

# Freedom as a detachment of finite beings from the Absolute in Schelling's *Bruno*

Juan Jose Rodriguez

*Abstract:* The dialogue *Bruno* of 1802 is arguably the natural starting point for any investigation on the concepts of finitude, evil and human freedom in Schelling's middle metaphysics. In this dialogue the author elaborates for the first time in his system a concept of freedom and independence of the finite, which extends via his reformulation in *Philosophy and Religion* of 1804 to the *Freedom Essay* of 1809 and beyond to the works of 1810 and 1811 – *Stuttgart Private Lectures* and *The Ages of the World*. The central ontological problem of the dialogue relates to the possibility of a separation between the absolute and the world as space of finite beings, which, according to the system of identity first presented in 1801, cannot exist as such. The question we will then address concerns the status of the finite as such and how would it be possible to admit both its existence for consciousness and the positing of an absolute and infinite principle of philosophy. We will show how Schelling's interest shifts, almost unintentionally, from the infinite principle to the finite as such, as a principle of freedom and self-initiation independent of the real.

*Keywords:* Finite, freedom, absolute, world, consciousness, idealism

## 1. *Introduction\**

The dialogue *Bruno* of 1802 is arguably the natural starting point for any investigation on the concepts of finitude, evil and human freedom in Schelling's middle metaphysics. This period signals his first systematic effort to present a so-called "System of Freedom" that would continue the tradition of Kant's practical philosophy integrated into an objective conception of nature. Schelling had referred to a "System of Freedom" from 1795 (*SW* I, 159) up to 1836 (*SW* X, 36) thus providing a queue of interpretation that runs through his whole career. The difference between early and middle-late Schelling con-

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cerning the constitution of a “system of freedom” consists in that, prior to 1802 (except for the work of 1800 *General Deduction of the Dynamic Process*) Schelling had not yet spoken of freedom as a property of the finite in the way we present it in this paper. It is the case though that the period of freedom properly speaking runs from 1809 to 1815 or 1821. However, and according to our main historical thesis in this article, the elements pointing towards the constitution of a philosophy of freedom need to be traced back precisely to the problematic of the finite arising between 1802-1806 because only in the works of those years Schelling discussed the main presupposition for finite freedom, namely the ontological independence and self-subsistence of finite beings in general.

We say that *Bruno* is the best starting point to elucidate Schelling’s middle metaphysics of freedom because in this dialogue the author elaborates for the first time in his system a concept of freedom and independence of the finite, which extends via his reformulation in *Philosophy and Religion* of 1804 to the *Freedom Essay* of 1809 and beyond to the works of 1810 and 1811 – *Stuttgart Private Lectures* and *The Ages of the World*.

The problem of the dialogue lies halfway between the aesthetic and the ontological, a characteristic intersection of Schelling’s aesthetic period between 1800 and 1803, which we have dealt with elsewhere in connection with the posthumous work *Philosophy of Art*. At the centre of the aesthetic *motif* is the theme of the equivalence of truth and beauty, which, strictly speaking, is an expression of the higher equivalence, towards which the dialogue is gradually moving, between the ideal and the real, of identity – unity and difference, a theme that has preoccupied Schelling at least since the system of transcendental idealism in 1800.

In contrast to his transcendental and aesthetic period, however, in *Bruno* Schelling treats in passing, but with increasing vigour, ontological issues raised by his 1801 exposition and controversially discussed in his correspondence with Eschenmayer. We shall refer first to the question of the existence of the finite as such, i.e. the world as we perceive it, and its relationship to the Absolute or God, which Schelling has been posing as a principle of his system since 1795. This point opens Schelling’s reflections to an even more general concern, namely, the connection and separation between the Absolute and the world, which, as we know, under the guises of the infinite and the finite, has preoccupied modern philosophy since Descartes and Spinoza.

Although the problem of the separation between the absolute and the world is present in Schelling’s philosophy as early as in the *Philosophical Letters* of 1795/1796, it acquires a radically new tinge around the years 1801-1802 that we will now briefly elucidate. The difference lies in the new concept of the finite as such (see *SW* IV, 249, 259, 263, 285) worked by Schelling in this period,

which differs from the concept of the infinitely finite in time that he took from Spinoza earlier in his career and up to the dialog *Bruno*.<sup>1</sup> If we now conceive the world as made of beings that are not only infinitely finite, that is, only ideally finite (see *SW* IV, 248, 257, 281–285), but also real finite beings, then we can begin to understand the notion of the world of finite beings as a proper detachment from the absolute, and, as such, as an ontologically independent formation that comes to rival with the now merely ‘ideal absolute’ and sets itself up as a second absolute in *Philosophy of Religion* of 1804 and in the years to come (see *SW* VI, 39–42; VII, 467). With the – partially unintended – discovery of the extra-systematic place of the finite as such in *Bruno* and in the following works of the period between 1802 and 1809 Schelling opens for the first time in the tradition of modern and contemporary philosophy the topic of existence as an extra or pre-rational fact as later developed by philosophers of existence of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To briefly summarize our previous points, we ought to say that the central ontological problem of the dialog relates to the problem of the separation between the Absolute and the world, which is raised by considering the world of phenomena as that which appears to consciousness but cannot exist as such or in-itself according to the system of identity first presented in 1801.

The question we will then address concerns the status of the finite as such and how would it be possible to admit both its existence for consciousness and the positing of an absolute and infinite principle of philosophy. We will show how Schelling’s interest shifts, almost unintentionally, from the infinite principle to the finite as such, as a principle of freedom and self-initiation independent of the real. The split opened by the duality of the two principles will continue in *Philosophy and Religion* of 1804 and become more apparent in the other works of the 1800s that are the subject of our broader philosophical interest.

## 2. *Freedom as Separation and Fall*

The first fundamental theme of Bruno’s metaphysics, which is related to our object of investigation, namely the idea of a separation between the Absolute and the world as an objection to the idealistic system conceived as identity, relates, as we have said, to the emergence of the Ideas as forms of mediation between the Absolute and the world.<sup>2</sup> The Ideas, in turn, introduce the

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the relation between the infinite and the finite, as well as the role of intuition in early to middle Schelling see Tilliette 1985, 207–208, 210.

