

The Priority of Reciprocity: The Development of the Categories in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*

Abstract (143 words)

In this paper, I argue that while all the works of Schelling's early period agree that Kant's table of categories is in need of deeper unification, the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) marks an important evolution in Schelling's thinking about the Kantian categories. It does so by developing two ideas merely implicit in the earlier essays: first, the elevation of the category of *reciprocity*, and not just the whole class of the relational categories as the most important element of theoretical philosophy and, second, the *synthetic method*, which, as fully developed in the *System*, presents the deduction of the categories as a particular episode in what Schelling calls the history of self-consciousness. Taken together, these two aspects of Schelling's early thought can be seen to merit what Owen Ware has identified as the leitmotif for the first post-Kantians, namely the priority of reciprocity.

Synopsis (728 words)

The *System of Transcendental Idealism* marks a welcome evolution in Schelling's thinking of the Kantian categories over the earlier essays by making two features of his earlier views more explicit. The first is the idea that transcendental idealism requires a different kind of deduction than that traditionally undertaken in philosophy, namely a sequential and genetic approach he calls the history of self-consciousness. The second idea concerns the category of reciprocity. In the *System*, Schelling argues that reciprocity plays both an ontological and methodological role such that reciprocity characterizes both the nature of the world and the synthetic method for the world's construction by the self-positing I. While these two ideas may at first seem disconnected, they are, I will suggest, related in a central way: for Schelling, the category of reciprocity ultimately underwrites the notion of a history of self-consciousness as a method for transcendental philosophy.

The theoretical philosophy of the *System* has two parts. The first part begins with the deduction of the “absolute act” of self-consciousness in which Schelling attempts to show that everything that *is* must be posited *for the I* in an absolute synthesis, since “*to be intuited* and *to be* are one and the same.” For Schelling, this act of synthesis allows to understand self-consciousness as an “*infinite becoming*” consisting of two simultaneous and opposed activities, one ideal and the other real. Schelling’s major innovation in the *System*, however, is his recognition that this abrupt positing of an active and self-opposing I is abstracted from an “original, material sequence,” through which the identity between the conflicting real and ideal activities in the I shows itself to be, in reality, “a created and mediated one.” This series of mediations or episodes of the infinite conflict generated by the oppositional struggle between the real and ideal tendencies is what Schelling calls the “middle terms of the absolute synthesis,” and constitutes the second part of the theoretical philosophy. The task of theoretical philosophy thus becomes the “free imitation” or “free repetition” of these principle epochs in the development of self-consciousness. We only come to “full conviction” in our “entire system of knowledge,” Schelling insists, when we demonstrate “a complete exhibition of the *mechanism of [the system’s] emergence*” in such a historical sequence.

A second development of reciprocity’s centrality in the *System* can be found in Schelling’s explication of the synthetic method. At least as early as the *Form Essay*, Schelling deploys the synthetic method as the driving mechanism of transcendental philosophy. Confronted with any given opposition, the synthetic method tells us to discover the opposition’s unifying act in which both extremes reciprocally determine one another. Further comprehension of this unifying act in turn gives rise to a new opposition, compelling us to repeat the process again. By coordinating two distinct and opposed relata within a unified yet internally differentiated identity, the synthetic method implements the category of reciprocity as a means of doing transcendental philosophy. Moreover, in the *System* Schelling further

connects the synthetic method with his idea of a history of self-consciousness. It is precisely the identity between self-consciousness's real and ideal activities, in which each reciprocally posits and determines the other, that is to be resolved in its historical genesis. Since philosophy must demonstrate a reciprocally determined or thoroughgoing identity, it must proceed historically. Reciprocity not only constitutes the highest moment of objective reality as Schelling argues in the course of the second and third epochs, but also undergirds the entire methodological notion of a history of self-consciousness.

Taking stock of the *System*'s articulation of these two ideas nascent in the early essays—on the one hand, reciprocity's fundamental role in the constitution of objective reality and, on the other, reciprocity's underwriting of the history of self-consciousness through the synthetic method—we ought to recognize the *System* as marking a genuine development in the early Schelling's theoretical philosophy. While the category of reciprocity plays a central role throughout Schelling's Fichtean period, it is not until the *System* that it is explicitly recognized by Schelling as earning pride of place. It is this later work, in other words, which best merits what Owen Ware has called the “leitmotif for the first post-Kantians”—namely, the “priority of reciprocity.” For this reason, scholars concerned with the transformation—and radicalization—of reciprocity in the hands of the early German Idealists owe the *System of Transcendental Idealism* careful attention.

