

The Initial Exposition by Young Engels on the Correlation between Thought and Existence

-- Grounded in a Critique of Schelling's Doctrine of Potenz

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Abstract

This paper examines young Engels' critique of Schelling's "Doctrine of Potenz" as an entry point to elucidate the early formation of his materialist framework for the thought-existence relationship. In Schelling's positive philosophical system, Potency (Potenz) is posited as the universal essence of Being, claiming to reconcile existential tensions through the dialectical movement of the triadic potencies (A^1 - A^3 structure), which served as a critique of Hegel's pan-logicism. However, this theory is undermined by three ontological dilemmas: the rupture between reason and the "unprethinkable being", the circularity inherent in the triadic structure, and the ambiguity surrounding temporal generation. Based on analysis of Schelling's Berlin lectures, Engels systematically refuted the transcendental grounding of potency, arguing that it merely constitutes an "abstract projection of reality". He condemned Schelling's inversion of the reason-reality nexus, insisting that only potency capable of actualization into existence holds philosophical significance. By synthesizing Hegelian dialectics with Feuerbachian materialism, Engels formulated a dual ontological principle: first, reason must be grounded in natural existence; second, philosophy must originate from the "actuality of being", rather than Schelling's "Potenz prior to Being". This critique marked Engels' transition from speculative philosophy toward "general materialism", laying theoretical foundations for the "primacy of practice" thesis in his historical materialism.

Keywords

Young Engels, Schelling's Doctrine of Potenz, Thought-Existence Relationship, Materialism.

1. The Theoretical Framework and Intrinsic Conflicts of Schelling's Notion of Potenz

In Schelling's later positive philosophical system, the concept of "Potenz" became the central fulcrum for the continuous advancement of his thought, especially in the philosophy of revelation and mythology, the doctrine of Potenz with potency as the basic building block constituted the theoretical "core" of his later philosophy.(Beach, 1994: p. 116) For Schelling, potency is not simply equated with Being, but is something that precedes Being and constitutes its foundation (Grundlage), i.e., "*Seinsgrund*," which is also a "Power" or "Potential" and "Grundlage" or "Possibility", both as a Wollen-driven effort to actualize and as a precondition for being.

Schelling proposed "Potency" as the "universal essence(*potentia universalis*)" of being itself.(Schelling, 2007: p. 211-212) It is not an isolated and self-sufficient concept, but rather a core element embedded within his comprehensive conceptual structure, permeating both his philosophy of revelation and philosophy of mythology. "potency" not only constitutes the basic

structure of Being, but also embodies the tension structure of being. The core of Schelling's doctrine of potentiality lies in the dialectical contradictory movement among three potencies - the first potency A^1 (also called *sein Könnendes*), the second potency A^2 (also called *sein Müssendes*), and the third potency A^3 (also called *sein Sollendes*). This movement is both manifested as an inner interaction between the three and simultaneously indicates a dialectical generation between three distinct forms of being (*Sein*). Schelling emphasizes the "unprethinkability" of this primordial existence, i.e., that it cannot be grasped a priori or fully incorporated into conceptual prescriptions, but can only be revealed in *actus*. Each potency is thus not only a form of being, but also a unique expression of the will. It is precisely in this sense that the dialectical movement between potencies constitutes not only the dynamic mechanism for the unfolding of existence, but simultaneously the dynamic mechanism of the internal logic within Schelling's positive philosophical system.