<sup>2</sup> More about the problem of the separation between the absolute and the world in the years 1800–

subject of freedom as emanation and consequently as detachment from the Absolute.<sup>3</sup> Freedom will thus be only conceivable from itself and not from the Absolute, to which it mediates a radical separation, a division.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we will see how the concepts of derived absoluteness and independent dependence, with which Schelling characterises both nature and man, are connected to the freedom of ideas.<sup>5</sup>

The fundamental question at issue here for Schelling is that of the separation between the world and the Absolute. We have already said that this separation manifests itself primarily in the freedom of ideas, according to which they separate themselves from the Absolute. For Schelling, freedom means first and foremost the separation of things from the Absolute, a separation that takes place through the action of things themselves. This movement thus implies a fall of the absolute into the world:

The individual things would now have separated themselves from that which is equal in and for itself by that which would be distinguishable and particular in them, although in that by which they are equal and individual to themselves they have taken with them into temporality an imprint and, as it were, the imprint of that which is par excellence indivisible. (*SW IV*, 233).

In all individual things there are two main properties. Those by whose presence they resemble each other, or otherwise stated, the predicates that signal the identity all of things between themselves and regarding the Absolute (= A). That which is equal in and for itself is the Absolute itself and the Absolute as essence is partially carried over each individual thing insofar, they are not completely dissimilar. All things are equal in that they are, and they are, that is, they positively exist, only in and through the Absolute. But things are not only their common properties between each other and the Absolute, namely, "being". Insofar they exist they are also particular and individual, but the "*what*" by virtue of which they are "so and so" cannot be singled out as a general property, precisely because what is particular of each thing is not an eternal essence and form – in this we note in passing some similarities of Schelling's theory of ideas and the Absolute in *Bruno* to the theory of ideas of Plato: only what is axiologi-

1809 in White (1983: 94-97).

<sup>3</sup> Beierwaltes (2000: 420-423, 434-436); Idem (1972: 100-144).

<sup>4</sup> Anselmo: But is not that which produces also in this respect like that of which it is the effluence? For has he, God, also revealed somewhere in the tangible world the beauty that is in himself, and does he not rather give the ideas of things that are in him an independent life of their own by making them exist as the souls of individual bodies? *SW IV*: 233. See also Vater (1984: 31).

<sup>5</sup> *SW VII*: 349; *VII*: 458; Theunissen (1965: 181-182).

cally and ontologically positive in things is an essence that corresponds to an idea. We must also underline that, the ideality of the Absolute that is built-in the essence of things insofar as they bear the imprint of the Absolute into the temporal world. Coming back to Plato, Schelling is alluding to some sort of participation (*μέθεξις*) theory by virtue of which the particular does not cease to be so by partaking in the Absolute. However, and unlike Plato, Schelling does not intend to separate the ideal and the real side of things by way of an ontological but rather through a *methodological* dualism.

The freedom of ideas and the process of differentiation of all beings, as mediated by the Absolute, relates to the concept of freedom of the finite in general.

Freedom depends on the possibility of differentiating the finite from the absolute. In this way, finite freedom appears as a kind of rebellion of things against their ground and as an attempt to constitute itself as its own ground and point of reference.

In this sense, we would like to suggest that freedom, and human freedom in particular, is configured in Schelling's system of freedom – around the years 1802-1809 – as the other of itself *vis-à-vis* the absolute. In contrast to the whole in the act, freedom lies in pure possibility, in pure potentiality. Freedom is therefore to be understood as separation, detachment, independence or fall. To what extent does it mean for Schelling to conceive freedom as a detachment from the Absolute? To begin with we must note that the existence of a realm of finite beings is the fundamental condition of possibility of freedom, in that if finite beings would not exist as such nor would it be possible to attribute freedom to them. This is why we speak in this paper of “finite freedom”<sup>6</sup> as a detachment of beings from the Absolute, namely, because freedom is to a large extent the self-generated capacity of finitude to posit itself as an independent existence. Freedom is then understood here not only as the fact that this detachment takes place, but also as the grounding operation according to which the finite posits itself as existent.

This goes so far that the gradual change in the concept of freedom that will take place around 1807 also had an impact on Schelling's concept of the absolute. The concept of the absolute began then to take on traits of human freedom and later, in 1811, culminated in eternal freedom, which is understood, subsequently, as the pure possibility of being, as the first potency or “Being able” (*Seynkönnendes*). It is a transition, we could say, from Spinoza's metaphysics of the perfect, the whole *in actu*, the past, the a priori and immovable,

<sup>6</sup> This can be also contested insofar as we could also make the case, as Schelling will later make from 1807 onwards, that there is only freedom where there is finitude, and that God's freedom regarding the world is a completely different concept than the freedom that we attribute to human beings and nature. This is nevertheless a topic lying beyond our scope in this article.

to a metaphysics of the possible, of what has not yet happened, but of beings (*Seyende*), and thus of the future, of progressive historical development.

In fact, Schelling reproaches both Spinoza and Hegel that they do not have a correct understanding of what we can call, following Gabriel, an “historic concept of Being”, but that they rather mobilize only a mere “logical concept of Being”. By this they mean that insofar as the result of the system of philosophy is already contained (although implicitly or ideally) in the principle of the system (being that the substance or absolute subject or spirit) then they are both unable to explain the process of a real becoming or real movement (in spatial terms) as well as the *difference* between the three moments of time: past, present and future. If the results of the system are already *virtualiter* in its original inception, then there could be no real difference, and all that has been and will be is the self-recurring movement of the same. This thesis of Schelling regarding Spinoza’s and Hegel’s system can surely be contested, but it would be difficult to deny that their systems are both complete systems and that at the same time they allow for the emergence of something radically new, either in space or in time.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, we must deal successively with the Absolute presented by the character Bruno, starting from the concept of absolute unity, as the First that precedes everything, and the relation of the First to consciousness, understood as the principle of cognition. The connection between the First and consciousness takes place through the Absolute itself, which Schelling will refer to as the Third = x and that authors such as M. Gabriel have regarded as the principle for the establishment of the logical-predicative space itself.

