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# Religion beyond the Limits of Criticism

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Schelling's philosophy of religion was the work of a lifetime of philosophical activity, considerably larger in ambition and accomplishment than the loose assemblage of questions usually collected under that name: the existence of deity, responsibility for evil, and immortality.

Schelling is the most difficult of the 'German Idealists' to fit into a consistent historical narrative and the least amenable of that generation of thinkers to philosophical reconstruction or contemporary retrieval. Part of this is due to entanglements early in his career with philosophical alliances and polemics, part with what the public perceived as shifts in his philosophical focus, and part with a refusal to stay on the high road of Kant's narrative about modernity's conflicting claims of rationalism and empiricism, which could only be reconciled in a *critical* recognition of the secure but hybrid nature of empirical knowledge—its content derived from sensation, its form secured by empty concepts furnished by reason. Schelling appreciated well enough Kant's conceptual precision; he chafed, though, at Kant's legislation of the limits of philosophy's competence: a metaphysics of experience, a formalistic morality, strictures placed on the artist's and scientist's imagination, and the reduction of religion to morality without remainder—which meant, in Germany, accommodation with

the political status quo. In his willingness to return to pre-critical sources of inspiration such as Plato, Spinoza and Leibniz, his incorporation of religious theme voiced by heterodox figures such as Giordano Bruno, Joachim di Fiore, and Jacob Böhme, and his seemingly quixotic fight against Newtonian optics and the methods of hypothesis-formation and experimental test practiced by the working scientists of his day, Schelling seemed in his own day to court ridicule. However one tries to fit him into the narratives of other movements and figures—the rise of German Idealism, the end of idealism, the origin of existentialism, the end of metaphysics, Christian systematic theology, the beginnings of psychoanalysis—he presents features that resist incorporation and make him an outlier.<sup>i</sup>

Schelling and Hegel both started lecturing on the history of philosophy early in the nineteenth century when they had fairly similar positions, and in their mature years they used these lectures to critique each other's positions. Hegel's students Michelet, Erdmann, and in their wake Richard Kroner, perfected a polemic style of historiography that minimized Schelling's role in the formulation of 'absolute' or 'objective idealism'. Hegel's jibe that Schelling conducted his philosophical education in public had quite a bit of play. At the turn of the twentieth century even a sympathetic critic who called Schelling the "prince of the romantics" found no less than six phases in the development of his philosophy and in a less than kindly turn of phrase dubbed him 'Protean.'<sup>ii</sup>

In the first decade or so of his philosophical writings Schelling published a prodigious amount at a very fast clip, not troubling himself to carefully note changes in position, and often engaging in behind the scenes machinations with past and present colleagues such as Fichte and Hegel. The times were turbulent: first Reinhold, then Fichte secured some recognition as systematizers of Kant's critical philosophy, but when Reinhold turned from idealistic epistemology to objective logic and Kant repudiated the *Wissenschaftslehre*, there was no obvious successor to Kant. The conversations and literary exchanges between Lessing, his literary heir Mendelssohn and Jacobi about Spinoza's naturalism or 'pantheism' and theistic alternatives to it made the intellectual situation in Germany about as fractious as the streets of Paris had been a decade earlier. Nothing of Schelling's early

publications secured him notice as an independent voice until his audacious attempts to graft a philosophical account of nature onto the stalk of Fichte's moral systematization of Kant's philosophy. Indeed his invention of *Naturphilosophie* was the first of three 'audacities', if I might use the term-- philosophical turns or revisions of outlook that were novel or 'unforeseeable' in some sense and resumptive or surprisingly continuous in another. Schelling forces the critic to dance a step more lively than the simple two-step of a pre-critical Kant and a critical Kant, or a logical Wittgenstein and an ordinary language Wittgenstein. Changes in his system occur in a seismic or geological way—Schelling will later argue that the decision whereby one adopts one's character is preconscious, repressed, and beyond recollection. Less charitably, it has of course been argued that Schelling was insufficiently self-conscious of the drift of his thought.

I do not have the luxury of arguing for it at length here, but let me suggest that an analogy with musical composition might throw some light on Schelling's philosophizing. There are continuous or recurring themes, voiced predominantly or subtly, transposed to different registers and elaborated at length (argument) or with sudden flashes of insight, and executed in progressions of extended dissonance or sudden resolution. This image may capture both some of the complexity of Schelling's work and the uncanny way nothing ever drops out or is left aside. But given that since Aristotle, philosophy has largely hued to the path of propositional truth and eschewed the tropes of Socratic irony or Platonic mythologizing, if one took this suggestion seriously Schelling would stand condemned by his own words, for his own account of artistic creativity puts the artist in the service of her work, condemned evermore to do more than she can say.<sup>iii</sup> Making Schelling the philosopher of the unconscious, or the forefather of psychoanalysis, invites the same difficulty.

