

THE PARADOX OF EXISTENCE

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Like the journal *TOPOI*, the *TOPOI Library* is based on the assumption that philosophy is a lively, provocative, delightful activity, which constantly challenges our inherited habits, painstakingly elaborates on how things could be different, in other stories, in counterfactual situations, in alternative possible worlds. Whatever its ideology, whether with the intent of uncovering a truer structure of reality or of shooting our anxiety, of exposing myths or of following them through, the outcome of philosophical activity is always the destabilizing, unsettling generation of doubts, of objections, of criticisms.

It follows that this activity is intrinsically a *dialogue*, that philosophy is first and foremost philosophical discussion, that it requires bringing out conflicting points of view, paying careful, sympathetic attention to their structure, and using this dialectic to articulate one's approach, to make it richer, more thoughtful, more open to variation and play. And it follows that the spirit which one brings to this activity must be one of tolerance, of always suspecting one's own blindness and consequently looking with unbiased eye in every corner, without fearing to pass a (fallible) judgment on what is there but also without failing to show interest and respect.

It is no rhetoric then to say that the *TOPOI Library* has no affiliation to any philosophical school or jargon, that its only policy is to publish exciting, original, carefully reasoned works, and that its main ambition is to generate serious and responsible exchanges among different traditions, to have disparate intellectual tools encounter and cross-fertilize each other, to contribute not so much to the notarization of yesterday's syntheses but rather to the blossoming of tomorrow's.

THE PARADOX OF EXISTENCE

Philosophy and Aesthetics in the Young Schelling

by

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*To Ludovico:
May He Find His Absolute*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xv
1. THE DISSERTATION OF 1792 ON THE ORIGIN OF EVIL	1
2. SCHELLING'S TIMÆUS.....	37
3. THE ESSAY ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A FORM OF ALL PHILOSOPHY (1794)	49
4. THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN THE UNCONDITIONAL	59
5. THE DRAMATIZATION OF CONTRAST.....	91
6. THE PARADOX OF OPPOSITION.....	115
7. PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE	133
8. THE SYSTEM OF TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM (1800)	149
9. EPILOGUE ON EARTH.....	173
INDEX	179

Foreword

This book is not a merely historical reconstruction of Schelling's thought; its main goal is to provide a contribution for a better comprehension of the importance of the philosophical quest of the young German philosopher from within, which represents a turning point for the whole thought of modernity. I did not describe the various fields of Schelling's work, but I pointed out the central position of his Aesthetics, through the analysis of the inner mechanisms of his concepts. This mechanism, in my opinion, shows the reason why an Aesthetic philosophy is possible, and why its origin can be traced to Kant's Aesthetics (particularly in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*) and in the speculations of the early post-Kantian philosophy. The young Schelling's philosophical problems precede his encounter with Fichte's philosophy. Schelling discovers these problems, related to Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Wolff, Leibniz and Kant, in the protestant college of the Stift in Tübingen. Fichte confirmed the necessity of an urgent reform of transcendental philosophy, and offered to the young philosopher a philosophical dictionary and an orientation. Schelling exploited these resources with a great degree of autonomy, independence and originality. In these years Hölderlin's influence on Schelling was much greater. Schelling's and Hölderlin's speculations, in these crucial years, were tightly connected.

The mechanism that animates Schelling's thought in these crucial years can be summarized as follows: Schelling wonders how it is possible to think the unconditional One from the point of view of its alterity, and after the One has lost its oneness and lies scattered in the fragments of its original fracture. Thus the problem is to understand how the One appears to itself and to the philosopher as the Two (a Two that never become a Three) without

thinking a third element (the Three), and allowing the One to remain One within the inexorable and tragic destiny of the Two. This fragmented multiplicity shall never completely return to its original oneness. This essay intends to retrace the origin of a speculation that represented an alternative to Hegel's philosophy. Schelling's ideas run through Western philosophy, and reappear in several philosophers. From Kant to Kierkegaard; from Rosenzweig to Scholem; from Heidegger to Tillich; from Merleau-Ponty to Pareyson. We also find Schelling's influence in existential philosophy, in hermeneutics, in the philosophy of the tragic. Schelling seeks a way to think the unconditional condition of the conditional (the totality of the empirical and the unity of its lawfulness) from within our situation. In this situation we know for sure that our existence and our thought both rest on the conditional. We cannot conceive the One in itself because we are placed within a situation in which its division already took place.

This problem is also the problem of our impossibility to think the unconditional condition of the possibility of thought and existence *from the point of view of our situation*. In order to achieve this goal we must begin a difficult journey through the conditional. Philosophy, in its daring movement through the conditional, constantly questions the relation (or the connection) between the conditional and the unconditional. In Schelling's case this relation is defined with two names: *opposition* or *contrast* (*Entgegensetzung*) and *separation* (*Trennung*).

The first and decisive aspect of this critical questioning is represented by an aspect of this relation that visibly appears to be the Two. This relation *cannot be the mere position of two terms* (the unconditional and absolute beginning and principle on the one hand and the dependent and passive conditional on the other). Schelling's relation is very different and quite paradoxical: the unconditional cannot be without the conditional, and the unconditional condition is nothing without the conditional. Thus in this relation both terms are reciprocally and mutually essential and necessary. The consequence is that our thought must immediately deal with what is looking for from within the original estrangement caused by the original fracture. Our thought moves its steps within the relation that imposes the thought of the absolute. *The unconditional-absolute can be grasped only through its separation and the loss of its unconditionality. The unconditional is thinkable only through its invisible presence in the conditional.* Both terms are necessary. The unconditional (the infinite) and the conditional (the finite) are inextricably connected by their reciprocal necessity. Thus the original unconditional is *the relation as such*. In Schelling's thought, absolute and unchanging Unity cannot be conceived as the primeval reality. The One is never a Third, and the relation is not a third element but the unity, the

identity and, paradoxically, the difference of its two terms. The beginning of the two terms makes them possible and real.