### 3. *Unity and Beginning*

The universe and man, according to Bruno, are both at a middle point or moment of becoming, between the absolute and nothingness: “[...] to be mixed of the immortal and the mortal, and neither merely of the finite nor of the infinite.” (SW IV, 234). This in-between is the real. The world, nature and freedom, as real determinations, are neither finite nor infinite, but a mixture of the mortal and the immortal.

The starting point of the metaphysical part of *Bruno* (SW IV, 235-260) is “[...] the idea of that in which all opposites are not both united but rather one, and not both sublated (*Aufgehoben*) but not separated at all [...]” (235) that is, the idea of that in which the opposites are not united, as in the later indif-

<sup>7</sup> See for instance SW VII, 349-350, 358-359; X, 36-48, 126-161, in particular 124-125, *passim*; Gabriel 2011: 70.

ference, but are one, and their elements are not sublated because they have not even separated.

Here there is neither unity nor duality, but the absolute identity, which does not exist in either unity or duality. There is no unity, but only the one.<sup>8</sup> There is also no opposition, but rather a non-separation (*nicht-Trennung*) or non-decision (*nicht-Entscheidung*). This is what we call mere ideality or interiority.

The beginning of philosophy is a theme that is central to the thought of classical German philosophy, both for Hegel's absolute idealism and for Schelling's "real idealism". The following reflections on Schelling's *Bruno* should be seen in this context. According to our author, there are three possible beginnings of philosophy.

The first of them refers to the beginning by "the First (*das Erste*) that precedes everything". This variant resembles the idea of absence of opposites and separation presented earlier by Bruno and the concept of absolute opposite analysed later.

The other two variants then correspond to what Bruno will call the relative opposition of thinking and being, of the ideal and the real. The unity that opposes the opposition is the second variant. The third, on the other hand, is an opposition without unity, which, as we will see, is impossible since every opposition between two elements is united in a superior element. The latter is known to us from the doctrine of the third, according to which  $A=B$  is only possible through a superior third ( $=$ ). The position of relative unity also implies a reversal of relative opposition, as we know from Fichte's idealism. In this sense, Lucian mentions that unity cannot be established without simultaneously establishing the minimal opposition, namely that which posits the same thing as a subject on the one hand and as an object or predicate on the other.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, we have two global ways of thinking about the beginning of philosophy. Either a negative form, based on the concept of what precedes everything, which is identified neither with unity nor with opposition, but rather overlays them, as it were, or a form of relative unity, which is at the same time a relative opposition, since the predicative categories of unity and of the opposition presuppose each other. The first form, which refers to the first that

<sup>8</sup> The One is to be understood as in Neoplatonic philosophy. On this point see Beierwaltes 1985. Tilliette has shown (following Beierwaltes) the strong influence that Plotinus conception of the One and of intuition played in Schelling's *Bruno* precisely through the mediation of Neoplatonic topics in the work of G. Bruno (as we will show, known to Schelling through Jacobi's *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza*). All in all, the Neoplatonic influence on Schelling is a complex combination of direct and indirect reading of Plotinus and other Greek and Christian sources as well. See Tilliette 1979, 706-708, 722; Idem 1985, 210.

<sup>9</sup> However, the semantic interpretation of the subject-object distinction must not be confused with its ontological conception. See Schelling's later critique of Hegel in Dews 2023 and Vater 1984, 25, 34.

precedes everything, is therefore identified with absolute unity and opposition, since there is no differentiated element in it that can be brought into a higher unity.

In the following, we will analyse in detail the concept of the First, which precedes everything, as well as the dialectic between relative unity and the opposition, which can be found in the philosophical positions of Schelling and Fichte. This analysis will enable us to highlight the problems underlying the concepts of unity and identity, which in turn will prove to have a negative impact on Schelling's conception of the system.

The difference between Fichte and Schelling regarding unity becomes clear right at the beginning of the dialog, as Lucian, in a reversal of Bruno's thesis of unity as the first, denies that it is possible to posit unity without simultaneously positing an opposition. This is where the concept of "relative unity" comes into play, i.e. a concept of unity in which the opposites are never completely united and never become one:

For unity is necessarily opposed to the opposite, and since it is therefore as inconceivable without the opposite as the latter is without it, it must also be impossible to posit unity without positing it with an opposite. (*SW IV*, 236).

According to Bruno, unity is the first, since it contains relative unity on the one hand and opposites on the other, so that the first unity is simultaneously a supreme antithesis: "[...] since we make the unity of all opposites the first, but unity itself, together with what you call the antithesis, itself forms the highest antithesis, we, in order to make that unity the highest [...]". (*SW IV*, 236).

Our aim is to show the incompatibility between a strong view of unity, as advocated by Bruno, and a concept of the freedom of the finite from the absolute, which gradually emerges from the phenomenological treatment of the sensuous world from 1802 onwards. By phenomenological treatment we understand the fact that the world that appears is considered as such insofar as it appears, and consequently as autonomous and independent from any ideal-identical principle beyond the 'I'.

What we notice here is the Schellingian view of absolute unity or unity unclouded by difference as distinct from the derivative concept of "relative unity". We also notice an influence of the Hegelian concept of the unity of identity that is to be attributed to the absolute

[...] also think this opposition, together with the unity that is opposite to it, conceived in it, and determine that unity as that in which the unity and the opposition, what is at once equal and unequal, is one [...] (*SW IV*, 236).