Be that as it may, there are three movements to Schelling's thought, or *three audacities*: (1) *Naturphilosophie*, or the turn to a metaphysics of nature to show that, pace Jacobi's reading of Spinoza, nothing has ever left the absolute—or that the finite does not exist from its own side. Once this absolute or objective idealism is sufficiently articulated, the second audacity is: (2) to leave this ontologically founded idealism behind as a surpassed moment in the

*risk of a freedom so radical that it is free from all being, and especially necessary being.* The third audacity is the synthesis of this uncanny mash-up of freedom and necessity in the grandest of all narratives European civilization produced: (3) the history or life-careers of God and humankind, as modelled in the mythologies of various ancient civilizations and *Christian revelation*. Each successive phase brings the prior forward, but fundamentally modifies it. Schelling's philosophy of religion is his whole philosophy, put before the public sequentially over a period of nearly half a century. I think Schelling articulated it for himself in a bare fifteen years, however, from the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* and essays of the *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik* (1800-1801) to the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion*, the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, to the cryptic 1815 lecture to the Bavarian Academy, *The Deities of Samothrace*.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Why Is There Something and Not Nothing?**

As a gifted student and young writer, Schelling displayed an ambition to surpass the received wisdom of the day about what were appropriate and inappropriate subjects of philosophy. Student notebooks on Plato's physics and metaphysics of nature thematize the transient nature of the elements, and, rather than focusing on *Timaeus'* pictorial account of imitation of the ideas, concentrate on the plastic nature of the receptacle or primary matter, invoking *Philebus'* category the ἄπειρον.<sup>v</sup> Schelling will later argue that *Naturphilosophie*, which can be included within an embracing philosophical idealism because it refuses independent existence to the entities of nature and demonstrates that nature's operations reintegrate difference back into primordial identity, has but one problem: the construction of matter.<sup>vi</sup> A series of early essays that imitate the structure of the first version of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* share Fichte's vision of completing or systematizing Kant's critical philosophy, but not his vision of what Kant called "the primacy of the practical." The young philosopher instead seems to hope for a logical-metaphysical completion of the Kantian project based on Kant's incomplete deduction of the categories, his discussion of God as the *summum* or *Inbegriff* of all concepts, and his remarks on the necessarily systematic form of philosophy.<sup>vii</sup> Symbolic of differences that will emerge between the two thinkers, where Fichte

writes *das Ich* in 1794, Schelling writes "the absolute appearing in us."<sup>viii</sup> Remarks on the insufficiency of the ontological argument, on the nature of modal categories and the origin time are scattered throughout the early writings, but these themes will not converge until 1802-1804 when Schelling makes it clear that in intellectual intuition, being cannot be conceived in any way other than as *self-existent* or *necessarily existent*. Coming to clarity on this will be the apogee of Schelling's early Spinozism. As we shall see, however, since Schelling adopts this concept in the train of Leibniz's peculiar phrasing of the ontological question: why is there something and *not nothing?*, and Kant's classification of modal predicates as conceptual, hence lacking ontological freight, *necessary being* is an inherent dialectical or self-undercutting concept, applicable only to something that contingently exists. This, of course, will not become clear to Schelling until he moves away from the absolutism of the *Naturphilosophie* (or philosophy of identity) and comes up with a novel definition of God's contingent existence as a state of being consequent upon utter freedom or original decision.

In the midst of disputes with Fichte about the nature and direction of transcendental idealism after Kant, Schelling veered sharply toward Spinozism and its naturalistic perspective, and away from the psychology of the moral life which was the undergirding of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. Though the dialectical argumentation of that work would remain fundamental to Schelling's elaboration of the *Potencies* or (conceptual) levels of being in the unfolding of his philosophies of nature, freedom, and religion, Schelling's 1801 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* leveled the charge of subjectivism against Fichte's idealism and proclaimed itself a "philosophy of identity."<sup>ix</sup> Some thirty years later, after he had twice made fundamental alterations in his philosophy in order to recast it as a dynamic and double-sided (conceptual and existential) account of the life of God and humankind, Schelling reconsiders the label and deems all of his work prior to the 1809 meditations on radical freedom *Naturphilosophie*. After Hegel's death and perhaps anxious to distinguish his own early position from what Hegel had called 'objective idealism' and Schelling now called *mere negative* or conceptual philosophy, Schelling returns to 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* which views nature as self-objectification of a

transcendental *subject*. In effect, in the Munich lectures on *History of Modern Philosophy*, Schelling covers his tracks and minimizes the extent of his experimentation in his journey from Fichtean disciple to philosopher of nature to Spinozist metaphysician.<sup>x</sup> Thinking he had placed himself beyond it, Schelling himself invents the *From Kant to Hegel* narrative that will eventually assign to him a role no larger than an *entr'acte*—a stagehand of Spirit.

There are three features of the *Naturphilosophy* 1800-1804 that deserve extensive comment. The first is the uninterrupted and continuous nature of the metaphysical 'deduction' (or construction) of being and its potencies and the consideration of the operations of nature which minimize the at-first-glance independence of the items of appearance and reveal that their true being is interdependent or organic. The second is the way that reason's consideration of the being of the absolute is framed either as immanent (or nondual) version of the classical ontological argument for divine existence or is framed in highly dialectical spin that Leibniz gave to ontology: why is there something and *not nothing*? The third is way the metaphysical question of individuation—or egress from the absolute—is made coextensive with an account of the origin of time, and both are given a voluntaristic account. Individuals have run away from home: the telos of unfolding phenomena is to invite the prodigals to return. Looking at these three themes, one might want to say that from early on Schelling's primary domain of endeavor is philosophy of religion. As late as 1804, however, in discussions with his Fichtean friend Eschenmeyer, Schelling will admit of no sense to the term 'God' that transcends the absolute that reason can adumbrate, Spinoza's *deus sive natura*.<sup>xi</sup> Schelling is not yet ready to imitate the theistic turn that Fichte took after 1800.

