Why German Idealism Matters

by Matthew David Segall

Who am I, What is this, and Why are we here? The entire history of philosophy can be extrapolated from these three questions. Idealists generally argue that the first question is the most important, since mind or spirit is the root of all things. Materialists argue for the explanatory preeminence of the second question, since everything ultimately rests on a physical foundation. Theists emphasize the third question, believing that God is our creator and that obeying His Plan is our sole purpose. Idealism, materialism, and theism by no means provide an exhaustive list of the philosophical possibilities. There are plenty of other ways to render responses to this trinity of questions. Philosophy is not itself an *ism*; it is a quest, a practice of questioning, an open-ended inquiry into the who, what, and why of reality.

There are certain historical moments when the right social and material conditions conspire to raise the temperature of philosophical inquiry so high that it begins to melt and remold our collective mental habits, transforming our sense of what is possible. The German idealist movement was such a moment. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) thought, lectured, and published more than two centuries ago, but we do ourselves a great disservice if we treat their ideas merely as historical curiosities. German idealism remains as relevant today as ever before. The very possibility of scientific knowledge of nature, democratic politics, ecological attunement, and psycho-spiritual self-understanding may depend upon our comprehension of their revolutionary critiques and radical reconstructions of traditional ideas of mind and nature, and of the bridge between the two. The problems these thinkers faced are very much still our problems. Finding livable solutions to these problems matters immensely for our individual and social lives today as members of an imperiled Earth community.

One contemporary interpreter of German idealism, the anthroposophist Eckart Förster, has suggested that the intense dialectic that erupted between these thinkers during the 25 year period between 1781, when Kant boldly claimed that there had been no philosophy at all prior to his invention of the transcendental method, and 1806, when Hegel announced the end of philosophy as a result of his own imminent completion of the systematic project inaugurated by Kant, can in some sense be argued to constitute the beginning and the end of philosophy as such. (*The 25 Years of Philosophy*, ix). There exist few other periods in the history of Western thought that come close to the intellectual creativity, sociopolitical importance, and depth of insight achieved. Perhaps German idealism's closest competitor is the period of Athenian history that brought us Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

On the other hand, in the same 1806 lecture on the history of philosophy in which he announced the end of philosophy, Hegel went on to say that "the last philosophy thus contains the previous ones, includes all the stages, and is the product and result of all the ones that preceded it…One must rise above…one's own vanity, the notion that one has thought something special" (*T25YoP*, x).

To say that philosophy begins and ends with German idealism is a pithy way of expressing the spiritual significance of what these thinkers accomplished, but we should not take it too literally. It is not as though there were no genuine lovers of wisdom before Kant. And certainly, plenty of vitally important philosophizing remains to be done after Hegel. It would be better to say that, thanks to the efforts of the German idealists, a new kind of philosophy has become possible (or perhaps even *necessary*) that is unlike what preceded it.

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"Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the more often and more enduringly reflection is occupied with them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

Kant concludes his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) with these stirring lines. Seven years earlier, in what is arguably the pivotal text of all modern thought, the *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant initiated an entirely new philosophical orientation analogous both in structure and significance to the Copernican Revolution in astronomy. Whereas Copernicus' heliocentric model expelled the Earth and its human inhabitants from the center of the universe and threw us into motion around the Sun, Kant's transcendental method placed the human mind back at the center of things. Subjective consciousness could no longer be understood to conform to the structure of objective nature; rather, for the transcendental philosopher, *objects must conform to the structure of our consciousness*.

According to Kant, our human mode of consciousness finds itself in sublime tension between the infinite physical expanse of the visible universe and the infinite moral depths of an invisible self. The universe and the self are not mere conjectures. We encounter both of these infinities directly in the very awareness of our existence, the starry heavens through our external senses and the moral law through our inward conscience. Without this polarity between physical extension and moral intension, there would be no consciousness. Kant's project was an attempt to hold this tension in the face of a dramatic increase in humanity's understanding of and power over the natural world, an increase that unfortunately has not been matched by a corresponding ripening of moral virtue. He feared that the march of scientific progress unleashed in the 17th century, already having overturned so much of what religious dogma had taught about the world, would soon tread on the sacred territory of the human soul. If all of visible nature could be reduced to a few mathematical laws of motion, and if the human body is made of the same stuff as stars and planets, what is to stop natural science from explaining us, too, in mechanical terms?