The reason why we bring forth the Hegelian concept of unity of identity of identity and non-identity has to do with problem of the internalization of difference introduced above. During the transition from the system of identity to the system of freedom, Schelling struggles to give a full account not only of finitude, but also of difference, to end up internalizing the concept of difference to the Absolute itself much like Hegel will do later in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with the notion of negation and negation of negation to explain the dialectic movement of reality. Whereas Schelling characterised the Absolute around 1800 as the unity of unity and opposition, he now adopts a Hegel-like formula: Identity of identity and non-identity.<sup>10</sup> Schelling alternates between the two formulations, for he uses both the concept of the non-identical and that of unity clouded by difference. The concept of difference is of key importance to understand the solution to the internalization of difference in the absolute, on one side, and, on the other, the divergence of Schelling with the Hegelian philosophy, for it signals the existence of something that is incommensurable with identity and is not dissolved in it. The concept of non-identity, however, presupposes the concept of identity and dissolves into it, so that what is opposed to identity is also a reductive expression of it and there is no real difference on the whole. Only a doubling or negation takes place. This negation depends on the affirmation of identity, and consequently identity is paramount and conceals true difference, which cannot be reduced to identity-unity. The concept of difference that Schelling is now trying to articulate aims to overcome the rule of pure identity, so that difference could explain the emergence of something new from the Absolute, namely, finitude and freedom. The problem that this radicalization of difference entails is that because it undermines identity and dialectic of opposition and resolution into a higher reality it ends up externalizing in a second formation or real absolute detached from the ideal absolute and therefore a full separation emerges between the absolute and the world that cancels all systematic pretensions of German idealist's claims to identity and unity. In this largely unintended movement Schelling resembles later existentialist opposition between a pure science of reason exemplified by Hegelianism<sup>11</sup> and existence conceived as an extra- or rather as a pre-rational fact.

<sup>10</sup> SW IV: 239-240, 266, VII: 445; Hegel (1986, II: 96). (= TWA 2: 96). See also Vater (1984: 25-26, 45).

<sup>11</sup> It could be objected that we present here Schelling's logic as less accomplished (in pure logical terms) than Hegelian dialectic. Nevertheless, in doing so we follow Schelling himself, who in his late Munich time declared Hegel's *Logic* as the best consummation of the dialectical method he had first conceived for the *Philosophy of Nature*. The only problem is that Hegel had exceeded the purely logical framework when he declared that existence and being do not surpass this science of reason. In this way, he illegitimately hypostasized a way of thinking adapted to the real domain and to actual movement (Nature) into all of philosophy and detached it then from experience, precluding the access to

Let us now return to our train of thought before we commenced our digression on the concept of difference, that is, the beginning of philosophy in the First, which precedes everything, or in the relative unity of unity and opposition. What Lucian objects to in the concept of absolute unity, or that which is placed above unity and opposition, is that this unity is precisely thereby placed again in a relation of opposition to the totality of relative unity and opposition. This regressive argument directed against positing an absolute unity that is later seen as opposed to the whole of the relative sphere of identity and opposition resembles the logical objection to the theory of ideas of Plato.<sup>12</sup>

What the regressive argument of the third man ought to teach us is that an absolute unity needs to be posited as completely detached from the sphere of relative unity and opposition, that is, of the excision between the ideal and the real in order to, paradoxically, be able to explain the emergence of the relative domain. The unity that is placed above the unity and the opposition is in turn directed against them. This prevents Bruno's formulation from arriving at a pure unity unclouded by difference: "In no way, too, do you seem to arrive at a pure unity and one that is not clouded by difference". (*SW* IV: 235).

Bruno maintains that there is no opposition in the highest unity, that is, that it is not in a relation of opposition with respect to relative unity and relative opposition, nor, one might add, in any relation at all. This now introduces the further problem of the separation between the Absolute and the world, just as the absence of a relation between the two in Schelling's system produces a stronger dualism than that which should be avoided. What we must note is that there is no relation between the First, which precedes everything, and the relative unity and opposition. Between the two it exists a kind of "excision".<sup>13</sup>

In what follows we will see, however, how Schelling retraces his steps relatively and attempts to connect the first, which precedes everything, with relative unity and opposition by introducing the concepts of absolute and relative opposition. The first unity, as we shall see, is the absolute opposite, which for this very reason can be absolutely one and indistinguishable. The contrast or difference as such refers to the relative opposite. Let us see how Schelling ex-

the "Positive Philosophy" that the lack of Being of his *Logic* was signaling. Cf. *SW* X, 126-128.

<sup>12</sup> The argument, known through Aristotle as the "third man argument" was first detected by Plato himself in his later dialogue *Parmenides* (132a-e). It states that to explain the essence of something as 'x' (for instance, largeness or man-ness) we need to posit an idea of 'x' that is also characterized as having x, thus requiring the positing of a third entity (like a third man) that would explain both the real entity and the idea, and so on *ad infinitum* therefore undermining our confidence in the explanatory power of ideas *vis-à-vis* the real domain (see for instance Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 84, 23-85 3; 93. 1-7; cf. also *Metaphysics* 990b17, 1079a13, *Sophistical Refutations* 178b36 ff., and *Metaphysics* 1039a2).

<sup>13</sup> *SW* IV: 236.

plains these key distinctions that are highly instrumental in differentiating his unity position against Fichte.

The relative opposite in turn entails a relative unity, for the opposites can only be one in a higher one, without one dissolving or reducing into the other, but they can be united in a higher third, just like two elements that unite in a higher order being. (*SW IV*, 237). The absolutely opposite, such as the image and its object, cannot be united in something superior, but for this very reason they are absolutely one, for if the one did not exist, the other would also cease to exist. According to Bruno:

Only think what you have already thought and tell me whether you can think a more perfect unity than between the object and its image, although it is utterly impossible that the two should ever come together in a third. [...] therefore and for this very reason both will necessarily and everywhere be together, because they are nowhere together. (*SW IV*, 238-239).

Schelling's character Bruno is following a medieval tradition of thought regarding unity that traces its steps back to the *Book of the 24 Philosophers* (*Liber XXIV philosophorum*) and to the metaphysics of Nicholas of Cusa, himself an heir of the conception of unity and God of the *Book*. According to this tradition, unity is like an infinite circle whose circumference is infinite and therefore has a centre that is located "everywhere". By the coincidence of everywhere and nowhere Schelling and the authors of the *Book of the 24 Philosophers* imply that in the infinite there cannot be any local nor temporal fixed point of reference but rather an absolute unity and indistinction. There is reference to Giordano Bruno himself taken by Schelling from Jacobi's appendix to the second edition of the *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1789). Schelling will draw inspiration, in particular, from the book *De la causa, principio et uno* (1584) to conceive later on in his *Freedom Essay* (1809) the key distinction in essence between ground and existence thereby distinguishing between the concepts of ground, principle and causa.<sup>14</sup>

Let us come back to our main argument: it is possible to posit the relative unity of being and thinking, the real and the ideal, as first principle of philosophy? But we have seen that the opposition between unity and difference is a relative opposition, i.e. it can be united in a superior third, in relation to which the first, which precedes everything, stands apart. Another way of expressing this original unity is to assert that, since everything in it is absolutely one and

<sup>14</sup> See Jacobi (2000: 157-159). We would like to thank one anonymous reviewer of *Philosophical Enquiries* for this last reference.

absolutely opposed, there is neither unity nor opposition in it.