[1] From first to last, Schelling insists that the philosopher of nature re-enacts the original being of nature, which is active or expressive, self-affecting, and therefore self-structuring in ways that *higher levels or 'exponents' of organization reflect and resume lower levels*. Matter or the filling of three-dimensional space is the nadir of nature's self-expression, and appears to mere perception as passive or inert, subject only to mechanic—externally imposed—motion. But what at first appears to be external and separated turns out to be internally

related, active, and pointed toward dimensions of interiority such as sensation, perception and intuition. The organism, the self-regulating entity that is the home and support for intelligence in humans, is nothing different from matter, but is a knot of activity and purposiveness supervenient upon this lowest and all subsequent levels of inorganic elaboration—phenomena the physical sciences call gravity, conduction, cohesion, electromagnetism and reactivity to light. In a suitably subdued and thoroughly predictable manner, nature is a work of *necessitated activity*.

The systematic aspect of *Naturphilosophie* comes from two sources, the philosopher's reconstruction of the complex web of interconnection and reactions that nature *does* all at once in a successive or *narrative* fashion **and** the repetition of basic logical strategies that nature itself enacts *from its own side* in constructing complex strategies. To elaborate the first conjunct, there is emergence, development, metamorphosis—Schelling even uses the Anglophone term '*Evolution*'—in nature, but this is the philosopher's free contribution or condescension to the very human need to understand by way of story; Schelling is pre-Darwinian and too Aristotelian to befriend randomness. Regarding the second, nature itself seems to have hit upon a set of basic organization strategies that it repeats, whether one looks at higher-level structures like inorganic, organic and intelligent life, mid-level structures (called *dynamic processes*) such as magnetism, electricity, and transmission of light, or the three dimensions of space. All of these are amenable to mathematical treatment; the logical distinctions of identity, difference, and totality (relative identity) can be mapped on a single continuous line and treated as negative and positive numbers. Schelling calls these repetitive structures *potencies* [*Potenzen*]*—*the term suggests power or capacity, and, derivatively, exponent or mathematical power.<sup>xii</sup> He also makes it into a verb [*Potenzierung*] which suggests an ability to manifest on a higher level or to jump levels. It is part of Schelling's 'deep Spinozism', never questioned or rejected, that, nothing standing in the way, being entails a capacity to realize itself or more fully express itself: *to be is strive* [*conatus*]. Once the concept of potencies is framed, it never leaves Schelling's vocabulary.

Despite Schelling's systematic intent, elaborated in the *Fichte-Schelling Correspondence*, of framing a three-part system with a Spinozistic theory of identity and difference replacing the genetic scheme of activity, production and intuition modeled in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling was unable in years following his break with Fichte to produce a philosophy of spirit or consciousness equal in detail to his *Naturphilosophie*—with the exception of some lectures on the Philosophy of Art in 1802 that prefigure his interest in mythology and religion but were highly dependent on Winkelmann's classicism. Versions of Schelling's system published in 1801 and disseminated in lectures in 1804 keep Spinoza in the foreground. Thanks to the increasingly general idea of the potencies, Schelling is able to move from metaphysics—the account of the embracing character of the absolute and the pseudo-independence of finite particulars—to the general and then the increasingly more specific features of nature. Schelling had taken a naturalistic turn in his disputes with Fichte and though he showed great ingenuity in turning to Platonic theory of ideas in trying to solve the problem of individuation, or the apparent self-separation of the individual from the absolute, he has much greater success in arguing that nature is a *physical proof of idealism* in the way that its operations and processes themselves undo separation.

[2] Though *Naturphilosophie* takes its proximate inspiration from Spinoza and takes the Platonic *Timaeus* as its template and so unsurprisingly depends on the notion of the absolute's *necessary existence*, there is an element of insecurity or nonbeing included in the concept from the first. It is this element of dialectical vulnerability that makes necessary existence *contingent* and eliminable in later phases of Schelling's thought, where the divine itself gambles away the "sure thing" of its necessary being to risk a career of freedom and a life as spirit. We will come to this knot of difficult and original ideas in due time; for now I wish to show that early in his career as an absolute idealist or one of the co-inventors of *negative philosophy*, there was something wobbly in what was claimed was the absolute's intrinsic nature: that its very idea guaranteed its reality.

In the first announcement of the so-called system of identity, Schelling claims that once it has turned aside from subjectivism, from

the *I* and its perspectival representations, philosophy can function in the pure ether of *reason*. It reconceives the items of experience in a fundamentally mathematical or geometrical form; its philosophical task from that point on is to rationally *construct* (we would say 'reconstruct') on metaphysical and naturalistic lines the particulars and genera of our experience until we achieve the degree of closure and validity that a hypothetical or nonfoundationalist account permits. To this constructed absolute and the intuition of the philosopher who does the constructing is ascribed not factual being, but logical-mathematical necessity. Yet there is a suspicion that this whole logical edifice is a fable, what Kant would cheerfully call a *Hirngespinnst*. Schelling announces, "Reason's thought is foreign to everyone; to conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from the one that does the thinking."<sup>xiii</sup> But can we humans abstract from ourselves? Ought we try to?