Kant's transcendental revolution in philosophy was an attempt to define the limits of scientific knowledge of a deterministic nature in order to leave room for the possibility of human freedom and moral responsibility. Kant established this limit by way of an ingenious argument: the nature known to science is merely *phenomenal* or apparent, and the categories and forms structuring natural phenomena are determined *a priori* by the mind doing the knowing. In other words, the universal and necessary laws of physics are actually artifacts of the universal and necessary categories that our human mode of understanding uses to make sense of the world. We do not experience nature as it is in itself, but nature as it is made to appear for us by our organs of thought and sensation. What lies behind phenomena we cannot know, but it is precisely this

limitation of our knowledge that allows for a reasonable faith in a *noumenal* or spiritual reality in which freedom and morality are somehow made compatible with nature's determinism. It is as though Kant's Copernican Revolution replaced the centrality of the physical Sun with a transcendental star hidden within the human heart whose light radiated out to give phenomenal form to all the natural bodies revolving around it.

But this Kantian compromise did not last long. The measured tension Kant had struggled to hold between the knowledge of natural science and the values of religious morality functioned more as a speculative slingshot than as a sobering leash for the next generation of thinkers to champion his new transcendental method. Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling were inspired not only by Kant's bold new philosophical proposal, but by both the political revolution unfolding across the Rhine in France as well as the new paradigm sciences of geology, chemistry, electricity, magnetism, and embryology.

Most accounts of German idealism interpret it as a progressive movement from Kant's critical idealism to Hegel's absolute idealism, with Fichte's subjective and Schelling's objective idealisms playing the role of Hegel's footstools. This is an oversimplification stemming largely from Hegel's own account of the movement's history in which he conveniently places himself at the pinnacle of its philosophical achievements. More recent scholarship on the period has challenged Hegel's version of the story by retrieving the independently valid insights of Fichte and Schelling, each of whom emphasized and developed different aspects of the the transcendental approach. Many ideas usually credited to the unique genius of Hegel were actually first worked out by Fichte and Schelling. The poet-scientist and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) also made crucial contributions to the movement, but an examination of his ideas is beyond the scope of this short essay (interest readers should consult Förster's book cited earlier, *The 25 Years of Philosophy*). Instead we will focus on the ecosystem of ideas that developed between Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling.

One winter afternoon in 1793, while he took a break from his writing to warm his hands by the stove and ponder Kant's transcendental deductions, Fichte was seized by the realization that only the "I" could serve as the first principle of all philosophy. He rushed back to his desk and penned the line: "Yes—the Self! Pursue the Self's absoluteness." Fichte was soon invited by Goethe to become professor of philosophy at the university in Jena. In his introduction to the first 1794 edition of the *Science of Knowledge,* written as a handbook for his students, Fichte announced the basis of his method: "Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and towards your inner life; this is the first demand that philosophy makes of its disciple. Our concern is not with anything that lies outside you, but only with yourself" (6).

In an introduction appended to a second edition of the text several years later, Fichte admits the imperfections in the written presentation of his system. For one thing, his writings were initially meant to be used only as supplements for his face to face lectures. For another, he was compelled to avoid using a fixed terminology, since although this might aid conceptual understanding, it also increased tremendously the risk that overly literal readers would mistake the propositions and definitions on the page in front of them for the living insights these words were meant to provoke within their consciousness. It is much like the story of the Zen master who pointed at the moon

only to have his students stare mesmerized at his finger. A fixed terminology, says Fichte, "is the easiest way for literalists to deprive a system of life, and make dry bones of it" (90).

Fichte's approach to philosophy is unique in that, by making the "I" the first principle, he in effect has to ask each of his readers not only to follow his logic, but to attend to their own experience of self-consciousness in the process. He is asking his listeners not to get stuck on his presentation, but to look *through* the logic of his system to awaken to the logos within themselves. His philosophical writing is in this sense a pragmatic invitation to participate in a kind of meditative exercise. During his face to face lectures, he would tell his students to stop their note taking and instead to consider the wall in front of them. "Look at the wall," he would say. "Form a clear representation of it in your mind. Now, look at yourself, represent to yourself internally yourself looking at the wall. Who is now doing the looking?"