The opposition between unity and difference is a relative opposition, i.e. it can be unified in a superior third, in relation to which the first, which precedes everything, stands apart. Another way of expressing this original unity is to assert that, since everything in it is absolutely one and absolutely opposed, there is neither unity nor opposition in it.

It is clear from the above passage that absolute opposition, according to Bruno, can be absolutely one at the same time, if we distinguish between opposition, which can be internal, on the one hand, and separation, which, as Bruno and Lucian argue, places both in a relation of exteriority, i.e. of cause and effect (SW IV, 238).

It is therefore appropriate at this point to return to the beginning of this metaphysical section, in which we presented three beginnings of philosophy (SW IV, 235-236): the first, which precedes everything, unity, which is opposed to difference, as in the relative unity of unity and opposition, and absolute opposition, as in absolute dualism. We thus see that the real beginning must be a relative opposition, for from the first that precedes everything, as Bruno maintains, only an original unity can follow:

Nor is there anything here but transparency (*Durchsichtigkeit*); for that regarding absolute unity, which, by comprehending the finite as well as the infinite, not united but undivided, is neither darkness nor mixture, you yourself see, and have already admitted it [...] (SW IV, 236).

The finite and the infinite are not united in the higher unity, but undivided. What is the difference? That the unity is clouded by the – finite-infinite – difference, but that the non-separation implies a prior moment, which is the ontological rather than the temporal origin of difference.

#### 4. *Unity in Being and Unity in Knowledge*

The most important conversation within the *Bruno* dialogue that we will analyse takes place in SW IV, pp. 252-262 between Bruno and Lucian. Bruno, as we know, represents the position of Schelling's system of identity and, as Beiser suggests, is a combination of Platonic, vitalist (Leibniz) and monist-immanent or pantheist (Spinoza, Bruno) positions.<sup>15</sup> Lucian represents Fichte's philosophy, especially in his *Foundation of the whole Science of Knowledge* formulated in 1794-95.

<sup>15</sup> Vater (1984: 12, 65); Beiser (2002: 350-354, 550).

The subject of discussion is the principle of philosophy and, in particular, the question of whether this principle lies, as Lucian proposes, in knowledge or absolute consciousness, or, as Bruno claims, in that which precedes everything and later gives rise to Fichte's absolute consciousness. The unity proposed by Bruno, which we say transcends knowledge and is located in the vicinity of Hölderlin's concept of being, ceases to be the principle of philosophy, understood as the science of knowledge,<sup>16</sup> to be located in the vicinity of the realm of religion on the one hand and non-philosophy on the other. It is for this reason that Lucian makes Bruno the following objections:

Lucian. Something else now indeed not, but this in such a way that that unity ceases to be the principle of knowledge, and just thereby also, as it seems to me, the principle of philosophy, which is the science of knowledge. (SW IV, 252).

Lucian's definition of philosophy as the science of knowledge is indicative of the problem we are addressing in this portion of the dialogue namely that of the principle of knowledge and the concept of unity. Let us see this more in details to understand the difference between the systems of Fichte and Schelling and to shed light on Schelling's posterior development. The concept of philosophy as a science of knowledge allows us to see how this science would have a mere negative relation to existence, insofar as by knowing the a priori elements of things it does not reach their effective presence. Later on in his career Schelling will direct a similar objection against Hegel logic which he regards exclusively as a "pure science of reason: insofar philosophy is a pure science of reason it is by virtue of this a mere negative philosophy, that is, it can tell us how the world is *if* the world exists at all, but as a science, it is dependent on the fact *that* a world exists, and such a fact cannot be established purely by rational – a priori – means.<sup>17</sup>

The problem that we must now analyse relates to the previous digression on philosophy as a pure science of knowledge. As a matter of fact, the beginning of Lucian's speech concerns the key issue of the extent to which absolute consciousness can function as ground or absolute principle and at the same time as principle of knowledge, which first establishes the relative unity of the real in the ideal:

<sup>16</sup> On Fichte's description of philosophy as the "science of knowledge", see Lauth (1975: 214-225).

<sup>17</sup> For the definition of (negative) philosophy as a "pure science of reason" see SW XIII, 60, 62-65, 76. See also SW XIII, 71, 75, 78, *passim*.

Knowledge as the unity of thinking and intuiting is consciousness. But the principle of consciousness is the same unity, only purely or absolutely conceived; it is absolute consciousness, while the latter is derived or grounded consciousness. Is this your opinion, then, that in philosophy we have no reason for going beyond the pure consciousness given in grounded consciousness, or for considering it at all other than in relation to the consciousness of which it is the principle? Lucian. But this is very much my opinion. (*SW IV*, 254).

The disagreement here lies in the concept of unity, which Lucian distinguishes between absolute and grounded consciousness, but which, as Bruno explains, must be the same unity that characterizes both the absolute and absolute consciousness. This problem is explained as follows. The unity in the absolute and in absolute consciousness, as distinguishable from the grounded consciousness, we must conceive of as identical, and yet the unity in knowledge is relative, for in it the ideal and the real are distinguished, and consequently we cannot place the principle of philosophy in knowledge if by it we mean absolute unity or the absence of opposites. The difference between the two, then, lies in the question of whether an absolute original unity that is free from contradictions is to be striven for, or whether the highest thing that knowledge can strive for consists in establishing, as in Fichte's idealism, the relative unity of thinking and intuition, of the ideal and the real:

For if the same absolute unity is expressed to you in the principle of knowledge that is expressed to us in the absolute, then you will fly over knowledge and consciousness with knowledge itself. Lucian. You overlook that we know unity as absolute, insofar as it is the principle of knowledge, but as absolute only in its relation to knowledge itself, and recognise it as the principle of knowledge. (*SW IV*: 254).

