Schelling to propose two different projects in 1795 and 1796.

In the 1795 *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge* (hereafter *Of the I*), Schelling sought to ground the unconditional within the system in order to respond to Jacobi's fundamental challenge: how to grasp the unconditional immediately. He established the "absolute I" as the principle of the philosophical system; the absolute I posits itself through its own activity, and in intellectual intuition one can directly grasp the absolute I as the unconditional. In the 1796/97 "Treatise Explicatory of the Idealism in the *Science of Knowledge*" (hereafter "Treatise Explicatory"), Schelling abandoned the term "absolute I" and instead traced the ground of immediate certainty in knowledge through the structure of spirit. In this sense, the unconditional appears within the system as spirit's generative activity, rather than being suspended outside the system as an abstract endpoint of inference – thereby fundamentally responding to Jacobi's diagnosis of nihilism.

In fact, whether taking the "absolute I" as the principle or tracing immediate certainty in the structure of spirit, the developmental logic of Schelling's early transcendental philosophy ultimately leads to the philosophy of identity. In this paper, I will examine Schelling's early transcendental-philosophical explorations and identify both the differences between the two early transcendental projects and their conceptual continuity. In terms of Schelling's own philosophical development, this analysis helps to reestablish the position of early transcendental philosophy within Schelling's overall system-construction and to reveal its intrinsic connection to natural philosophy and the philosophy of identity. From the perspective of intellectual history, it

¹ See Sandkaulen (2023, 11 – 12); Jacobi (1799, 39).

clarifies Schelling's complex relations with Jacobi² and Fichte, presenting both his response to and supersession of Jacobi's nihilism diagnosis, and displaying his fundamental divergence from Fichte on the question of subjectivity. Furthermore, examining Schelling's transcendental explorations of 1795 – 1796 in the context of the entire metaphysical tradition, one can say that Schelling constantly responds to the fundamental demands of metaphysics within the tension between the "One" and the "All" – and it is precisely this tension that constitutes the deep root of the nihilist threat disclosed by Jacobi.

I. The Unconditional and the Philosophy of Immediacy

In this section, I will first trace Jacobi's pursuit of a philosophy of immediacy and indicate in what sense Jacobi's path – which ultimately leads to a "non-philosophy" relying on faith and revelation – constitutes the intellectual background of early Schelling.

In his correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn, Jacobi expressed his skepticism toward the entire rationalist philosophy through his critique of Spinoza's philosophy. The "Pantheism Controversy" ignited by Jacobi ostensibly revolved around the question of whether Lessing was a Spinozist. The core of the dispute, however, concerned whether rationalist philosophy as represented by Spinoza must necessarily tend toward a self-enclosed systematic philosophy, thereby losing the possibility of discussing the unconditional.

Jacobi first argued that genuine philosophical knowledge of the highest being must be a knowledge possessing "immediate certainty." This immediate certainty "requires no ground and thoroughly excludes all ground" (Jacobi 2000, 113). In Jacobi's view, all knowledge within the chain of the conditioned can only explain the being of the finite, and cannot reach the unconditional. This knowledge within the chain of the conditioned is also called "mediate knowledge" (Jacobi 2000, 163), obtained through "discursive reason" (*die diskursive Vernunft*) – the capacity for "analysis, combination, judgment, inference, and reflection" (Jacobi 2000, 286) – and lacks immediate certainty. This discursive reason is only capable of obtaining mediate knowledge: "it can

² Recent scholarship has increasingly foregrounded Jacobi's centrality to German Idealism as a whole. Sandkaulen argues that the concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) is a shared leitmotif of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and that it is Jacobi who first introduced this concept into the tradition. This paper, however, limits itself to Jacobi's more specific role as the originator of the nihilism diagnosis that early Schelling's transcendental philosophy sought to address. For Jacobi's broader significance for German Idealism, see Sandkaulen (2023, 21 – 22); Rasmussen (2026, 76).

only reveal the conditioned, the laws of nature, and the ever-renewed conditions of mechanism" (Jacobi 2000, 285),³ and cannot reach the unconditional. For Jacobi, the unconditional cannot be understood as something abstract, existing only in conceptual and logical relations, but rather as a personally existing God (see Jacobi 2000, 307). "My philosophy asks 'Who is God?' not 'What is He?'" (Jacobi 2000, 307). For this personal God, the traditional rationalist-philosophical question of "what" (*Was*) can only yield a description of God as some universal conceptual entity, and cannot answer who (*Wer*) God is – that is, how God as "the One" (*das Eine*) exists as a living actuality. Only a personal God can relate to human beings and serve as the foundation of morality and freedom; conversely, if God is reduced to an abstract entity or the highest concept in a system, philosophy necessarily slides into the nihilism Jacobi criticizes.