In his Berlin Lecture, Schelling takes "Potenz" as the starting point of his later philosophy, criticizes Hegel's over-reliance on logical reason, and advocates transcending the system of conceptualization with the "unpredictability of being". In his view, reason is not a universal and ubiquitous dominant force, but merely a limited cognitive capacity of human. (Schelling, 2007: p. 132) He reinterprets reason with the concept of Potency as the "infinite capacity of consciousness" and corresponds it to the "infinite capacity of existence", which realizes the identity of consciousness and existence in the dimension of "nothingness" (*das Nichts*). (Schelling, 2007: p. 141) Since Potency is prior to everything and open to everything, Schelling argues that it should be the true starting point of philosophy. The true beginning is that which is prior to being (*was vor dem Sein ist*), i.e., that which is prior to and beyond being (*was vor und über Sein ist*). The doctrine of Potenz also serves as a key resource in Schelling's critique of Hegel's philosophical system. Schelling's assertion that reason is essentially an impersonal and universal instinct shakes the conceptual self-movement foundation of Hegel's "pan-logicism"; (Schelling, 2007: p. 173) simultaneously, he criticizes Hegel's system for having only "logical" systemic completeness, while failing to truly integrate the sensibility of art and the primordial status of "nothingness", resulting in an unbridgeable rupture between the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature*, which renders it inadequate for a genuine comprehension of "wholeness". Schelling's doctrine of Potenz constitutes a metaphysical program beyond the Hegelian dialectic with its "three-order structure", "temporal transformation" and "practical breakthrough". This approach emphasizes that the foundation of reason must depend on that which cannot be mediated or pre-conceptualized—the unprethinkable being (*das Unvordenkliche*) (Schelling, 2007: p. 83)—thereby preserving for "philosophy" the theoretical space to address contingency and historicity.

However, Schelling's doctrine of Potenz faces three fundamental contradictions: First, the rupture between reason and the Unpredictable being: if reason is unable to mediate the transcendent, existence degenerates into contingency; if dependent on the transcendent, reason loses its autonomy; Second, the circular argumentation of the triadic structure: appealing to a higher-order "identity" to explain unity without clarifying its interactive mechanism. Third, the ambiguity of temporal generation: time both originates from and exists independently of the Absolute, resulting in an ambiguous self-founding mechanism. Furthermore, Schelling's rewriting of Spinoza's concept of substance and reliance on practical pathways further expose the suspension of his theoretical foundation. Schelling's theoretical design confronts multiple tensions: the rupture between reason and unprethinkable being, circular argumentation in the triadic structure, and ambiguity in the mechanism of temporal generation, ultimately rendering existence unable to simultaneously satisfy self-foundation and rational intelligibility.

It is thus evident that regarding the relationship between thought and existence, Schelling maintains that the two are unified from the outset: wherever existence manifests, thought

necessarily accompanies it; it is impossible for existence to precede the emergence of thought. Thought and existence coexist in an unknown eternity, with potency consistently integrated with existence as a unified whole throughout history. Schelling posits that potency, as a complete unity of holistic existence, was established at the inception of things and has persisted continuously. The unification of thought and existence is not the consequence of subsequent events but rather the prerequisite for all reflective activity. As in the primordial, bottomless, and undifferentiated ocean, the universal state of unity enables reflective cognition, and the integration of thought and existence similarly originates from this “self-familiarity prior to self-reflection”. (Tritten, 2012: p. 115) This primordial unity constitutes the foundation of self-consciousness, and the doctrine of *Potenz* endeavors to reveal and substantiate this inherent consistency. Schelling's doctrine of *Potenz* attempts to transcend Hegelian rational centrism through the prioritization of will, yet its ontological dilemma exposes metaphysical tendencies detached from reality, providing a target for Engels' critique.

2. Engels' Critique of Schelling: Reconstructing Rationality and Existence

In *Schelling on Hegel* and *Schelling and Revelation*, the young Engels clearly expresses his support for Hegel's rationalism and his criticism of Schelling's position, focusing in particular on the understanding of the relation between “potency” and “*actus*”. (Schelling, 2012: p. 132) He asks three key questions: “whether a power which itself has no being can produce a being, whether a power which can no longer alienate itself is still power, and whether the trichotomy of the powers does not correspond in a remarkable manner with the trinity of idea, nature and mind which emerges from Hegel's *Enzyklopädie*” (Engels, 1975: p. 186-187) These questionings reveal the logical gaps in Schelling's doctrine of *Potenz*. Whereas Schelling regarded potency as something prior to reality, prior to reason, and intended to establish an ontological starting point that transcends reason, Engels argued that potency can only derive from reality, and that it is an abstraction of reality by reason, not its root. Schelling tries to explain the generative mechanism of existence through the path of “nothingness-potency-action”, but in Engels' view, this logic reverses the relationship between reason and reality. Engels insisted that reason is necessity, and that potency only has meaning when it can be transformed into reality; otherwise, it is merely nominal. He argued that “the infinite potency of cognition” could not be established independently of reality and lacked a logical basis. (Schelling, 2012: p. 132) For him, Schelling's philosophy of *Potenz* failed to provide a foundation for philosophy, but instead exposes metaphysical predicaments detached from reality.