The question with which we shall be concerned is the following: can the relative unity expressed in knowledge between the real and the ideal be transcended, and if so in what way?

It is important to dwell on the point of absolute and relative unity, for here the difference between Fichte's transcendental idealism and absolute idealism advocated by Schelling up to 1804 becomes clear.<sup>18</sup>

Lucian, as we have seen, assumes the different unity of absolute and grounded consciousness and argues that the two are different forms of unity, one absolute, the other relative. Bruno, however, forces Lucian to recognise that in reality both are relative forms of unity, beginning in one case with the ideal or

<sup>18</sup> Vater (1984: 35-37).

knowledge and in the other with the real or being. On the contrary, the unity of a true absolute consciousness, like the unity in the Absolute, should be such that it abolishes the duality of knowing and being, of ideal and real: “Bruno. But the unity in absolute consciousness is the same as that in the Absolute considered *par excellence*.” This shows that there can be no difference between absolute consciousness and the Absolute itself, but that both are identical in the Eternal.<sup>19</sup>

We are thus examining the unity of knowledge that Lucian posits as a principle of philosophy and which makes the ideal and the real appear to be distinct. Unity in knowing is more precisely the relative unity of knowing and being, that is, what begins with the ideal, while unity in being is the relative unity of being and knowing that begins with the real. This is the thesis of the reversibility of Transcendental Philosophy and Philosophy of Nature, which Schelling establishes in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and which is presented here as a continuation of Fichte’s philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

If we consider knowledge, i.e., the relative unity of knowledge and being, of the ideal and real factors, as our principle, then we cannot arrive at true unity, i.e., that which is not only relative to knowledge and being: “Bruno. But unity is absolute consciousness only in so far as you regard it as the principle of the certain relative unity which is knowledge.” (SW IV: 256). But to place the unity of knowledge above the unity of being, both of which are relative unities, is for Bruno a step that Lucian has no right to take. In other words, to make idealism the ground of the real or of nature, both of which involve relative forms of unity, cannot follow from a metaphysical foundation of the concept of unity:

Bruno. But there is no ground for considering absolute unity preferably as the principle of one of the two relative unities, e.g. of knowledge, and to abolish the relative opposites in the unity thus considered, for it is the same principle of both, and either you consider it, even in relation to knowledge, in itself, [then] there is no ground for restricting it at all to this relation, or you do not consider it in itself, [then] there is equal ground for considering it in relation to the opposing relative unity, which is equally real and of the same originality with this. (SW IV: 256).<sup>21</sup>

The knowledge of consciousness is a distorted or inverted image of true knowledge, in which thinking and being are not reciprocally determined. The

<sup>19</sup> SW IV: 254

<sup>20</sup> More about the difference between Fichte’s idealism and Schelling’s philosophy between 1794 and 1800 in Schnell 2009; Snow 2018; Vater and Wood 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See SW VI: 42-43.

reason why we can claim to be aware of the inversion of Being in knowing can be summarised as follows. Consciousness or reflection has a dual or double structure in which what appears in consciousness as the first is, in fact, the third, while what appears in it as the third, being, is, in fact, the first. What appears as the content of consciousness is actually a reflection or duplication of the real content, like the image in a mirror, which consciousness nevertheless makes us regard as if its basis lays in consciousness itself.<sup>22</sup> At the heart of the objection of an inversion of Being in knowledge lays Aristotle's theory of a reversal of the *ratio essendi* in the *ratio cognoscenti*: even though we initiate knowledge by what is best known to us and progress towards what is best known in-itself, we then learn that what is best known in-itself has turned out to be, in the course of the investigation, best known also for ourselves.<sup>23</sup> This transformation of our view on knowledge has as a consequence an elevation of what is best known in-itself, namely Being, over what is best known for us, that is, consciousness, constituting then a case of philosophical realism.

Why did we express this inversion of Being in knowledge through the terms "the first" that becomes the third in Being, and vice versa, "the third" that appears subsequently as the first? The third as we shall see below simply denotes the absolute that comes only last to consciousness because we begin knowledge by our sensible certainty. This putative certainty is called the first for that very reason, but the case that Schelling is making involves seeing finite knowledge as an inverted image of the Absolute which is the first not in cognition but in essence.

The error of idealism, according to Schelling, from Descartes to Fichte, resides in that it takes the inverted image of being in knowledge to represent itself Being. By so doing idealism falsely hypostasises the subjective beginning of philosophy by the real beginning of the universe, and thus produces a great gigantomachy or picture of the world which takes subsequently the place of the world itself. More generally, according to Schelling, idealism sets the abstract as the basis of real experience, whereas in reality, the abstract, thinking, can only be an abstraction of true reality, of what actually exists. (See *SW* IV, 256-257; *SW* VI, 197).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Henrich (1982: 159-160); Bowie (1993: 84); Frank (2018: 139-140). See also Bhatti 2014. Bhatti illuminates the difference between the gnoseological or epistemological ground of things and their ontological ground, which lies in the real, that is, outside of consciousness.

<sup>23</sup> See *Posterior Analytics* 71b32; *Prior Analytics* 68b35-7; *Physics* 184a16-20; *Metaphysics* 1029b3-12; *Topics* 141b2-142a12.