Paper (2963 words / 3000)

Reflecting on Schelling's influence on modern German philosophy, Hegel famously remarked that "Schelling worked out his philosophy in view of the public."¹ Today this thesis continues to guide much interpretation of Schelling's theoretical philosophy and its relationship to Kant's.² But however true this may be of Schelling's philosophical oeuvre as a whole, this interpretation does not adequately characterize the Fichtean works of the young Schelling. These works instead exhibit a significant degree of continuity, not only in their engagement with Fichte's axiomatic use of the self-positing I, but particularly in their privileging, both methodologically and ontologically, of the category of reciprocity.³

In this paper, I argue that while all the works of Schelling's early period agree that Kant's table of categories is in need of deeper unification, the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) marks an important evolution in Schelling's thinking about the Kantian categories.⁴ It does so by developing two ideas merely implicit in the earlier essays of 1794 and 1795⁵: first, the elevation of the category of reciprocity—and not just the whole class of the relational categories—as the most important moment of theoretical philosophy and, second, the synthetic method, which, as fully developed in the *System*, presents the deduction

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

² For a notable defense of the "protean" Schelling, see Xaver Tilliette, *Schelling: une philosophie en devenir*, vol. 1 (Vrin, 1970), 12–13 and *passim*.

³ There are many concepts of reciprocity or community in Kant. In this paper, I refer only to the *logical use* of reciprocity as it appears in the table of categories and the third analogy. In these contexts, Kant often uses the words reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*) interchangeably, thus for my purposes I will assume that they are the same. On this point see Charlton Payne and Lucas Thorpe, "Introduction: The Many Senses of Community in Kant," in *Kant and the Concept of Community*, edited by Charlton Payne and Lucas Thorpe (University of Rochester Press, 2011), 2.

⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (University Press of Virginia, 1978).

⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, "On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy (1794)" and "Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy: Or, On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge (1795)" in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays*, ed. and trans. Fritz Marti (Associated University Presses, 1980).

of the categories as a particular episode in what Schelling calls the history of self-consciousness.

I. Schelling on the Categories

Throughout his early Fichtean period, Schelling takes himself to be establishing precisely what Kant neglected in his own system, namely a unified and deeper ground for the deduction of the categories. In the *System*, Schelling argues that the categories are dynamic and active in nature. They are to be understood as “concepts of acts”⁶ or “modes of action” rather than passive theoretical conditions of all possible experience.⁷ The categories are those elementary *activities* of the I without which “there is no object for the intelligence” and are “for that very reason inseparable from objects.”⁸ In this way, Schelling’s early acceptance of Fichte’s primacy of the practical affords him a conception of the I as pure activity and self-positing, and so, too, of the categories as the elemental activities of the I.

Without examining Schelling’s claims about the interrelations of the categories in further detail, we can nonetheless identify a common project throughout Schelling’s early Fichtean period. Each of these points can be understood as aspects of Schelling’s aim to bring unity and systematicity to Kant’s table of categories so as to explain the recognizable patterns to which they give rise. To be sure, Kant himself agreed that a haphazard list of categories would be unacceptable for transcendental idealism, and, in the *Prolegomena* and B edition of the first *Critique*, even recognized the combinatory and synthetic nature of the third category in each class.⁹ But Schelling’s point is that Kant’s “nice notes” on the categories are themselves unsystematic so long as there is no further unifying principle which explains them, and thus that transcendental philosophy must seek a grounding principle for the

⁶ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 95.

⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 76–77; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B110.

categories if it is to become a *Wissenschaft*. Thus, even though some of Schelling's critical remarks on the categories resemble Kant's own observations, Schelling differs fundamentally from Kant by placing emphasis on the derivative and non-fundamental nature of the categories. For Schelling, the categories are mere moments within the wider system of transcendental idealism rather than, as they are for Kant, one of its foundations.¹⁰ It is precisely this mediated nature of the categories that Schelling most explicitly foregrounds in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

II. Developments in the System

The *System of Transcendental Idealism* marks a welcome evolution in Schelling's thinking of the Kantian categories over the earlier essays by making two features of his earlier views more explicit. The first is the idea that transcendental idealism requires a different kind of deduction than that traditionally undertaken in philosophy, namely a sequential and genetic approach he calls the history of self-consciousness. The second idea concerns the category of reciprocity. In the *System*, Schelling argues that reciprocity plays both an ontological and methodological role such that reciprocity characterizes both the nature of the world and the synthetic method for the world's construction by the self-positing I. While these two ideas may at first seem disconnected, they are, I will suggest, related in a central way: for Schelling, the category of reciprocity ultimately underwrites the notion of a history of self-consciousness as a method for transcendental philosophy.