Through such exercises, Fichte hoped to lead his students toward a direct first person experience of the insight guiding his entire philosophical project. "Attend to yourself"—this was his starting place. What, then, does such self-attention reveal? Rather than beginning, as Kant tended to, with the *fact* of consciousness' representation of an object to a subject, Fichte's original insight was to ground philosophy instead on an unrepresentable *act—unrepresentable* because we have a special "intellectually intuitive" experience of this act prior even to the *a priori* forms of spatial and temporal intuition and categories of the understanding that Kant argued determine our experience in advance of all consciousness.

Fichte can either be understood to have parted ways with the letter of Kant, or to have remained truer to the spirit of Kant's philosophy than Kant himself. Kant denied the possibility of intellectual intuition. He believed that we only experience ourselves as appearances in time and space. Fichte agreed with Kant that the absolute act constituting our self-consciousness is *not* a given fact found in our experience, not an object in space and time waiting for us to know and determine it. Fichte's Self is not accessible in the representational way that knowable objects are, namely, through the operation of synthetic judgment whereby the transcendental imagination relates concepts to intuitions and transforms them into propositions. The Self is not another object among objects—*it is no object at all!:* it is that which makes the appearance of objects possible, that which formally conditions and categorically determines them. The Self is not a fact, not a given state of affairs definitively describable in propositional terms. We can only speak paradoxically and elliptically about the Self. We are conscious of ourselves, we know ourselves, only through an intellectually intuitive act of free will—an act of free will that paradoxically we *must* perform, since it is our duty as a Self to perform it. The Self need not be synthesized by the cognitive machinery determining all experience because it is not originally separated from itself. *The Self asserts itself as a thesis and is not constructed as a synthesis.* It is the indemonstrable postulate upon which all demonstration depends.

For Fichte, the starting point of any systematic transcendental account of experience is not a determined fact of consciousness (a physical thing or a reflective thought); it is a free spiritual activity unfolding below the level of phenomenal consciousness. But how are we to philosophize about something that occurs below the level of our conscious experience? This, says Fichte, is the challenge set for us by Kant's transcendental method, the decisive crisis we are forced to confront as a result of his discovery. Many try to turn back, retreating to some more comfortable form of

pre-Kantian dogmatism. Only a few push on ahead beyond the threshold, striving to know the very conditions of knowing, to think that which cannot be thinged, to become-with the Absolute (literally, the unthingable). In order to philosophically investigate the activity unfolding below phenomenal consciousnsess, Fichte argued that it is necessary to free oneself from ordinary sensory intuition by cultivating a non-sensory, *intellectual* intuition.

Fichte, in affirming the freedom of the absolute Self and its self-generative capacity of intellectual intuition, is forced to deny the independent existence of nature. Nature only exists as a residue of freedom, as to become conscious of itself the Self must first meet resistance as a "check" on its will. Nature is thus a merely negative concept for Fichte: "To the idealist, the only positive thing is freedom; existence, for him, is a mere negation of freedom" (69). Fichte, even more radically, argues that "all reality—for us being understood, as it cannot otherwise be understood in a system of transcendental philosophy—is brought forth solely by the imagination" (194).

It is a stretch for most of us to consider the natural world to be a mere mental projection or imaginary invention of the Self. Fichte does not deny our feeling of helpless irrelevance when confronted by the elemental powers of the natural world around us. We do not consciously will the storm clouds to gather, nor do we get to decide upon the date and time of the next major earthquake. Luckily, Fichte does not actually argue that nature is a mere projection of mind. More radically, he argues that it *should* be. His idealistic negation of nature is not meant as a theoretical fact already accomplished in advance, but as an *ideal*, as something we ought to strive towards. The Self is compelled as a result of its duty to act freely to gain control over nature, to transform it into the passive stage for the human Self's free expression.

You might say that Fichte's reading of human self-consciousness has in fact won the day, as today the earth has been almost entirely remade by human hands to serve our human ends. Unfortunately, a looming ecological catastrophe threatens to call Fichte's bluff concerning the priority of mind over nature.

Despite being just as entranced as the rest of the German philosophical community in the mid-1790s with so much of what Fichte had to say about the freedom of the "I," Schelling was from the beginning unable to deny the inescapable reality and autonomous creativity of nature. Unlike Kant and Fichte, who argued that mind organized nature, Schelling was committed to knowing a *living* and *self*-organizing nature. Beginning in 1797 with his book *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling published a series of groundbreaking and influential texts on *Naturphilosophie* wherein he articulated an ensouled understanding of the universe. Nature was no mere appearance for Schelling, but the living ground and visible body of an eternally incarnating divinity. In contrast to Kant's view in his third *Critique of Judgment* that the human mind could not understand with any clarity the organic or living aspect of nature, Schelling affirms our ability to cultivate special experiential knowledge of the divine life at work at the heart of every self-organizing process in nature. Upon assimilating the philosophy of Fichte, Schelling would come to call this participatory way of knowing intellectual intuition.