<sup>24</sup> *SW* X: 20-40; Falgueras Salinas (1993: 19-100); Tritten (2012: 41, n. 26; Vater (1984: 57-59, 61, 82). A diagnosis similar to Schelling's on the relationship between modern philosophy, idealism and the construction of the world as image, as re-presentation, can be found in Heidegger famous work of

We have already seen that Bruno – and with him possibly Schelling – take from Aristotle the doctrine of the inversion of the *ratio essendi* and the *ratio cognoscenti* to characterise the relation that mediates between absolute and finite knowledge. As we have just mentioned, what appears in consciousness is a reflection or a duplication of the real content, an inverted image of that original unity which precedes everything. In connection with the theme of the inversion of knowing and being in reflection, Bruno introduces the concept of “the third” (*das Dritte*). What appears as the third term to reflection is the first thing in being and through which the synthetic identity ( $A=B$ ) expressed in all real equality is made effective. This equality is actually a threefold equivalence of  $(A=x) = (B=x)$ ,  $x$  being the third concept necessary to establish the equivalence, but which can never appear as such in it. The  $x$  is the absolute itself, or in M. Gabriel’s words, the establishment of the logical-metaphysical space as such, which cannot be of itself, but without which no further equivalence is possible.<sup>25</sup> Idealism is in this sense an inversion of the truly real, i.e., of the absolute in-itself:

Bruno. Is it not for this very reason that the expression of the infinite, from which, and of the finite, in which they are reflected, and of the third, in which these are one, may be recognised in all finitely cognised things? For of that which is the first in the absolute, we have said before that it necessarily becomes the third in the reflected image (*Abgebildeten*). (SW IV: 290).<sup>26</sup>

In principle, then, there are two attitudes. If the relative unity can be reconstructed indifferently from the ideal or real side, why not assume a superior unity that overcomes the opposition from which both emerge? On this point we can ask ourselves: is it completely impossible to assume a unity that is superior to knowledge and being, even if we cannot properly recognise it? This is where the theme of the trans-reflexive character of Being, which Schelling takes over from Hölderlin, appears. Knowledge, which stands in opposition to being, is in fact a form of reflection, a reversed form of a simple principle. Through this inversion of the principle, what is second in being appears to consciousness as the first, but appears inverted through its doubling, like the image in the mirror, which does not exclude the existence of the reflected, but of which we cannot know directly.

1938, “The Age of the World Picture”.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriel (2011); Tritten (2012: 42-44).

<sup>26</sup> See also SW IV: 292. On the concept of mirror image (*Abbildung*), see Schelling’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*.

I cannot see myself directly in the mirror, but I could not see myself at all if the mirror image of which I see myself were not itself a mirror image *of something else* – the mirror image cannot simply be a mirror image of the mirror image, namely reflection cannot close in on itself:

In things you see nothing but the displaced images of that absolute unity, and even in knowledge, insofar as it is a relative unity, you see nothing but an image of that absolute cognition, which is only distorted in a different direction, in which being is determined as little by thinking as thinking is by being. (SW IV, 256-257; see also SW VI, 197).<sup>27</sup>

Lucian counters this doctrine with idealism, i.e. the doctrine of ideality, i.e. of existence only for consciousness, of opposites, according to which being is a proper being *for consciousness* or *for knowledge*, and not something independent in itself:

Since now on the displacement or relative separation and restoration of that unity, as you yourself say, rests all that which is generally held to be real, but that separation itself is made only ideal and in consciousness, you see why this doctrine is idealism, not because it determines the real from the ideal, but because it makes the opposition of the two itself to be merely ideal. (SW IV, 257).

Therefore, idealism is not the doctrine of the relative unity of ideal and real on the side of the ideal or of cognition, but of ideality, i.e. of the existence *for* consciousness only, of the opposition of the two in general. A detailed explanation of the thesis of ideality is needed here. Idealism is not what we can characterize as transcendental idealism or idealism in lax terms, that is the doctrine of relative unity of the ideal and the real that departs from consciousness.<sup>28</sup> This is rather called subjective idealism. Idealism is, on the contrary, a totalizing doctrine begun with Francisco Suarez (1548-1617) and continued via Descartes (1596-1650), Leibniz (1646-1716) and Fichte up to Hegel, according to which the distinction between ideal and real, between essence and the positing of essence (existence), is already merely ideal, that is, is only a *mental* distinction or a way of cognizing that does not (and cannot) posit a real independent of the mind. Precisely the existence of a real independent of the mind is seen as a production of the mind proper.

The above distinction between a limited idealism and a thesis of ideality

<sup>27</sup> More about the metaphor of the mirror in relation to knowledge in Frank 2018, 139.

<sup>28</sup> For this see Wirtz 2015; Ferreiro 2023.

or idealism in stronger terms is key for differentiating (this noted in passing) between the transcendental idealism of Kant and the integral or absolute idealism advocated by Fichte and Hegel – as we do not count Schelling into the idealist authors precisely by refusing to see the real only as a real brought forth by the mind. Kant himself had fully discredited Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* as an attempt to build up an idealistic account of the material side of knowledge alongside with the formal one, an attempt that, as we could claim of later Hegel's panlogism, he regarded as impossible and void.<sup>29</sup>

The problem of idealism is that only this consciousness is assumed to exist, so that one can only speak or think from the standpoint of consciousness. (SW IV, 257). If idealism is the thesis of ideality, then it is only the thesis of the mere existence of the ideal relative unity and thus of the impossibility of any absolute form of unity. How can Lucian prove this?

Idealism is consequently the doctrine of the negative, in so far as it asserts the non-existence of the sensuous world in relation to consciousness or reflection. It is therefore, according to Schelling, a philosophy which explains the finite by means of form and which is categorical only in the face of nothingness:

They would explain the finite completely through form, were it not that the eternal stubbornly refuses the material. Their philosophy consists in the proof that what is indeed nothing, the world of the senses, is really nothing, and this philosophy, which is only categorical of nothing, they call idealism. (SW IV: 309).<sup>30</sup>

In another sense, however, all philosophy is idealism, because it affirms the ideality of the phenomena of the sensuous world in relation to the Absolute, or in relation to action, which unites possibility and reality in itself – albeit as an infinite task.<sup>31</sup>

Now, for the absolute, neither thinking and being are opposed to each other, as for Fichte, nor are thinking and extension attributes of the absolute, as in Kant's empirical realism or in Spinoza's transcendental realism. This applies only to the idealism of the finite, and consequently philosophy is neither idealism nor realism in a one-sided or relative sense, but both at the same time, insofar as it gives an account of absolute unity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Kant, "Open Letter on Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, August 7, 1799," (1967: 254).