A. The History of Self-Consciousness

Schelling first introduces the idea of a history of self-consciousness in the *Abhandlungen* published in 1797.¹¹ However, it is only in the *System* where the notion of a

¹⁰ For an example of the centrality of the categories in Kant see Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, trans. Michael Friedman [Cambridge University Press, 2004], 4:475–76n.

¹¹ F. W. J. Schelling, “Treatise Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge (1797),” in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F. W. J. Schelling*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Pfau (State University of New York Press, 1994).

history of self-consciousness plays a prominent and architectonic role in Schelling's thought, comprising the majority of the book's theoretical philosophy. Because of this architectonic role, an understanding of the history of self-consciousness requires some knowledge of the *System*'s structure as a whole.

The *System* is divided into four principle parts: (1) an introductory section which begins with the principle of the I or of self-consciousness; (2) a theoretical philosophy consisting of three “epochs” (sensation, reflection, and willing); (3) a practical philosophy consisting of an account of the will, intersubjectivity, and a philosophy of history; and (4) a keystone part consisting of a theory of teleology and, most famously, a philosophy of art.

The theoretical philosophy itself has two parts. The first part begins with the deduction of the “absolute act” of self-consciousness in which Schelling attempts to show that everything that *is* must be posited *for the I* in an absolute synthesis, since “*to be intuited* and *to be* are one and the same.”¹² For Schelling, this act of synthesis allows to understand self-consciousness as an “*infinite becoming*”¹³ consisting of two simultaneous and opposed activities, one ideal and the other real, and to understand that this becoming is founded on the formal “mechanism of the mind” before any sort of content has been added to it.¹⁴ Schelling’s major innovation in the *System*, however, is his recognition that this abrupt positing of an active and self-opposing I is abstracted from an “original, material sequence,”¹⁵ through which the identity between the conflicting real and ideal activities in the I shows itself to be, in reality, “a created and mediated one.”¹⁶ This series of mediations or episodes of the infinite conflict generated by the oppositional struggle between the real and ideal tendencies is what Schelling calls the “middle terms of the absolute synthesis,” and constitutes the second part

¹² Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 43, emphasis mine.

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

of the theoretical philosophy.¹⁷

We may wonder: how do we get from a sequence of middle terms in the ceaseless activity of the I to a history of self-consciousness divided into three discrete epochs? In other words, since everything that *is* is posited in the absolute act of self-consciousness, the I's mediating sequence is in principle infinite; an account of this act of self-consciousness would itself be unending. Schelling's response is that philosophy can only take account of the highlight reel, as it were, and trace the major epochs of this immanent development of the I's two opposed activities:

Since [...] there is an infinite conflict in self-consciousness, the one absolute act we start from contains—united and condensed—an infinity of actions whose total enumeration forms the content of an infinite task; (if it were ever to be completely accomplished, the whole structure of the objective world, and every determination of nature down to the infinitely small, would have to be revealed to us [which is impossible]). So philosophy can enumerate only those actions which constitute epochs, as it were, in the history of self-consciousness, and establish them in their interrelations with one another. [...] Philosophy is thus a history of self-consciousness, having various epochs, and by means of it that one absolute synthesis is successively put together.¹⁸

The task of theoretical philosophy thus becomes the “free imitation” or “free repetition” of these principle epochs in the development of self-consciousness, and talent in its undertaking lying in “becoming aware [...] of the *original necessity* of those acts.”¹⁹ We only come to “full conviction” in our “entire system of knowledge,” Schelling insists, when we demonstrate “a complete exhibition of the *mechanism of [the system's] emergence*” in such a

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49, emphasis mine.

historical sequence.²⁰

Moreover, as Schelling's qualification in the above passage shows, the history of self-consciousness is intimately tied to the nature and finitude of the philosopher, who is held in distinction from the self-developing I which she is observing. Schelling often makes use of the distinction between the *standpoint of the philosopher* and the *standpoint of the I* in order to better explain the local moments of conflict between the I's ideal and real activities. For example, in the deduction of productive intuition in the epoch of sensation, in which the I comes to understand itself as actively constructing the real-ideal conflict rather than being passively subject to it, Schelling remarks:

For now indeed the identity of consciousness is utterly abolished thereby, not only for the observer, but for the self itself; the self is thus led to the same point of observation at which we ourselves have been stationed from the first, save only that for the self at this point a number of things must appear quite otherwise than they did to us. *We* viewed the self originally in a conflict of opposing activities.