In Jacobi's view, the apprehension of such an unconditional as a personal God "must necessarily begin with intuition and feeling; there is absolutely no path of mere speculation" (Jacobi 2000, 314). Such certainty of the unconditional's existence means "faith" (*Glaube*) or "revelation" (*Offenbarung*) – a form of immediate certainty that can establish knowledge without any mediating links. In this sense, opposing the philosophical systems previously built with discursive reason, Jacobi called his own philosophy "non-philosophy" (*Unphilosophie*): a philosophy of immediacy established through the immediate certainty and the "salto mortale" of faith. As Sandkaulen evaluates: "A philosophy committed to the 'salto mortale' must appeal to the self-evidence of incomprehensibility and regard this as its truth" (Sandkaulen 1900, 63). That is, Jacobi's rejection of systematic philosophy is at root a rejection of reason's mode of mediated operation; by contrast, the "immediate certainty" or "self-evidence of incomprehensibility" of faith and revelation becomes the philosophical starting point Jacobi pursues.

In his *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, Schelling criticized such philosophy grounded in faith or revelation, holding that this philosophy itself means an abandonment of science – "without making claims to knowledge, namely to a science drawn from this feeling or from this spiritual intuition"

³ It should be clarified that what Jacobi criticizes is the understanding of reason solely as discursive reason and the speculative philosophical system built on it alone. That is, he does not advocate any form of irrationalist philosophy. Beiser's claim is therefore untenable – he holds that Jacobi advocates rational nihilism or irrational faith. Franks argues that Jacobi is not the "irrationalist"; on the contrary, "his project was intended to rescue reason from rationalism." See Beiser (1987, 83); Franks (2000, 96).

(Schelling 1994a, 165). That is, once philosophy is completely reduced to faith or revelation, it simultaneously surrenders the speculative dimension upon which science depends. In this sense, Schelling was never satisfied with the path of faith-philosophy opened by Jacobi. Yet the demand for immediacy raised by Jacobi remained in the background of early Schelling's exploration, constituting one of the challenges facing his early philosophy.

II. *Of the I: The Absolute I as the Unconditional*

In the 1795 *Of the I*, faced with Jacobi's nihilism diagnosis, Schelling's response strategy differed from Jacobi's from the very outset: the aim was not to abandon the system, but to re-ground the unconditional within the system.⁴

In *Of the I*, Schelling first indicated the need to find a principle "which is not objective at all and which nevertheless furnishes the basis for all philosophy" (Schelling 1980, 66). On the one hand, similar to Jacobi's view, the principle must be immediate, not reached through conceptual mediation, as "what is immediate in man and present only to itself" (Schelling 1980, 67). In the entire chain of human knowledge, conditioned knowledge is interlinked, and the principle of the entire system must be that "ultimate point on which the whole depends" (Schelling 1980, 72). This point is the "unconditional": it falls outside the chain of the conditioned and is absolutely opposed to everything conditioned. On the other hand, unlike Jacobi, Schelling does not regard this unconditional as an object of faith but still seeks it within human knowledge.⁵

Such a principle exists only in the "absolute I." Schelling argues as follows: the principle must serve as the last, absolute ground for all reality, and such a ground is "something that is thinkable only through itself, that is, it is thinkable only through its being (*Sein*)" (Schelling 1980, 72). But everything that is a "thing" (*Ding*) – i.e., an object of cognitive activity – as a link in the chain of knowledge, itself presupposes the chain of knowledge as its basis.

⁴ Before turning to *Of the I*, it is worth noting that Schelling's 1794 work *On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy* already derives the I as the unconditional from the axiom (*Grundsatz*). There Schelling argues: "For the I is absolutely posited. Its being posited is not determined by anything outside itself." However, for reasons of space, the following discussion focuses on *Of the I*. See Schelling (1980, 45).