Three years later, in the *System der gesamten Philosophie*, Schelling rethinks the identity theory which grounds *Naturphilosophie* in a more rigorous way, working again from Spinoza, but not a literal reading of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza had largely been content to elucidate the unity and necessary existence of substance through preliminary definitions and axioms. Instead Schelling fashions an ontology of power in which primal being is seen not just to be self-constituting but self-expressive; the concept of *expressivity* explains what Spinoza could not explain, how attributes and modes follow from substance's self-sufficient being. When it comes to expressing how the absolute or god/nature exists, Schelling invokes the ultimate question that "vertiginous intellect" can pose: *why is there something rather than nothing?*, and finds that in luminous, lightning-like clarity reason is pulled back from the abyss and realizes the *impossibility of nonbeing*.<sup>xiv</sup> I have elsewhere called this Schelling's Hitchcockean moment, his ontological cliffhanger—not just because there is a moment of high drama in this isolated text, but because, once articulated, the suspicion that *nothing was not in fact impossible* turns into the worm coiled in the fruit of Schelling's whole previous philosophy and which turns the ruby promise of necessary existence into the mundane brown rot of contingency. Schelling will return to Kant and admit that modal predicates are just predicates, while

existence is something else: God or the absolute exists necessarily, *if it exists*.<sup>xv</sup>

[3] The third feature that Schelling carries forward from the identity-theory phase of *Naturphilosophie* to the later philosophies of freedom and religion is the notion that the finite particular's self-positing—its decree, as it were, that *it* is the point of origin from which all perspectives are to be calculated—is its positing of time. While existing in the absolute or in the idea it is essentially the same as the universal, and so related to every other particular, but when it separates itself from the absolute or 'falls' into finite existence, its relationships to others are parsed out as successors to some and predecessor to others, or as past and future. The individuality of the particular entity in its ersatz declaration of independence constitutes its 'finite identity,' its point of view, its subjectivity, or to say the same in Kantian terms, its temporality. <sup>xvi</sup>

While the doctrine of the 'fall' of finite beings is a somewhat quizzical feature of *Naturphilosophie*, where it provides another opening for the critique of Fichtean subjective Idealism, the idea of free decision and the ability of a free being to abandon modes of being formerly necessary (or at least 'in character') gives Schelling the occasion for defining what radical freedom might be: not 'arbitrary choice'--which at best would signal only confusion about one's character and environment-- but putting what has been *compulsory* or purely necessary behind oneself as '*past*' and moving on into the novel. The time of freedom comes from futurity; the accounting of necessity embraces the past, and if we find the later Schelling believable, stops there. Falling into addiction is a story of conditioning and the economy of neurotransmitters; entering recovery is quite different. As we shall see, the life of God is an experiment in recovery—from addiction to necessary being and from isolation within it.

## **Decision: Separating the Divine Yes and No**

We have just had to make a move from abstract ontology to lived human psychology in order to understand a move that Schelling makes. While his stock of erudition in classical philosophy, the history

of Christian theology, and the cultures of antiquity replete with their myths and artistic accomplishment grows weightier as he ages, Schelling's approach to philosophy and religion becomes more simple or classical, and less burdened with the methodological and epistemological self-consciousness of modernity. Increasingly the mature Schelling adopts the standpoint of medieval Christian and renaissance philosophies that place humankind in the center of things and work by analogy between the microcosm and the macrocosm. As the first text of the radically new philosophy of freedom announces, "Only man is in God and is capable of freedom through this being-in-God. He alone is a being of the *centrum* [*ein Centralwesen*] and for that reason he should also remain in the *centrum*. All things are created in it just as God only accepts nature and ties it to himself through man."<sup>xvii</sup> This antiquarian guise will hardly endear Schelling to the empiricist, or one who waits for science to endorse her philosophy. It frankly returns to reader to a prescientific framework where myth, narrative, and religious traditions traced the horizons of human consciousness. And if we are not entirely comfortable with this when we read the arguments of the German Idealists with a hope for a retrieval that meets *our* current needs, we should remember there was quite an obstinate antiquarian streak, extending even to a love of things medieval and Catholic, which seized the souls of their literary and artistic friends.

Although it is conventional to distinguish Schelling's middle philosophy or philosophy of freedom from his late philosophy or philosophies of mythology and revelation, there is considerable overlap between the two. As one might gather from the title of the work that inaugurated the middle philosophy, the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Matters Connected to It*, Schelling's interest is philosophical and his method is argumentative; a great deal of the work is devoted to showing that the systematic intent of the earlier *Naturphilosophie* can only be carried out by substituting a version of the principle of sufficient reason for the concept of the sameness or identity of the different that had previously been advanced as the system principle. Schelling concedes that his earlier philosophy had hoped in vain to find a logic connecting the orders of nature and that of spirit (self-conscious agents). Now a dynamic principle is invoked instead, *freedom*, the logic of which

demands that novelty can occur or that existence float free of conditioning ground. On the basis of this new way of thinking first things, Schelling is able to fashion a narrative in which a living God is able to leave primordial or necessary existence, risk life in creative freedom, let nature and humankind go forth as separate, in order to become spirit and reunite with created spiritual being. A smaller problematic, the possibility and origin of evil, and where to place responsibility for evil, is embedded in the larger scheme—the classical project of theodicy. The late philosophy, begun in 1820 but not widely disseminated until twenty years later, takes over this narrative of the divine and human life careers, but attempts to trace it out in great detail in the mythological narratives and religious views of prior historical civilizations, calling itself *positive philosophy* or *philosophy of revelation*. Though Schelling claimed he was in no sense dependent on Christian dogmatics and it was not his intent to do systematic theology, he comes close to a complete elaboration of the so-called 'truths' of Christian revelation, but in a historical or 'empirical' mode.