Engels critiqued Schelling's notion of *Potenz* in relation to the unity of reason and reality as presented in Hegel's *Logic*, while upholding the fundamental tenets of dialectics.

To begin with, regarding the relationship between “being” and “nonbeing”, Engels criticized Schelling's proposal of “movement of potency” out of existence and “reason is nothing other than the faculty of knowledge” (Schelling, 2012: p. 35, 132) which is detached from reality, pointing out that his argumentation is not in line with the principle of the unity of reason and reality, pointing out that his argument lacked logic and arbitrarily used such contradictory terms as “the unthinkable condition of all thought”, “a being that is absolutely independent of all thought, which precedes all thought”, and “The human will is also relatively an *infinite* potency”, (Schelling, 2012: p. 48, 204, 135) “puts metaphors in the place of arguments”, which led to an ambiguous philosophical system rather than a strict one. Engels believes that Schelling's notion that potentiality can transform or remain “by turns, as it suits him” (Engels, 1975: p. 222, 207) negates the necessary connection between reason and reality, deviating from the “absolute necessity” required at the beginning of philosophy. True philosophy should begin with “the actual being” as its starting point; otherwise, the transition from “potency” to

"potentia ad actum" loses its foundation, degenerating into purely speculation. (Schelling, 2012: p. 207, 36, 135, 162)

Secondly, regarding the relationship between reason and reality, Engels, relying on the structure of "essence and existence" in Hegel's *Logic*, emphasized that the significance of Potency lies in its inevitable transformation into reality. He stated that "the essence of power is the necessity of transition and that power is only abstracted from the actus of reality". Potency is not an abstract possibility, but an aspect of reality from which it is reduced to nothingness. (Engels, 1975: p. 211) Schelling's conception of "the prius of everything that is external to reason (what exists)" has no empirical basis, divorces reason from reality, and plunges one into empty fantasies. (Schelling, 2012: p. 135) His positive philosophy depends on unverifiable "transcendental object" and "nebulous, fantastic shapes", ultimately undermining the necessity and clarity demanded by rationalism. (Schelling, 2012: p. 206)

Finally, with regard to the definition of reason itself, Engels criticized Schelling for reducing reason to a kind of "potency of cognition" that can only grasp "only a being in the concept, not outside it" rather than reality itself. (Schelling, 2012: p. 134) Engels insisted on the consistency between reason and reality, arguing that reason must be integrated with reality in order to acquire true meaning. He pointed out that Schelling "makes a most devious way for himself between reason and unreason" (Schelling, 2012: p. 201), using elegant yet arbitrary language to conceal logical defects, especially in his attempt to establish God's existence in "'aeon before the creation of the world'", deviating from the modern philosophical tradition that takes actual being as its beginning. Engels believes that Schelling's doctrine of potentiality ultimately amounts to a variant of the Christian Trinity theory, and his so-called "modern Christianity" mixes rationalism with religious faith, reducing philosophy to an appendage of authoritarian superstition and mysticism. (Engels, 1975: p. 210, 235)