⁵ This is also evident from the book's title: *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge*. Horstmann also notes that early Schelling's philosophy is dedicated to applying a Fichtean epistemological perspective to a Jacobian goal – establishing a non-trivial connection between knowledge and the unconditional. See Horstmann (2000, 129 – 130).

Etymologically, the German "*das Unbedingte*" (the unconditioned) relates to "*bedingen*" (to condition) and "*bedingt*" (conditioned, or determined)⁶: "*Bedingen* means the action by which anything becomes a thing. *Bedingt* [determined] is what has been turned into a thing. Thus it is clear at once that nothing can posit itself as a thing, and that an unconditional thing is a contradiction in terms" (Schelling 1980, 74). That is, a "thing" is "determined" as a matter of definition – it can only be posited with something else as its condition and cannot serve as the ultimate ground of all knowledge's reality. Therefore, the "unconditional," as the negation of all "conditioning," becomes "what has not been turned into a thing, and what cannot at all become a thing" (Schelling 1980, 74). This "something that cannot be thought of as a thing at all" exists in the subject – more precisely, in the subject that absolutely cannot become a thing. This absolute subject is the absolute I (*ICH*), which can only posit itself through its own activity. Schelling distinguishes the absolute I from the conditioned self: the latter is thinkable only in relation to objects, whereas the absolute I excludes all opposites and stands in no relation to the not-I.

This construction appears to be quite similar in structure to Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, but we must not stop at this surface similarity and must instead examine the essential difference between them from subtle divergences. Schelling emphasizes the unconditionality of the absolute I, which is equal only to itself: "there can be no object at all for the absolute I; and, moreover, ... the absolute I never can become an object." (Schelling 1980, 84) The absolute I posits everything as wholly identical with itself, while the conditioned self is "determined for it by something posited outside of it" (Schelling 1980, 85). All oppositional positing and co-positing related to the not-I are activities of the conditioned self. Even self-consciousness is not a variant of the absolute I but rather "an unfree urge that induces the mutable I, conditioned by the not-I" (Schelling 1980, 84). If the absolute I and the conditioned self are confused, one may fall into the danger of "losing the I" –

⁶ The German "*das Unbedingte*" is difficult to translate into English. The prefix "un-" negates not only "*bedingt*" (conditioned) but also evokes "*Ding*" (thing), implying something fundamentally "thingless" (un-Ding), which cannot be a thing at all. In this sense, an "unconditioned thing" (unbedingtes Ding) would be a *contradictio in adiecto*. This allows Schelling to distinguish his position from vulgar Kantianism, which wants to ground the unconditional in the "thing-in-itself" (*Ding an sich*) and so turns it into just another determinate object. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

into the reciprocal determination of the absolute I, the conditioned self, and the not-I – and into “subjective idealism.”⁷

That is, Schelling’s guiding concern in *Of the I* differs from Fichte’s.⁸ What Schelling seeks to answer is not “how does the I posit itself and the not-I,” but rather the question opened by Jacobi: how it is possible to directly grasp the unconditional within reason? Schelling indicates that the absolute I can only be determined in intellectual intuition, because “intellectual intuition is possible only inasmuch as it has no object” (Schelling 1980, 85). In other words, intellectual intuition does not take as its object something independent of the subject but is rather a mode of immediate evidence for the unconditional. Without passing through any representational mediation, and differing from an empirical faith or revelation, it can directly grasp the unconditional. Such a direct grasp of the unconditional fulfills Jacobi’s demand, and thus Schelling explicitly invokes Jacobi to explain that the ultimate aim of the system is to reveal what is immediate and “can never be conceptualized, explained, deduced” (Schelling 1980, 89).

However, Schelling did not further demonstrate the legitimacy of intellectual intuition, nor did he explain how intellectual intuition specifically operates; instead he returned to the theme of the unity of the absolute I and its strict distinction from the empirical I. Further, only the empirical self can be grasped through concepts, while the absolute I is an absolute that cannot be reached through rational-logical deduction at all – “For the absolute cannot be mediated at all, hence it can never fall into the domain of demonstrable concepts” (Schelling 1980, 87). One can say that it is the absolute that truly constitutes the principle sought in *Of the I*. In 1809, in the preface he wrote for a collected edition of his works, Schelling explicitly characterized his position in *Of the I* thus: “At least the I is still taken everywhere as an absolute, or strictly as identity of the subjective and the objective as such [see note 8], and not as a subjective I” (Schelling 1980, 69). Although this absolute inherits the character of activity from Fichte’s I,⁹ from the very beginning, the principle was not the “I” in the Fichtean transcendental-philosophical sense, but rather something that can give itself by itself. This absolute is both the ultimate ground of our

⁷ The term “subjective idealism” comes from Schelling’s later assessment of Fichte’s philosophy. See Schelling (1856 – 1861, IV, 109).