Another thing to note as we embark on the philosophies of freedom and revelation is that though Schelling continues to criticize the subjectivism of a narrow idealism, when he rejects Fichte's idealism he is rejecting the *primacy of the I* and its incessant *monologue* about perceptions and arbitrary choices. He has learned from the Pietists, the poets, and from the detail argumentation of the first *Wissenschaftslehre* that there are *many* prompters, deciders, valuers and judges packed into our skins and that Fichte's watchword: *my being is my own deed*, was true in many senses that consciousness most often will not or cannot acknowledge. As Goethe's Faust rewrites the gospel, "*In the beginning was the deed*," putting 'word' and the obvious mental process under erasure.<sup>xviii</sup> The generation of critics who want to view Schelling as the forefather of psychoanalysis finds ample support in the writing of Schelling's middle phase: the *Philosophical Investigations of Human Freedom*, the *Stuttgart Lectures*, and the drafts of *Ages of the World*. Schelling does not think, however, that the divine is a projection of the human imagination, as Feuerbach, Freud and perhaps William Blake thought, but that the two mirror each other in identical intertwined careers.

In this section, we will look closely to two central issues: Schelling's definition of freedom and the nature of the two principles of being that allow for it. I shall not stress his treatment of the issue of evil and the question of divine responsibility for it, for in the middle period Schelling seems prone to relapse into pantheism just when he declares himself free of its snares. The account offered in the philosophy of religion is more successful and more difficult to argue: creation entails that God excretes the nondivine element within itself, and this rejected element becomes the cosmic Christ wherein humankind is created, falls, and is redeemed in Christ's acceptance into deity. The simple account of Schelling's theology is that the *Menschwerdung Gottes* implies the *Gotteswerdung Menschen* and vice versa and that in a process of clarification or refinement [Verklärung] evil and the "irreducible remainder" of nature will somehow be sublimated.<sup>xix</sup>

[1] Before we can appreciate Schelling's novel 1809 definition of freedom, both human and divine, we must carefully look at a defense of Spinozistic necessity or 'decidedness' that Schelling offered in 1804 in the context of a discussion of the demands of a *religious morality*. Neither so-called arbitrary choice nor empirical lawfulness, the standards advanced by Kant, will suffice, says Schelling, but only an unconditional trust in the *necessity that rules all*. Spinoza, especially in his teaching on the 'intellectual love of God', recaptured the ancients' sense of virtue: not arbitrary freedom but *choiceless resolve* [*Entschiedenheit*] for the right. The highest moral and cognitive standard that religion can advance is *conscientiousness* [*Gewissenhaftigkeit*], not the subjective standard of devotion or feeling offered by contemporary theories.<sup>xx</sup> There is no absolute standard of right [*Sittlichkeit*] that is the achievement or possession of the isolated individual; one is *sittlich* or virtuous only insofar as one is bound to do what is right *without* any consideration of its opposite. –This is as impassioned a piece of argument as one can find in all of Schelling's writings. He is not seeking easy solutions or conceptual loopholes; this is a soldierly morality that he espouses, one that commands fidelity to the situation the agent finds herself in. And it is absolutely consistent with Spinoza's teaching of universal necessity—which, when understood and trusted, is *amor intellectualis dei*. Schelling takes aim at Enlightenment fables of human perfectibility, infinite moral (or

revolutionary!) progress, and the futurity of blessedness, and longs instead for the recurrence of a golden past, morality as spokes radiating from a single wheel, not the spectacle of humanity wandering in a circle. This is the morality of necessary being, the divine decree.<sup>xxi</sup>

[2] What can be said to alter this rigid view? What alternatives can there be, when the necessity of the necessarily existent has defined the position of every point and the conditions of every 'agent', when inner determinations of *virtue* and *power* correspond only to outer determinations of *destiny* and *fate*? First of all, there is no need to soften the view: what is viewed from the outside as necessary is seen on the interior as *decision* or free act of will. Kant had articulated this basic view when he argued that the free act is outside of all causal connection, or outside of time. Empirically, the only evidence for a free act is the occurrence of new series of phenomena, but the decision or free act itself is outside of time—and even the agent has no privileged access to it. What the addict really wanted or did when she nominally started on a 'recovery' will surprise her as much as those around her when the consequences of her new course of action unfold. –Fichte had said: *the I is its own deed*, consciousness is self-positing. The I is really nothing other than self-positing, remarks Schelling, but it is not coextensive with consciousness. All self-apprehension or cognition presupposes something deeper, being which is *fundamental willing*, which makes itself into something and is the ground of all modes of being.