For Kant, the human mind is incapable of objectively understanding the organic purposiveness of nature as a whole or in its parts. Kant was willing to grant nature purposiveness in appearance

only, a side-effect of our subjective way of apprehending it. We can judge nature aesthetically (that is, by analogy to a work of art) *as if* it were purposively designed, but if our goal is scientific knowledge, he was convinced that the mind is equipped only to grasp nature as a deterministic machine. Schelling affirms that the purposive activities of organisms implies that some sort of intelligence is involved in their coming-to-be. But rather than rest satisfied with a theistic account of nature's ends, where purpose is imported into nature from beyond nature, Schelling sought to grasp how nature's organizational patterning could emerge from within itself, as a result of an indwelling world-soul. According to Schelling, "you destroy all idea of Nature from the very bottom, as soon as you allow the purposiveness to enter her from without" (34). In order to make such immanent or intrinsic teleology a constitutive principle of our knowledge of nature, Schelling needed to overcome Kant's skepticism regarding the limits of reflective understanding. "What is that secret bond," he asks, "which couples our mind to nature…that hidden organ through which nature speaks to our mind or our mind to nature?" The bond Schelling sought was deemed non-existent by Kant, who understood the human spirit to be forever alienated from the reality of the physical world it desires to know.

From Schelling's perspective, "Philosophy had to descend into the depths of nature in order to raise itself from there to the heights of spirit" (120). Schelling did not deny Kant's transcendental approach to philosophy. He only relativized its claims to the Absolute by articulating a complementary approach that I've elsewhere termed "descendental" philosophy. The prime subject-object of philosophical thought becomes not the Self, but the incomprehensible groundlessness preceding volitional egoity and objectified physicality alike. This creative abyss is *unprethinkable* according to Schelling, since it provides the groundless ground of Reason itself. The philosopher encounters it, as Kant taught, both inwardly in the moral world, but also outwardly in the sensuous world, the realm of *aesthesis*. Fichte emphasized the former, while Schelling argued that an aesthetic act provides the keystone of all philosophy and worked to develop what he termed a "metaphysical" or "higher empiricism." This "higher empiricism" is not at all the positivistic empiricism of much modern science. Schelling's is not a high altitude God's eye view of nature as a collection of objects mechanically governed by eternally imposed mathematical laws. Rather, Schelling sought to return philosophy to its senses, to its concrete aesthetic encounter with nature. Only in such an encounter could nature's *natality* or *creativity* shine through the superficial appearance of objective finitude. Our sensory experience, attended to in earnest, reveals itself to be infinite, sublime; it is only after reflective consciousness has manufactured for us a finite, determined world that this infinity is obscured. In attempting to descend below the veil of transcendental reflection into the depths of the sensible, Schelling reverses the typical orientation of philosophy toward the intelligible. His aesthetic (un)grounding of philosophy is a challenge to the Hegelian notion that philosophy ought to overcome itself by arriving at a finished "system of science." His *Naturphilosophie* is an infinite creative task, not a finished system. It is not a philosophy *about* nature but "Nature itself philosophizing" (*autophusis philosophia*), as he put it.

Where Kantian philosophy put the human subject at the center, Schelling argued that "Nature is *a priori*." What makes the human being unique among earthly creatures is that it *knows* reality's ground is incomprehensible. Wise to our ignorance, we can either use our new found freedom to flee upwards by way of idealistic transcendentalism, or we can fall deeper in love with cosmogenesis via a naturalistic descendental approach. The former option, freedom without love,