⁸ Many scholars have noted the incompatibility between the starting points of early Fichte and Schelling. See Horstmann (2000, 117 – 140); Kowarzik (1993, 67 – 101); Schnell (2017, 1 – 9).

⁹ As Rasmussen observes, Schelling already in *Of the I* describes the absolute I as “the living work of the human spirit” and specifies its founding principle as a “living unity.” See Rasmussen (2026, 73).

knowledge, and the point at which "the principle of being and thinking is one and the same" (Schelling 1980, 72) – its role is closer to the kind of unconditional immediate existence demanded by Jacobi.

One can see that Schelling's philosophical exploration in 1795 was not yet mature. On the one hand, although he had a completely different starting point from Fichte from the outset, he still adopted the distinctly Fichtean term "absolute I," so that his intention had not yet sufficiently distanced itself from Fichte. On the other hand, although Schelling sought to respond to Jacobi's demand for a philosophy of immediacy by treating the absolute as something directly graspable within the system, Schelling did not further explain how such a direct grasp is possible. In 1796 Schelling abandoned the term "absolute I" and instead named the unconditional "spirit," thereby opening a new stage in the development of his system.

III. "Treatise Explicatory": Spirit as the Unconditional

In the 1796 "Treatise Explicatory," one can equally observe Schelling's appropriation and transformation of Jacobi's philosophy. Schelling noted that for idealists who have not recognized the identity of object and intuition, representation and object, nothing immediate exists: "For him all existence is attained by inference and sophistry (*Vernünftelei*)" (Schelling 1994b, 75). This discursive thinking, revolving around inference and sophistical reasoning, is incapable of recognizing what is immediate in knowledge. Schelling neither seeks immediate certainty in inference, nor, like "Profound philosophers" (referring to Jacobi), calls "our conviction of external things as a belief" (Schelling 1994b, 85); instead, he seeks to explain the origin of the immediate of our knowledge – that is, what grounds the identity between representation and object.

As noted in the previous section, *Of the I* did not fully explain how the unconditional is grounded within the system. In this respect, the "Treatise Explicatory" provides a clearer account. The "Treatise Explicatory" abandons the term "absolute I" and instead proceeds from the structure of spirit to seek what is immediately certain in knowledge. In Schelling's view, seeking the ground of the absolute correspondence between representation and object can begin from ourselves: "the only example of an absolute identity of representation and object we find inheres within ourselves" (Schelling 1994b, 78). That is, in spirit's activity of intuiting itself, the identity of representation and object can be immediately established. By clarifying this absolute correspondence between representation and object, the reality of our knowledge is thereby guaranteed.

Schelling explains how this correspondence is possible in two respects. On the one hand, from the perspective of the nature of spirit's activity, spirit "becomes" the object through and in its own activity. Specifically, spirit, as a being that intuits itself, intuits itself and in this self-intuition becomes its own object. The object is not given to us as something external to intuitive activity – a sensation or stimulation (*Affektion*) – but is simply the product of the original spiritual self-activity. That is, the correspondence between representation and object is not subsequently established but is something immediate: this immediacy stems from the fact that one is spiritual activity and the other is the product of spiritual activity. Therefore, spirit is both subject and object, "simultaneously representing and represented or intuiting and intuited" (Schelling 1994b, 78). Schelling holds that by demonstrating this, the reality of knowledge is guaranteed.