But this account of the individual's deed, if it settles the smaller question of the individual's freedom, character, and responsibility for the good or evil that in a sense it *is*, raises larger questions that Schelling struggles to answer in light of his prior commitment to an identity of different principles in the absolute and his new stance of looking at the development of spirit in terms of will, or of a conflict of wills. In moving from the pantheism of *Naturphilosophie* to creationism of the *Investigations*, ontological commitments have shifted: in the former there was one agent (*natura naturans*) and one self-conscious being (finite spirit, the last level of the deployment of organization in *natura naturata*). Now there are two agents in one complex structure of being, both capable of spiritual activity and destined to be reunited in love. It is striking that definition of *love* Schelling offers here: *that*

*two beings capable of being independent of each other nonetheless try to be together*, is a reprise of a description first offered in 1804 as a depiction of attraction between sexually dimorphic animals. The logic of love and of lust is identical.<sup>xxii</sup>

[3] One striking feature of the *Investigations* is the effort Schelling makes to show that the systematic intent of *Naturphilosophie* can be fulfilled only if its core logic of the essential sameness (or indifference) of phenomenally distinct orders can be translated into a dynamic framework suitable for agents as well as entities. The distinction between *ground* and *existent*, employed occasionally in the 1801 philosophy of nature to characterize latent and emergent stages of the same phenomena or potency is now used to demarcate basically different modes of being, roughly nature and spirit, or put in voluntaristic terms, the *will to evil* and the *will to good*. Actually the orders of being (the contractive will of the ground and the expansive will of love) are prior to and ontologically necessary for the moral order. The factors that are distinguished but indissolubly united in God are contingently united, and so dissoluble, in the human being; the possibility for good *or* evil, grounded in God's nature, becomes in humans the reality of good *and* evil. –That there are human individuals with good and bad wills, or who have chosen egoistic or altruistic characters, according the Schelling's earlier nonvoluntaristic meditations, depends on their character and their 'resolve' or fidelity to their different situations. The conclusion that God is therefore the ground of possibility of good and evil, but is absolved of responsibility for their actuality, seems unsatisfying. Oppenheimer had a pretty definite intuition of what he had done when he saw the first atomic explosion and uttered "We have become like gods." What he had done did not correspond to his original intention to solve a problem in physics. –Schelling's attempt to translate original principles of being into modes of willing seems less than successful too. When he declares with utter generality and sweeping rhetoric, "Will is primal being [*Ursein*] to which alone all predicates of being apply: groundlessness, eternity, independence from time, self-affirmation. All of philosophy strives only to find this highest expression," his translators remark that he has overstepped himself and promised more than he can deliver.<sup>xxiii</sup> Heidegger too was critical of Schelling at this point, seeing in the turn to a philosophy of will a slip back into the metaphysics of presence.

[4] Whatever its argumentative shortcomings, the *Philosophical Investigations* show a total shift in Schelling philosophy, from a static ontology of nature to a dynamic philosophy of religion. While the basic story is that of the emergence of moral beings, with will and responsibility, *from* the natural principle, this can in no way happen *within* that principle. Freedom must be withdrawn from nature, as it were, like Prometheus' theft of fire, and God and humanity be sundered as agonal combatants before they can be reunited in a spiritual bond over the course of history. Before this explanatory structure can be fleshed out—the basic narrative of the philosophy of revelation-- a more satisfactory account for the independence of nature and humanity from God must be discovered. This is work of the multiple drafts of *Ages of the World*, where Schelling offers a sketch of how the potencies evolve, contest, and fall into succession is a dream-like exercise of imagination *before* the creation. The potencies are now viewed not as external classification but as ontological structures in their own right, self-impelled if not totally autonomous agent functioning not as explicit *will* or decision, but as dream-like apparitions of yearning and inchoate desire which deploy themselves in ghostly forms that fall back into their sensory and appetitive elements. Schelling distinguishes between a violent and unpremeditated scission (or 'decision') among the potencies that now and then (eternally) erupts and gives one temporary hegemony, and the creative, presumably conscious, decision of creation wherein God posits what is nature in it--that which is necessity or the play of mere imagination and desire--and enters into an ordered realization of the proto-possibilities.<sup>xxiv</sup> Schelling again comments that the deed or act of will that is the agent of decision— and in fact ecstatically ejects the existent from the basis of being— is preconscious and repressed.<sup>xxv</sup> What is past is locked away as eternally past, and what is there for consciousness is eternally cut off from its nature basis, "the irreducible remainder."

The entry into the philosophy of religion proper, that is, the yoked negative and positive philosophies comes with a double intensification of these themes: (a) the play of nonbeing or necessity in God's natural basis prior to the decisive separation is rethought as leap over being, the assumption of a freedom so radical that it is

*freedom to be or not to be*, that is, a complete rejection of the 'prior' state of necessary existence, and (b) the scission between will and consciousness is deepened in the realization that the truth and reality of this whole narrative is beyond conscious grasp or conceptual explication. All philosophy that is merely negative—that is, , rational, conceptual, and driven by logic and argumentation— can only lead up to the bare idea of an entity with this sort of freedom, at which point it can and must reach out in experiment or exploration to an actuality beyond necessity and all concepts of existence.

## **To Be or Not to Be?**

We suggested earlier that there is something like a process of musical composition in the makeup of Schelling's entire philosophy, with themes voiced briefly and subtly early on swelling into prominence later on, and conceptual elements at first seemingly discordant eventually brought into harmonic resolution. If there is any merit to the metaphor, it implies that Schelling must be judged by his whole *oeuvre* as well as by the cogency of its elements or phases. The philosophy of religion and, more particularly, the late philosophy of mythology and revelation, must be taken as Schelling's single accomplishment. For both the necessitarian ontology of the early *Naturphilosophie* and the volitional ontology of *Human Freedom and Ages of the World* are brought forward and intertwined in surprising way in Schelling's final position. As we shall see, there are two overwhelming obstacles to appropriating this philosophy, first, *the problem of scale* or detail and, secondly, *the problem of essentialism*.

