

Identity of Spirit and Nature: Schelling and Hegel on the True Standpoint of Philosophy in 1801

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-- Abstract --

The talk addresses the relation between the two idealist thinkers F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel in their first joint public appearance in 1801. Thereby, the paper puts forward a twofold claim: On the one hand, both philosophers share the assumption that the true standpoint of philosophy may only be determined as the absolute identity of spirit and nature. On the other hand, however, both differ quite fundamentally in how precisely to understand this principle of absolute identity. Schelling conceives of the true principle of philosophy as an identity which is, in its essence, absolutely *free of* any difference. Hegel, however, puts forward a notion of identity as ‘identity of identity and non-identity’, that is to say, as an identity essentially *structured by* difference.

The talk unfolds these different notions of identity in Schelling’s “Presentation of my System of Philosophy” and Hegel’s “The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s Philosophy”. Thereby, the talk seeks to show that the main reason for this distinction between the two thinkers is a difference in their critique of their predecessor J.G. Fichte, the ‘founder’ of German Idealism. Schelling, around 1800, criticizes Fichte’s principle of the ‘absolute I’ as being a one-sided, merely subjective notion. He complements Fichte’s (idealist) philosophy of the I with a second (realist) philosophy of nature, and unites both in the standpoint of absolute identity. Hegel fully affirms this stance taken by Schelling, yet he at the same time develops a specifically systematic critique of Fichte on his one. Namely, he criticizes the fact that Fichte thinks of the I as a pure identity (the ‘I = I’) and thus fails in explaining difference (the non-I) in starting form this principle. Although addressed merely at Fichte, this critique structurally also applies to Schelling’s understanding of absolute identity in 1801, albeit tacitly and inexplicitly.

Finally, the paper indicates that this early disagreement already foreshadows Schelling’s and Hegel’s explicit dispute, taking place some years later, surrounding Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807 and his polemics against an absolute identity in which ‘all cows are black’.