On the other hand, spirit's activity of intuiting itself is simultaneously an activity of limiting itself; in this doubled activity, the original unity of finitude and infinity, activity and passivity, emerges. Specifically, spirit's activity of self-intuition is an infinite outward-going activity, and by intuiting itself it limits itself, thereby infinitely regenerating itself. This kind of activity is also called intellectual intuition: "We claim that the human spirit, in abstracting from everything objective, possesses by virtue of this very act an intuition of itself, which we shall call intellectual" (Schelling 1994b, 116). Spirit as product is necessarily a finite one, and it is precisely through this finite product that spirit returns to itself and discovers itself to be limited" (Schelling 1994b, 88 – 89). Thus spirit is both active and passive: "the original nature of the spirit consists of this absolute identity of activity and passivity" (Schelling 1994b, 110). Through this activity of returning to itself, spirit directly establishes in itself the identity between object and representation, knowledge and Being.

Schelling summarizes his account of spirit's activity in a passage that closely mirrors one in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*¹⁰: "The goal of all these acts is self-consciousness, and their history is none other than the history of self-consciousness" (Schelling 1994b, 90). From the transcendental-philosophical perspective, the path spirit has traversed becomes the history (*Geschichte*) of self-consciousness. This "history" is not an external record of past facts but points to spirit's internal, self-realizing process of becoming – a process that also presents

¹⁰ The parallel passage in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* reads: "Philosophy is thus a history of self-consciousness, having various epochs, and by means of it that one absolute synthesis is successively put together" (Schelling 2001, 50).

itself as a collection of events that have already occurred. In this sense, Schelling also regards his system as "genetic" (*genetisch*): "Transcendental philosophy aims by its very nature at the becoming and the living, for its first principles are genetic, and both the spirit and the world become and mature concomitantly in transcendental philosophy" (Schelling 1994b, 104). That is, spirit's primary meaning is activity: it is not a static, presupposed entity but a becoming that unfolds in its own activity – acting and becoming a ground simultaneously, continuously establishing itself in the course of its unfolding. On the side of spirit's activity, this manifests as the original act from intuition to self-consciousness and on to willing. On the side of spirit's products, Schelling calls the world an "organization" (*Organisation*): all of nature presents itself as a purposive, continuous, fixed process moving toward organization – a transition from inorganic nature to organic nature. At the final point, nature transitions into organic nature, and the human spirit presents itself as "a self-organizing nature (*sich selbst organisierende Natur*)" (Schelling 1856 – 1861, I, 386).¹¹

One can say that spirit is the unconditional in the "Treatise Explicatory." "The Treatise Explicatory" seeks what is immediately certain in human knowledge, and ultimately traces this element of immediate certainty back to the structure of the human spirit. As an activity simultaneously possessing ideality and reality, the human spirit limits itself to its own object through its own activity, thereby realizing the immediate unity of finitude and infinity. Spirit is understood as an absolute act that establishes itself in the process of becoming: on one side it makes itself the ground as an active subject, and on the other it realizes itself in its products. It is itself both unconditional and at the same time, in its activity, constantly conditions itself and renders itself finite. In this sense, the unconditional is no longer faith lying outside the speculative system, nor the presupposed absolute identity of the subjective and the objective, but rather spirit – which comes to appear within the system through self-unfolding.

From the foregoing analysis one can see that, although *Of the I* and the "Treatise Explicatory" differ in their guiding thread and mode of argumentation, they share the same problematic: how to directly grasp the unconditional within a system? This question apparently derives from Jacobi's challenge to previous speculative philosophy, but its deeper roots lie in the entire metaphysical tradition's inquiry into being and the One. On the one hand, a philosophical system demands the uniqueness of the principle; on the other, this unique principle must be capable of explaining all beings and of

¹¹ This sentence is omitted in Pfau's English translation.

constituting their foundation. The reason metaphysics became systematic philosophy lies precisely in the fact that it must think both the “All” (the totality of beings) and the “One” (the ground of the totality).¹² How to satisfy the demands of both “One” and “All” constitutes the ultimate difficulty of systematic philosophy.

Early Schelling unfolded his philosophical thinking precisely within this background tension between the One and the All. Unlike Jacobi’s resort to faith, Schelling convinced that in order to recognize and understand the unconditional, one should start from human knowledge. Therefore, the problem of his early transcendental philosophy can be summarized as: how to ground, within the system of human knowledge, an absolute that precedes the I and transcends subjectivity?

IV. Early Schelling’s Transcendental Philosophy as a Response to Nihilism and Its Limits

What Jacobi’s nihilism diagnosis reveals is not an accidental error of some specific philosophical system but the structural predicament of all systematic philosophy: so long as philosophy relies on conceptual inference, the unconditional can only appear as the endpoint of the chain of inference and thereby loses its immediacy as the ground of being. Faced with this challenge, Schelling sought within the system a path by which the unconditional could appear immediately. From this perspective, early Schelling’s transcendental-philosophical explorations can be understood as a systematic response to nihilism.