In his 1841/42 Berlin lecture on the *Philosophy of Revelation*, Schelling first presented the philosophical outline of the positive philosophy, then its historical and theological content which he regarded not as mere application but as its enrichment or fulfilment. In our eyes I fear it cannot but count as an obstacle that Schelling's narrative encompasses almost the whole of Christian doctrine as well the mythologies of various ancient cultures. Our way of doing philosophy is to isolate and reconstruct historical positions, preferably in sparse form, and to test the merits of their premises. Admittedly all the German Idealists cause grief in this regard, but the cumulative nature of Schelling's argument causes special difficulty.

[1] The positive philosophy begins with the critique of the absolute idealism of Schelling's own *Naturphilosophie* and Hegel's system of philosophy, which moved solely in concepts in abstraction from things or sensory intuitions, and so attained a mere conceptual legitimacy. These philosophies were systems, indeed, but detached from any foundational reality. They could count as no more than *negative philosophy*, an analytic propaedeutic to a treatment of reality that was never furnished except in outline, at the end, and as the result of the analytic process. Schelling essentially attained this position in 1809 and attempted to put the Spinozism of the *Naturphilosophie* behind him, seeing that his earlier philosophy has begun and ended in the concept of the absolute as a necessary or self-existing being. When the godhead sets out to become life, spirit, and God, the earlier philosophy must be abandoned, but it cannot be abandoned by any move less drastic than having the divine will, emergent from nature, bury its eternal past and become a life. But how can one undo necessary existence?

I have argued that there is thinness to this idea of necessary existence from its first introduction in the identity-theory of the *Naturphilosophie*. If the ontological question, properly voiced, is the "vertiginous question"--Why is there something and *not nothing*?--then from the very start being has been conceived dialectically as infected with nonbeing, if not actually, then at least possibly. The odor of fishiness that explorers of the ontological argument have always smelled, though some chose to cover it with frankincense, was cleared discerned by Descartes: God was a necessarily existent entity, *if it existed*. From the side of the thinker and her thinking, necessary existence is eliminable. As Kant saw, existence is not a concept, but a contingent fact dependent on the state of the world.

The novelty of Schelling's philosophy of religion is that God clues into this situation ahead of the philosopher and remedies the lack by exercise of will. This point is where the narrative of the 1809 *Investigations* becomes unclear and the drafts of the *Ages of the World* fail to illuminate except by arguing on a quasi-psychoanalytic model that deed or will must precede the arising of consciousness and must be structurally buried underneath consciousness in such a way that

retrieval is impossible. We shall investigate some of the ways Schelling tries to argue this transition in the next section, but will first have to deal with the difficult fact that Schelling in attempting to think outside the conceptual has left the a priori for the realm of the a posteriori. Schelling calls his new venture 'philosophical empiricism', acknowledging that it can be but an open system and can have authority only for those actively seeking along its lines. This is a form of thinking whose object is not given prior to thought, but actively produced by it. Its object stands beyond thought rather than being a product of thought. Only in way can Jacobi's demand for some *reality* beyond human feeling and imagination be met.<sup>xxvi</sup>

[2] Since positive philosophy is an experimental rather than an analytical enterprise, a voyage of discovery and not a cartographical expedition, Schelling's texts in this period are full of neologisms and overlapping conceptual distinctions, none of which can be said to exactly designate their objects. Earlier attempts to talk of deity as the self-distinguishing process of

Essence [*Wesen*] and Existence  
Being [*Seyn*] and the Existent [*Seyendes*]

are superseded in the 1841/42 lectures by

*Unvordenkliche*, blind, and ontological capacity [*Seinkönnen*],  
or necessary being will, or godhead [*Gottheit*].<sup>xxvii,xxviii</sup>

Furthermore, all versions of these contrasts are pervaded by the late Platonic contrast between nonbeing and being [ $\mu\eta\grave{\nu}$   $\acute{\omicron}\nu$  and  $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ ], the dark and light principles which from the earliest days had occupied Schelling's imagination and which could function in either natural or moral environments, becoming *contraction* and *expansion* in the former, and self-will (evil) or universal will in the latter.

Crucial to the positive philosophy is the situation that the subject, not the observing philosopher, makes these distinctions, which means that by the power of necessary and inconceivable being, *contingency* emerges from necessity and, uniting necessity and contingency in itself, becomes God—Lord over being. As in the middle

philosophy, Schelling thinks this occurs through *willing*, primordially a withdrawal from necessity or the assumption of freedom over both being and not-being. The necessarily existent wills itself as *Sein-und-Nichtsein-Können*, or contingently existing.<sup>xxix</sup> This breaks primordial being, hitherto the undisturbed tranquility of groundlessness and beginninglessness, into opposing factors: being and freedom, nature and spirit, B and A.