The self, without knowing of that conflict, has had to reconcile it involuntarily and, as it were, blindly in a common construction.²¹

The philosopher posits all reality and knowledge in self-consciousness in one originary and absolute act of intellectual intuition. But the specific content of this reality and knowledge can only emerge through the philosopher's observation of the epochal I, which progressively but involuntarily reconciles its constitutive antagonism of real and ideal activities. We can therefore use this distinction to formulate a central goal of theoretical philosophy: to watch the I's own deduction for itself what was in the beginning only posited for the philosopher.²²

Much more could be said for Schelling's innovative idea of a history of self-

²⁰ Ibid., 35.

²¹ Ibid., 77–78.

²² Ibid., 65.

consciousness, but I would like to emphasize two important points. First, the elaboration of theoretical philosophy as a history of self-consciousness is a further development of the synthetic method already present in the earlier essays. Schelling is clear that the history of self-consciousness is the only means for determining the specific content of transcendental philosophy, and that this content cannot be deduced without sequentially following through its own genetic unfolding. It is only by means of this transcendental history that Schelling makes good on his promise in the *System*'s foreword to "enlarge transcendental idealism into what it really should be, namely a system of all knowledge."²³ Despite this methodological development, it would be wrong to understand the sort of genetic argument Schelling introduces in the *System* as a departure from his views in the early essays, which announce the same attempt to integrate the particular knowledge of all sciences within transcendental philosophy.

Second, while Schelling never says so explicitly, we should also conclude that one essential function of Schelling's presentation of theoretical philosophy as a history of self-consciousness is to give each aspect of the Kantian philosophical apparatus its proper place and order within the system of idealism as a whole. Nearly all of the central notions of Kant's transcendental idealism, such as the ideality of space and time and the schematism in his metaphysics, mechanism and organism in his science, and judgment, concept, and, of course, the categories in logic, all arise for Schelling as connected steps along the way of the I's becoming-aware of itself in the act of absolute synthesis. The history of self-consciousness thus serves as the deeper principle upon which the Schelling of the *System* grounds the Kantian categories.

B. From Relation to Reciprocity

The second development of the earlier views to be found in the *System* is Schelling's

²³ Ibid., 1.

elevation of the category of reciprocity over and above the other two relational categories, subsistence and causality. While Schelling from the beginning champions the categories of relation over all the others,²⁴ it is not until the *System* that he explicitly privileges *reciprocity* as such (and so, too, community and simultaneity). While in the *I Essay*, Schelling seemingly demotes reciprocity in favor of absolute causality and substantiality (§§13–14), attributing these latter two categories to the absolute I but not reciprocity,²⁵ Schelling nonetheless deploys the synthetic method throughout the early essays.

Reciprocity's central role in the *System*'s theoretical philosophy is most evident in book's two-step deduction of the relational categories. I say "two-step" because Schelling first deduces the categories of relation as constituents of objective reality in the second epoch on reflection, and then returns to them again as elements of the I's own self-awareness in the third epoch on willing. Put differently, where in the second epoch the categories are deduced for the philosopher, in the third epoch the I comes to know or "recognize" the categories for itself.²⁶ In treating the categories in this genetic way, Schelling takes himself not to be merely presenting the relational categories as if they were a preestablished result, but to be "exhibiting their origin in the intelligence itself."²⁷

There is no denying that Schelling's arguments in these sections of the *System* are dense and complicated; a full explication of their subtleties would lead us beyond the scope of this merely schematic paper. But a sense of Schelling's transformation of the categories in the *System* can be gathered from his criticism of Kant's treatment of them. Loosely put, Schelling thinks that the Kantian categories are stuck in the standpoint of reflection and have

²⁴ Cf. Schelling, "On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy," 52; Schelling, "Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy," 114; Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 133, 145, and 150.

²⁵ Dalia Nassar, "Pure versus Empirical Forms of Thought: Schelling's Critique of Kant's Categories and the Beginnings of *Naturphilosophie*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2014): 126–27.