<sup>30</sup> SW VI: 43-44.

<sup>31</sup> SW IV: 326.

<sup>32</sup> Schelling has given a similar account on philosophy as neither idealism nor realism already in his works of the period between 1795 and 1796, namely *On the I as Principle of Philosophy* and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, although later starting with *Bruno*, Schelling gradually move in the direction of real-idealism, that is, a position that concedes primacy to the real over the

What Bruno ought to explain is how unity in ideality, i.e., of consciousness, necessarily follows the eternal idea; for that it is possible is shown by the very existence of such ideal consciousness and unity:

You rightly demand that I speak of this. For you, indeed, by wanting to know the absolute unity originally already in relation to the relative unity of knowledge, evade that question which is only a special case of the general investigation of the descent of the finite from the eternal. (*SW IV*, 257).<sup>33</sup>

This means that Lucian wants to enforce Schelling's positing of unity in the question of the origin of the finite from the eternal precisely because Fichte's idealism of the finite does not answer this question, indeed he does not even present it as possible. For Fichte, the finite is thus an ultimate fact of reason, and he excludes, at least in his writings of the 1790s, any investigation that goes beyond the relationship between absolute consciousness and grounded consciousness.

It is therefore up to Schelling to elucidate to what extent the finite can be derived from the eternal, or, if this is not possible, to draw the metaphysical and theological conclusions that result from the break between the two.

## 5. *Conclusions*

This article main problematic has been to clarify and analyse of the theme of the duality between the Absolute and the world as it appears in the work *Bruno* of 1802. Let us take a closer look at the conclusions we reached on both points.

In his system of 1801-1804, Schelling opposes idealism from the point of view of a speculative position of unity, which starts from the Absolute and derives absolute consciousness and grounded consciousness from it. For Schelling, as for Hegel's *Phenomenology*, speculative means that the active and passive factors, the subject and the substance, are not constitutively opposed but that they are absolutely one and at the same time absolutely opposed.<sup>34</sup> For the speculative thesis of the unity of thinking and being, only the absolutely separate can become absolutely one, such as the object and its mirror image.

We have shown, following here Schnell, the incompatibility of the phenomenological attitude of finite reflection in Fichte with the speculation on the infinite of Schelling's absolute idealism around 1801-1804. Either the differ-

ideal. See for instance the beginning of *Stuttgart Private Lectures* (*SW VII*, 428-446).

<sup>33</sup> See Vater 1984, 37-38.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *TWA* 3: 23.

ence between absolute and grounded consciousness cannot be overcome, and so the distance between the subjective and the objective remains constitutive, as in Fichte, or, as we have seen in Schelling, the entire sphere of knowledge is subordinated to the Absolute or God, the supreme principle of all things.

Finally, we explained the point of contact between phenomenology and Schelling's philosophy using the example set by in *Bruno*. We scrutinized the problem of the difference between the Absolute and the world, which can be seen as a dualism between Being on the one hand and appearance or the phenomenon on the other.

Firstly, we analysed the question of the freedom of ideas to detach themselves from the Absolute and to constitute a world separate from it. Secondly, we have established the extent to which Schelling's philosophy can assert its claim to unity against Fichte's idealistic split between ideal and real ground. Although Schelling seems to continue along the path of his speculative position, he is in fact moving towards a dualistic stand between the principle and what is revealed (*Offenbarten*), which reaches its climax in his *opera magna* of 1809, we refer to the *Philosophical Investigations on the Essence of Human Freedom*.

In the section on the difference between the ideal and the real in relation to the finite and the infinite, we have seen an essential problem of Schelling's approach to unity, namely the question of the status of the finite in a system dominated by an infinite principle. Despite the claim that philosophy's only concern has to do with the finite, Schelling moved gradually towards a position that recognises a kind of ontological status not only for the finite "in" the infinite, but also for the finite as such, i.e. insofar as it exists outside and beyond the infinite. This difference overlaps with the difference between Absolute and world, as well as between absolute and derived consciousness, which we have discussed at last. Around 1802/1804 Schelling is highly divided between the absolute idealist claim of the ideality of the finite, on one side (see *SW* IV, 248, 257, 281–285) and, on the other, is progressively leaning towards a position of strict finitude (see *SW* IV, 249, 259, 263, 285) later pursued in *Philosophy and Religion* of 1804 (see *SW* VI, 39–42) and in the *Freedom Essay*. The thesis about the real existence of the finite will be further enhanced in his *Private Lectures of Stuttgart* when Schelling defends the right to exist of the will proper to every finite being (see *SW* VII, 467).

Schelling failed, however, to fully establish the status of the finite as such in 1802, but unlike 1801, has now been forced by his own reasoning to recognize the need to explain *that* we must and *how* we can think the finite as such. We see therefore a duplication in the treatment of the finite on one side as infinitely finite and, on the other, as finitely finite. Schelling had also difficulties in proving how both approaches are *compatible*, so that now either the finite

tends to again vanish away in view of the infinite, or, as he would rather do in later works, the finite in the infinite and with it the whole sphere of the infinite is called into question – as we lean to think. This is surely a highly polemical finding in that by presenting it, we claimed that Schelling has discovered the impossibility of a complete system of reason already early in his career and that in order to be consistent with his claims on finitude he must have abrogated from his absolute idealist position altogether. Precisely because it is contested in some of the literature is that we consider this finding highly original and worth of attention.

Schelling's thesis, halfway between speculative idealism and a proto-existentialist position, was to connect the absolute character of consciousness with the real absolute itself and to make it a level derived from the absolute itself, rather than, like Fichte, locating the absolute "in" knowledge and thus in consciousness itself – what would result in an absolute "for" consciousness or in an idealism "of" the absolute.<sup>35</sup>

Juan Jose Rodriguez  
Charles University in Prague, Bergische Universitat Wuppertal  
juanjo\_r\_012@hotmail.com

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. L.D. Scarfia, *El idealismo 'de lo' absoluto en Fichte y Novalis*, Doctoral Dissertation presented in October 2019, in Buenos Aires (inedited).

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