But was this response successful? Iber’s critique touches precisely on the core difficulty here. Iber sharply distinguishes *Of the I*, as an “early writing,” from the “Treatise Explicatory,” a “transcendental-philosophical writing,” holding that the former’s determination of the absolute’s content is obtained in a direct manner through analysis of the concept of the unconditional, while the latter opens a new path of grasping the absolute as self-consciousness or as the subject-object structure (Iber 1994, 6; 68 – 71).¹³ In other words, if the unconditional can only

¹² Halfwassen summarizes metaphysics as the unfolding of different solutions to the tension between the One and the All: the “metaphysics of the One” (*Metaphysik des Einen*) represented by Plato, the “metaphysics of being” (*Seinsmetaphysik*) represented by Aristotle, and the “metaphysics of spirit” (*Geistmetaphysik*) represented by Plotinus (Halfwassen 2015, 1 – 5).

¹³ Moreover, Iber indicates that the latter path is unsuccessful: “the standpoint on the other side of consciousness ultimately remains only a projection (Projektion) of subjective self-consciousness” (Iber 1994, 85). Similarly, Sandkaulen holds that in the *Treatise Explicatory*

appear in the structure of self-consciousness, Schelling's response has not truly freed itself from the predicament Jacobi pointed out. The absolute is still only the product of subjectivity rather than a ground of being that genuinely transcends subjectivity.

I argue that this critique reveals the genuine tension in early Schelling's transcendental philosophy but does not constitute a comprehensive negation of his response.¹⁴ As the analysis in Section II already showed, from *Of the I* onward Schelling never proceeded from self-consciousness in the Fichtean manner, projecting self-consciousness onto the side of the world; on the contrary, Schelling consistently emphasized the absoluteness of the absolute I. In the "Treatise Explicatory," this position is not abandoned but further refined. What Schelling consistently aimed at was the absolute identity of representation and object; this identity simply receives transcendental presentation in the structure of spirit. As Schelling himself stated, the human spirit can be regarded as "the only example of an absolute identity of representation and object we find inheres within ourselves" (Schelling 1994b, 78). This means that spirit, as the starting point of cognition, does not absorb the unconditional as an internal product of subjectivity but rather presents itself as the direct expression of absolute identity at the level of subjectivity. That is, compared to 1795, 1796 did not produce a foundational reversal but further revealed how the absolute presents itself in the dimension of human knowledge – gradually transforming the unconditional from an external presupposition of the system into an internal becoming within the system.

Therefore, I do not agree with Iber's drawing of a line of intellectual rupture between *Of the I* and the "Treatise Explicatory." On the contrary, the whole early Schelling's transcendental philosophy can be seen precisely as a preamble and transition toward the philosophy of identity. Of course, early Schelling's response to the problem of nihilism remains immature. Not until the philosophy of identity of 1801 did Schelling, through the act of abstraction, thoroughly free the starting point of the system from subjectivity, grounding the absolute as the truly unconditional prior to all opposition of subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense, early transcendental philosophy is less the final answer to nihilism than the foundational exploration that makes such an

Schelling treats the principle as self-consciousness or the subject–object structure (Sandkaulen 1990, 92).

¹⁴ Schelling's parallel work in natural philosophy at this time shows, one cannot simply regard the "Treatise Explicatory" as a doctrine centered on self-consciousness.

answer possible – it opens within the system a passage that allows the unconditional to appear immediately while also exposing the internal limits of relying solely on the transcendental path. The driving force of Schelling's subsequent philosophical development derives to a large extent from his continued reflection on these limits.

To summarize: if one wishes to accurately understand the theoretical ambitions of early Schelling's philosophy, transcendental philosophy cannot be isolated as a stage-specific failed attempt. Whether the absolute I in *Of the I* or spirit in the "Treatise Explicatory," both presuppose the absolute as their premise and foundation. This shows that the theoretical ambition of early Schelling's philosophy lies in exploring, within the fundamental tension between the One and the All, how the absolute comes to appear and be grasped within the system of human knowledge.

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