²⁶ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 112.

²⁷ Ibid., 151.

not been properly raised to the superior standpoint of intellectual intuition:

Since our whole philosophy proceeds from the standpoint of intuition, not that of reflection, occupied, for instance, by Kant and his philosophy, we shall also derive the now incipient series of acts of the intelligence *as* acts, and not, say, as concepts of acts, or as categories.²⁸

In this passage, Schelling suggests that Kant, stuck in the standpoint of reflection, reifies and intellectualizes the categories, which are basic forms of the intelligence's activity as opposed to mere concepts. To be sure, Schelling accepts that the categories appear to the I as concepts and discusses this in the third epoch. His point is rather that the appearance of the categories as concepts is parasitic on their more fundamental role as the kinds of activity necessary for representing the objective world. Elsewhere, Schelling writes that the relational categories are the special "modes of action" through which "objects themselves first come about for us," and so are the basis for all knowledge of objective reality.²⁹ Since reciprocity is also the primary way of understanding the highest form of objective reality—the organism understood as the "positive capacity for self-organization"³⁰—Schelling likewise places reciprocity at the center of the *System*'s view of objective reality.³¹

However, a deeper significance of reciprocity's centrality in the *System* can be found in Schelling's explication of the synthetic method. At least as early as the *Form Essay*, Schelling deploys the synthetic method as the driving mechanism of transcendental philosophy. Confronted with any given opposition, the synthetic method tells us to discover the opposition's unifying act in which both extremes reciprocally determine one another. Further comprehension of this unifying act in turn gives rise to a new opposition, compelling

²⁸ Ibid., 95.

²⁹ Ibid., 107.

³⁰ Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (State University of New York Press, 2011), 178.

³¹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 126.

us to repeat the process again.³² By coordinating two distinct and opposed relata within a unified yet internally differentiated identity, the synthetic method implements the category of reciprocity as a means of doing transcendental philosophy. Thus, in the *Form Essay* Schelling speaks of the mutual determination of form and content in the ultimate axiom $I=I$ ³³ and, in the *I essay*, of the simultaneous and reciprocal nature of the original form of all synthesis,³⁴ all the while likening the process to a circle.³⁵ But while Schelling deploys the synthetic method throughout all of his early writings, it is only in the *System* that he addresses the question of methodology directly, explicitly grounding the synthetic method on the category of reciprocity.

Moreover, in the *System* Schelling further connects the synthetic method with his idea of a history of self-consciousness. It is precisely the identity between self-consciousness's real and ideal activities, in which each reciprocally posits and determines the other, that is to be resolved in its historical genesis:

The act of self-consciousness is ideal and real, simultaneously and throughout. By means of it, what is posited as real is also immediately posited as ideal, and what is posited as ideal is likewise posited as real. This *thoroughgoing* identity of ideal and real positedness in the act of self-consciousness can only be presented in philosophy as arising in succession.³⁶

Since philosophy must demonstrate a reciprocally determined or thoroughgoing identity, it must proceed historically. Reciprocity not only constitutes the highest moment of objective reality as Schelling argues in the course of the second and third epochs, but also undergirds the entire methodological notion of a history of self-consciousness.

³² Ibid., 61.

³³ Schelling, “On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy,” 42–43.

³⁴ Schelling, “Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy,” 116–18.

³⁵ Schelling, “Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy,” 43; Schelling, “On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy,” 71; Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 69 and 134.

³⁶ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 42.

Taking stock of the *System*'s articulation of these two ideas nascent in the early essays—on the one hand, reciprocity's fundamental role in the constitution of objective reality and, on the other, reciprocity's underwriting of the history of self-consciousness through the synthetic method—we ought to recognize the *System* as marking a genuine development in the early Schelling's theoretical philosophy. While the category of reciprocity plays a central role throughout Schelling's Fichtean period, it is not until the *System* that it is explicitly recognized by Schelling as earning pride of place. It is this later work, in other words, which best merits what Owen Ware has called the “leitmotif for the first post-Kantians”—namely, the “priority of reciprocity.”³⁷ For this reason, scholars concerned with the transformation—and radicalization—of reciprocity in the hands of the early German Idealists owe the *System of Transcendental Idealism* careful attention.

³⁷ Owen Ware, “The Concept of Persons in Kant and Fichte,” in *Persons: A History*, ed. Antonia LoLordo (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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