

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

4-1981

Review of *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays* by F. W. J. Schelling

Michael Vater

Marquette University, michael.vater@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vater, Michael, "Review of *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays* by F. W. J. Schelling" (1981). *Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications*. 466.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil_fac/466

As brief and as few as the articles are, there are some transparent biases, bad ones and good ones. *Capitalism* is replete with negative indicators as compared with the treatment of *Socialism*, *Communism* and *Marxism*, e.g. "Marxism thus offers to Christians the possibility of being 'doers of the word, not hearers only'." A bright view shines through such topics as *Courage*, *Happiness*, *Hope*, *Joy*, *Leisure*, *Pleasure*. Timely topics include *Addiction*, *Development Aid*, *Euthanasia*, *Human Dignity*, *Liberation*, *Marriage*, *Military Service*, *Racism*, *Sex and Sexuality*, *Suicide*, *Theft and Hostages*. An environmental concern is seen in *Environment*, *World*, etc.

Continual frustration results from the fact that there are noble nuggets lost in the husks. A better treatment of sin is found under *Guilt*, *Conscience*, *Norms*, *Godlessness* than under its own title *Sin*. On topics comparable with Beauchamp and Childress, as in *Euthanasia*, *Suicide*, *Sexuality*, it is easier to find the weakness or strength of the "Christian" position in Beauchamp and Childress. There are some very good things said about prayer and lexically under *Spirituality*. There is a good social orientation in all of the articles, but something must have been lost somewhere in translation when the definition of *Social Gospel* is: "A liberal Protestant notion which sees sin as inherent in evil social systems, and the kingdom of God and a truly human this-worldly social goal not only as compatible but often as one and the same thing."

WALTER A. MARKOWICZ

Wayne State University School of Medicine
Detroit, Michigan

The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796),
by F. W. J. SCHELLING. Translation and commentary by Fritz Marti.
Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1980. Pp. 271. \$18.50.

This volume collects and explicates Schelling's first philosophical writings, the fledgling attempts, inspired by Fichte, at turning Kantianism into a systematic philosophy. Though they served the reading public as a popularization of Fichte's arid *Science of Knowledge* and brought the two philosophers into an uneasy master-disciple relationship that would last twelve years, the essays manifest independence of thought and voice many of the themes that later appear in Schelling's mature systems. Taken together, they compose a sustained and lucid meditation on the spirit of Kant's philosophy and provide an interesting glimpse into the philosophic community's disarray after his attack upon metaphysics. Kant had to be read, understood, and then answered or assimilated. For Fichte and the young Schelling in particular the task was to weld the three *Critiques* together into a system—a 'Critical Philosophy' they believed implicit in Kant's

writings, but undeveloped. Yet barely had the programme been formulated when Schelling began looking back beyond Kant toward Spinoza, raising the question of whether metaphysics had a future after all.

"On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy" (1794) is a drily logical little treatise which attempts to deduce the three Principles of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*—the 'I', the 'not-I', and the empirical ego wherein 'I' = 'not-I'—from the formal properties of an axiomatic system. More interesting are the closing pages, wherein a criticism of Kant leads to the proposal that the *Critique of Pure Reason* be systematized on the basis of the question that Kant forgot to ask, viz. the possible unity of Reason and Understanding.

"Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy" (1795) offers extensive argumentation for, and elucidation of, Criticism's transempirical but non-transcendent system-principle, the absolute I. The essay's chief task is demonstrating that an unconditional principle for systematizing our knowledge can be neither objective nor subjective (the way the empirical ego is), but must be 'metasubjective,' characterized by the spontaneity, independence and freedom of the rational I. It is difficult to explicate the postulation of an I that cannot appear *in* consciousness or *as* consciousness; the enduring temptation for novice readers of Kant and post-Kantian idealism alike is to reify transcendental subjectivity, turning it into some extra-worldly mental thing, some individual Mind that somehow gets 'attached' to minds like ours. Schelling is quite clear that to assert the absolute I is *not* to make a transcendent assertion, *nor* is it to point to an object in empirical consciousness, *nor* to the empty logical subject ("I think") given in empirical consciousness, *nor* to any idea. To assert the absolute is to indicate the spontaneous self-constituting activity (whether you name it 'thinking' or 'being') within which empirical consciousness and the objectivity juxtaposed to it first become possible, and also to indicate that it is one. Only an I is *one* because it thinks *itself*; only an I *is* because it is a thinking. In the course of the essay, Schelling waxes a bit metaphysical and attributes predicates such as 'absolute reality,' 'absolute substantiality', and 'absolute causality' to the I, though in the cautious manner of the tradition of "Negative Theology." It was moves such as these that motivated Fichte himself to re-do this introductory elucidation in the 1st and 2nd "Introductions" to the *Science of Knowledge* in 1797.

"Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism" (1795) marks a significant departure from Fichte's vision of Critical Philosophy, for Schelling now argues that Kant did not intend the *Critique* to be a refutation of dogmatism (objectivistic metaphysics). Basically an essay in methodology, the *Critique* provides a canon for measuring both dogmatism (the attempt to explain the world from things) and criticism (the attempt to explain the world from experience and from human action). There is simply no theoretical refutation of a dogmatism like Spinoza's, for it is superbly con-

sistent and, if it metaphysically explains all reality through an arch-object, it practically demands the surrender of action, the extinction of the illusion of freedom, and ultimately the abolition of the self in the *amor intellectualis dei*. As for the semiconsistent dogmatists like the Kantian theologians of Tübingen who employ Kant's moral postulates (God, afterlife, happiness as moral reward) to conceal the self-abolition that comes along with objectivistic metaphysics, they can be refuted only *practically*. One can only point out to them, says Schelling, that they have surrendered freedom and autonomy, that their very moral existence is annihilated in their objectifying use of these postulates. The last point makes clear that, despite apparent departures from Fichte's standpoint, Schelling stands fast with him in the conviction that the center of gravity of Kantian philosophy is what Kant himself called "the primacy of practical reason."

The "New Deduction of Natural Right" (1796) is the most thoroughly Kantian of the essays. First, willing and human freedom are given an ontological foundation: "*Be!* in the highest sense of the word; cease to be *yourself* as a phenomenon; endeavor to be a noumenon as such." From the difference between individual will and general will, Schelling distinguishes ethics from the sphere of right. Ethics makes willing absolute (and preserves freedom without limits) by identifying the individual will with the general, while right identifies the general will with the individual. The whole content of the concept of right turns out to be freedom and its preservation. Schelling expels the concepts of "natural law" and "natural right" from the proper domain of right, for freedom does not appear within nature, nor does will. In nature only physical power (coercion) and phenomenal causality appear.

Fritz Marti has done the reader a splendid service by providing a wealth of texts from Fichte and Kant in the notes, and a great deal of lucid terminological clarification as well. Illuminating too is his use of citations from Descartes and Augustine to explain the self-constituting nature of the I. His aim in the introductions and notes is simply to elucidate the philosophical issues Schelling raises, and to make them both intelligible and plausible—no easy task when the issues are the non-objectivity of God, the self-active nature of reason, and the reality of freedom. The only difficulty with this approach is that in conflating texts of Fichte, Schelling, and Kant, he tends to blur their historical differences.

The translations themselves are generally clear and quite readable; oftentimes the original texts are not. There is definite merit in the way Marti has crafted short, straightforward English sentences out of the sometimes byzantine convolutions of Schelling's periods. At times, Marti's translation of individual terms is starkly literal: Rendering "*unendlich*" as 'non-finite' rather than 'infinite' seems odd, and it is hardly a justification to cite Hegel's distinction between the 'good' and the 'bad' infinite. "*Grundsatz*" and "*Satz*" are given a misleading technical ring in being

rendered as 'axiom' and 'theorem' in the first essay. However, I must applaud Marti's use of 'I' for *das Ich*, whatever the havoc it causes to grammar. Terms such as 'ego' and 'the self' have an inevitably objective cast and would obscure Schelling's message—that the I is the I because it *does* the I, and that it is nothing else, simply because it is no thing.

MICHAEL G. VATER

Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

V. 17 *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. THOMAS C. O'BRIEN Executive Editor. New York: McGraw-Hill. Pp. 812 + Appendix & Index.

When first published in 1969, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* was remarkable for its scope, depth, comprehension, order, and editorial excellence. The recently published volume 17 is also remarkable, but for different reasons. The theme of this volume is change in the Church, and its purpose is to identify in one volume the changes that have taken place in almost all of the areas of the life of the Church in the past fifteen years. What is exceptional about this volume is the manner in which the contributors and editors were able so clearly and precisely to grasp all of the developments, changes, and innovations in the Church in this period.

The 800 or so articles in this volume are divided into different areas. Six types of articles deal with the inner life of the Church and the other four types deal with the peace and justice ministry of the Church to the world. The fact that so many articles in an encyclopedia deal with these topics is a good indication of development and change in the Church. These articles also show the saliency of these issues and pastoral concerns in the Church since Vatican II. Numerous articles also deal with contemporary controversies in theology, the function of various ecclesiastical offices, the nature of many important Church institutions, organizations and associations, new trends in theology, pastoral ministry, social action, spirituality, the relation of the Church to many contemporary social and political movements and problems throughout the world, and new institutions and movements that have developed in the Church since 1965. The articles dealing with theology, medical ethics, moral theology, lay spirituality, catechesis, eschatology, Christology, medical research, Latin American and African theology, and justice and peace are all very informative, original, and insightful. The articles in this volume treat not just academic and theoretical topics but also contemporary social and political issues, pastoral innovations, and movements among the laity. Some articles are biographies of prominent Catholics, and others attempt to capture the spirit, goals, and