3. An Initial Investigation of the Materialist Perspective on the Connection Between Thought and Existence

According to Feuerbach, human consciousness and ideas are rooted in concrete material life and sensual practices, and it is in the process of interaction with and transformation of nature that cognition is formed and developed. He emphasized the importance of perceptual intuition and criticized Schelling's way of isolating thought and placing it in a metaphysical deductive system, pointing out that this inevitably leads to cognitive bias and fallacy. Schelling treats ideas as existing independently of reality, but suspends the foundational conditions on which thinking exists. Influenced by Hegel's dialectic and Feuerbach's materialism, Engels initially established the materialist way of the relation between thinking and being. He explicitly stated, "reason cannot possibly exist except as mind, and that mind can only exist in and with nature". (Engels, 1975: p. 209) Accordingly, Engels argued that the actual existence of reason is the logical premise of philosophy, and that thinking must be verified and realized in the reality of existence. The concept of potency can only be abstracted when action in reality serves as concrete proof of existence.

Engels further criticized Schelling for conceptualizing the object of thinking and isolating it from actual existence, thus forming an idealistic discourse divorced from reality. He emphasized that being is the fundamental path and premise for the development of thinking, and that only by recognizing the existence of reality can the deduction of thinking have practical significance. He pointed out, "If the existence of the premises is admitted, the existence of the conclusion stands to reason. Now the basis of all philosophy is the existence of reason". (Engels, 1975: p. 210) Engels insists that actuality is external to thought and that reason corroborates itself through empirical reality. Because "existence belongs indeed to thought, that being is

immanent in the mind and that the foundation of all modern philosophy, the *cogito, ergo sum*". (Engels, 1975: p. 186) This position emphasizes that philosophy must be rooted in objective reality, and that only through sensual life and practical activity can it truly grasp the inner contradictions of the development of things, laying the foundation for the subsequent formation of social materialist thought in the Manchester period.

Engels' concern for the concept of "Hyle(materie)" in materialism can be traced back to his criticism of Schelling during the Berlin period. In *Schelling and Revelation*, he studied and criticized Schelling's philosophy of mythology, and realized the importance of Schelling's new formulation of Hyle "it develops itself into God". (Engels, 1975: p. 220) Schelling saw matter as a "blind being" or "unpremeditable being", as one and the same as essence and being. (Engels, 1975: p. 220) Engels thus began to distinguish Schelling's philosophy of myth from the philosophy of revelation, arguing that the former, though mystical, has a reality that distinguishes it from revelation. He emphasized that the development of human consciousness should be studied in a "purely human standpoint (Anschauungsweise)." and understood myth as "the free self-development of consciousness within world-historic necessity". (Engels, 1975: p. 228) In this process, Engels's original conception of necessity as a direct equivalent of reality began to waver, and he initially recognized the "the unpredictable of being", and later mentioned the concept of Hyle again in *The Condition of England: Past and Present by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1843*, indicating his continued and deepened attention to the question of materiality.

4. Conclusion

Through his critique of Schelling's "Doctrine of Potenz", young Engels first articulated his understanding of the thought-existence relationship. This study demonstrates that Schelling's metaphysical construction, which posited "potency" as the essence of existence, while attempting to transcend Hegelian panlogicism, ultimately collapsed due to fundamental contradictions: the rupture between reason and the unprethinkable being, circular reasoning in the triadic structure, and ambiguity in the mechanism of temporal generation. The root problem lies in presupposing potency as a transcendental category detached from reality, resulting in a fundamental inversion of the relationship between thought and existence. In *Schelling and Revelation*, Engels revealed the essence of this logical predicament: the transcendentalization of potency amounts to a "projection of the phantasm of reality," where his theory substitutes mysticism for dialectics and abstract possibility for concrete actuality. Engels' advancement of this critique manifests in a dual theoretical clarification: first, the foundational nature of existence to thought—reason must be rooted in the material existence of the natural world; second, the verification of truth through practice—the objectivity of thought can only be confirmed through real action. This reconstruction was not a simple inheritance of Hegelian dialectics but rather a critical sublation that integrated it with Feuerbachian materialism, negating the epistemological fallacy of idealism that elevates conceptual abstraction above reality. This research reveals that Engels' critique not only settled accounts with the metaphysical residue of Schelling's theory of potencies but also laid the epistemological foundation for his materialist turn.

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