quickly devolves into alienation. Idealists like Kant and Fichte tried to overcome this devolution by privileging practical over theoretical philosophy. To save the possibility of love between free humans they had to deny the possibility of a loving knowledge of living nature. Schelling moved away from the modern equation of knowledge with power in favor of what Goethe termed a "gentle empiricism" or loving knowledge. Rather than recoiling from the abyss of the sensible to a supposedly stable intelligible ground, as transcendental philosophy does, Schelling dives heart first into its radiant darkness. Transcendental philosophy is not to be rejected, however. It is indispensable for clearing the way, for preparing thought for its encounter with reality. But Reason alone cannot take us all the way. Schelling is clear on this point: "Without intellectual intuition, no philosophy!" The capacity for this sort of intuition, akin to artistic genius or mystical experience, depends on a certain character trait, Schelling tells us. As such, it cannot be taught to just anyone, as geometry or arithmetic can; it can, however, be cultivated by those with a heartfelt sense for the limits of all finite knowledge. Because of his tendency to rest philosophical insight on the capacity for genius or mystical sensitivity, Schelling left himself vulnerable to Hegel's quip that he makes philosophy depend on a genius that comes only as if by God's grace to Sunday's Children. Mystical experience is secretive, a mostly silent knowledge. As such it is difficult if not impossible to communicate about to those who have not experienced it for themselves.

In October of 1806, with the sound of cannon fire echoing through the city streets as Napoleon's army marched on Jena, Hegel hurried to make the finishing touches to the last part of the manuscript of his *Phenomenology of Spirit.* After delivering it to the publisher, Hegel recounted seeing Napoleon—"the world-spirit on horseback"—as he rode through Jena after his victory. Witnessing Napoleon ride into Jena helped confirm Hegel's sense that the revolutionary political events which had been unfolding in France over the past two decades were being mirrored in Germany by the revolutionary spiritual event that he himself was about to bring to completion in the *Phenomenology*.

In his preface, Hegel warns against the tendency, so prevalent among the philosophers of his day, to construe one's own system as a refutation of prior systems. Such a contrarian approach to the philosophical systems of others prevents us from recognizing what Hegel hoped to show, that the history of philosophy, the seemingly contradictory views of all its various schools of thought, is, when seen from the proper perspective, nothing other than the progressive development of truth. For Hegel, stages of development are not merely differentiated: they contradict and so supplant one another. But the ceaseless activity at the heart of their development makes them at the same time interrelated moments in an organic process of differentiation-into-wholeness where each newly emergent part becomes as necessary for the ever-renewing whole as the last. All prior systems of philosophy, Hegel argued, are but different stages in the growth and development of a single Consciousness that he named Absolute Spirit. Hegel showed how each historical manifestation of philosophical consciousness provided a perfectly appropriate expression of the truth adapted for its particular time and place. The argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology* goes even further, claiming that by retracing the steps of Spirit through its entire historical progression he (and the readers who manage to follow him) can see how it attains Absolute Knowledge of the whole of reality. While most philosophers simply observe and describe their process of thinking and concept-formation from the inside, totally absorbed within their own perspective, convinced that it is true and that all others are therefore false, Hegel's aim in the *Phenomenology* is to overcome the need to defend a partial perspective by enacting an encompassing meta-

perspective, and from there tracking the philosophical Self as it forms and reforms its objects of thought and perception through history. This higher perspective (that of absolute knowledge) allowed him to remember and narrate the evolution of consciousness as it moved through different conceptions of the self-world relation, beginning with the ordinary consciousness which assumes an opposition between subject and object, and culminating in the absolute or spiritual consciousness which realizes their complex identity. As Hegel described it, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* recounts the travails of philosophical consciousness as it "casts off the appearance of being caught up in something alien to itself," finally reaching "a point where appearance and essence coincide" in absolute knowing.

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So why does German idealism matter? In our technoscientific age, the risk posed by increasingly intelligent machines has been widely acknowledged. But the danger lies more in humans becoming machine-like than in machines becoming human. Grasping the significance of Kant's transcendental intervention helps prevent us from shirking the responsibility of freedom, for the human spirit is no mere algorithm. Fichte inspires us to pay attention to the power of our own imagination to shape reality. Schelling reminds us that this power is in fact a higher potency of nature itself, the until now unconscious spirit of cosmic evolution rising into consciousness. The harm we do to what we thought was a natural world distinct from us is only harm done to ourselves. And Hegel invites us to patiently endure the sometimes difficult dialectical twists and turns of history. If we manage not to become ideologically fixated by partial truths and fragmented into waring camps, but are able to stay with the tension of opposites, we may discover that an integral consciousness emerges to subtend and unite them. Who am I, What is this, and Why are we here? Even if we disagree with their answers to these questions, studying the German idealists is enough to compel us to keep asking them.