The second aspect of Schelling's quest is that the one who asks the question (man and/or the critical philosopher) doesn't inhabit neither the point of view of the absolute (that is, the unconditional condition of the conditional) nor the point of view of the conditional/finite. Schelling acknowledges that philosophy moves its steps on a shaky and precarious ground, but this ground (that shall eventually lead the philosopher to ecstatic amazement and reflection) is not the mere ground of a meaningless conditional. According to Schelling, philosophy begins with the paradoxical relation between the conditional and the unconditional, and not from one of the two terms. The philosopher shares his starting point and his emotional situation with the common man. However, the philosopher asks the fundamental question: *why (and how) being and not nothingness?*

Schelling tells us that the philosopher that radically questions this paradoxical relation also points out and shows the condition of existence, that is, the condition in which we find ourselves entangled *in the relation between what we are and what we feel we should be – or what we merely feel.*

Therefore philosophy is neither an activity that rests on the determined conditional, articulated in its various forms, nor an activity of the spirit whose fundament rests on the unconditional. Philosophy represents an activity that takes the radical risk to be on the boundary of two terms that are paradoxically necessary and unavoidable. Philosophy adheres to life through its effort of comprehension, that very effort that to the external eye seems to build a wall between life and the philosophical quest. The point of view of critical philosophy is that of the paradox of the relation between an almost too visible conditional and an unconditional shrouded in obscurity, that is, the obscurity caused by the visibility of the conditional. This would not be a problem if, as Schelling says, we were not a part of this paradoxical opposition. Schelling aims at thinking (and to think already means to be rooted in separation) each one of the terms through the other.

The conditional must be understood through the unconditional, and the unconditional through the conditional. Thus we must recognize that our being is a being *within the paradoxical separation* of what we are and what we feel we should be. In doing so, we understand that our existence and our knowledge do not rest neither on an immediate metaphysical intuition of the Whole (the point of view of the unconditional), nor no the precarious situation of the conditional (the point of view of determined knowledge). Our existence is grounded on something that is far more difficult and dangerous: it rests on the paradox that forces us into a position from which

we cannot privilege any of the two terms. We will never be able to completely bridge the gap created by the original separation.

Schelling's philosophy takes this risk, and stretches it to its extreme limit. Schelling aims at developing simultaneously the two sides of separation. On the one hand Schelling dares to think the unconditional through the conditional (i.e., he begins from experience in order to understand its condition of possibility). The re-enacting mechanism of this synthesis is the same mechanism of every critical philosophy that questions itself. Even more interestingly, the young philosopher dares to think the conditional through the unconditional. In this shortsighted age of the apology of what exists, this approach is almost completely abandoned.

Schelling is well aware of the impossibility to reach the point of view of the unconditional; however, he dares to do so anyway, in order to think the possibility of the conditional and of its being. How is this possible? Schelling knows very well the point of view of critical philosophy, if compared with the dogmatic procedure of reason in its pure knowledge. He also deeply respects Kant's criticism and the general plan expounded in the *Preface* of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Schelling's philosophical point of view is neither the point of view of the finite, nor the point of view of the infinite. It is the point of view of the finite-infinite and of their paradoxical opposition as such. This is the most inexorable and tragic conflict. Schelling places its trust in a very dangerous and daring idea: the conditional stems from the unconditional and it can be understood through the unconditional. Schelling can be certainly considered an "optimist" philosopher (after all he doesn't renounce to seek the light of the absolute); his system, however, does not rest on an external, incomprehensible, mysterious *totaliter alter*.

This is the sense of the paradox. The unconditional, the infinite and initial condition, is constantly present within the fabric of the conditional, and challenges philosophy to seek the unconditional from within the world of experience. The unconditional must be sought from within the tragic condition of temporality. Philosophy must feed itself with the nostalgia of absolute immanence, and mustn't evoke the unconditional as a ghost that would turn us into paralyzed statues of salt.

Schelling's absolute-unconditional cannot be an object for dogmatic speculation. It doesn't belong to any metaphysical ambit: it is placed within the paradoxical and unavoidable opposition that is the object of a critical philosophy that evolves into a transcendental idealism.

Aesthetics is the philosophy that sees the conditional-unconditional opposition in its identity and difference. This philosophy doesn't see the work of art as an external object: it remains within the mechanism of re-enactment that questions and re-comprehends its paradoxical relation with

the conditional. The work of art is seen as an object; thus it is extremely important to understand how these objects are produced through the movement that repeats the relation between the conditional and the unconditional.

Aesthetics is the main, if not the absolute, protagonist of this book. Aesthetics appears at the end of this book, but this is not a mere theatrical *escamotage*. At least since the year 1800, Schelling's speculation can be understood and interpreted as the effort to build an Aesthetics, conceived as a comprehensive philosophical theory and not a mere philosophy of art. I always tried to adhere strictly to Schelling's text in order to support the exigencies of our spirit *with his spirit* and *against his spirit*. The exposition of the genealogy of an idea is usually more productive and stimulating than its representation as a datum.

Rome, January 2004

Leonardo V. Distaso

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