In making necessity or his own primordial being other than itself, God makes it an independent power of being and turns its natural necessity (which is a kind of relative nonbeing) into real possibility, capacity for being. In so doing, the contingently necessary or living God first becomes objective in its necessary counterpart, and only here is the possibility for consciousness situated. God finds itself in unprethinkable being before it thinks, and it must wrench itself from this blind or mute being before it can become a thinkers or knower. Here, Schelling announces, is his point of divergence with Jacobi who would posit the being and consciousness of God simultaneously. "*Instead we must proceed from an original being of God that precedes him.*"<sup>xxx</sup> There would be no point to consciousness if its sort of knowledge were not the cognitive side of contingent being, the registry of what happens, not of what is eternally the same.

How is this separation from primordial being possible or conceivable? Schelling no longer seems to prize the simple category of *will*; it is contingency, ability *to be or not to be*, that asserts itself over blind or monotonous being and first reveals the law of being, to which even God is subject: nothing is to remain hidden, unclear, latent—*everything is to be brought to decision*. Schelling calls this is the "idea" in the inchoate divine imagination, the intuition that it is fundamentally other than the capacity for being which is connected to its eternal or necessary being.<sup>xxxi</sup>

This idea is the idea of *freedom*; to see it is *will*; to act on it is to depart from the security of being. Reality itself is inherently dialectical, says Schelling, in such a way that the possible has more value than the actual, the contingent than the necessary, and the novel and risky than the ever-present. Reality is evidently popping with possibility!

[3] The other-than-divine becomes the locus of creation: humankind, and in the human, the natural world. The potencies, or capacities for being which evolved out of the primordial blind being, become independent powers, as it were, and in succession shape the epochs of human historical existence— which are also the phases of God's self-revelation. Thus the abstract and ontological side of positive philosophy turns toward history, the unfolding of human cultures, the mythologies that are the flowering of deity in so-called pagan cultures, and the mystery-cults of ancient Greece that lead one to the truths of Christianity: creation, fall, redemption through a humanly suffering God, and immortality (of sorts). This all makes for a vast narrative. We will have to confine ourselves to three topics: creation and the human status of Christ, Christ's divinization and the generation of the Trinity, and the future of human spiritual evolution. Schelling had vast amounts of learning at his disposal in classical languages and literatures, the history of religions, and Christian scriptures and theology, so his narratives are engaging. What I find interesting is the economy of his account: the *three potencies* in their dialectical unfolding structure human history, the phases of religious consciousness in ancient peoples; they also determine the internal relationship of the deity, the so-called different 'persons' of the Godhead. Also interesting is Schelling's argument that if revelation is universal, It cannot be confined to one people or one cultural epoch.

[a] *Creation and the Christ: The Naturphilosophie* pictured humankind's (structural) evolution inside nature, while the philosophy of freedom did the reverse, showing nature to be a process within the cosmic creature, humanity. The positive philosophy situates both within what Johannine theology called the preexistent Logos, the medium of creation. While orthodox Christian thinking identifies the *Logos* with the second person of the Trinity and the earthly Christ, Schelling identifies it with the excluded blind or pre-personal ground of the living deity, within which humanity both takes its origin and falls from union with the divine.<sup>xxxii</sup> It is the historical adventure of various human cultures to mark out stages on the return to God—the basic pattern marked by Ouranos, Chronos and Dionysus in Greek culture, and their female counterparts Demeter, Persephone, and Cybele. These are shapes of God, phases in revelation.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Within the Hebrew culture, Christ plays the same role as Dionysus and Cybele—mediation with the ancient, harsh gods and redemption through suffering. Christ is essentially human, the pure human, divinized by God in response to his obedient suffering, and thus incorporated into the godhead. That this is a purely Arian account does not bother Schelling, who insists he is doing *philosophy*, not dogmatic theology.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

[b] With the acceptance of Christ into the godhead, the Spirit is generated as the bond between Father and Son, the principle of sharing, and outreach. Revelation marks out stages in human history, conceived as a single narrative with universal meaning, with the age of the Father covering ancient times and civilizations, the age of the Son coinciding with the domination of Rome and Europe, and the age of the Spirit yet to come, marked by the withering away of the difference between ecclesial and secular communities. Schelling borrows this historicized version of the life of the Trinity from the writings of Joachim di Fiori.<sup>xxxv</sup> As far as eschatology goes, Schelling continues to maintain that a form of immortality or life after death is possible, with a sort of distillation or *Verklärung* of one's moral personality; the ontological possibility of such a transformation rests on the resonance of the human *Gemuth* (soul) or the hidden unity of psyche and body with the divine *Geist* (spirit), as Schelling argued in the final pages 1810 *Stuttgart Lectures*.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Conclusions

We have indicated that the immensity of Schelling's narrative poses obstacles to its acceptance; so does the fact that it is quite Eurocentric, despite Schelling's attempt to argue for the validity of non-Christian religions as being necessary steps toward God's full revelation in the Christian narrative. Weightier than the problem of scale, however, is that Schelling thinks that terms such as 'God' and 'man', 'being' and 'ontological capacity' designate universal essences. Informed by evolutionary biology, neuroscience, genetics and emergent genomics, we have a difficult time imagining anything other than a statistical reality to entities that we think take shape discretely but which we continue to denominate in the old vocabulary of sortal

nouns. Reality seems to unfold in micro-events far below the threshold of our unaided perceptions. Though Schelling seems to have anticipated something like the process philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne, particularly in his valorization of *contingency* over *necessity*, his religious imagination seems anchored in classic Christian dogma and the Renaissance tradition of placing "man" in the center of a single process of divine revelation. Paul Tillich, the one theologian obviously influenced by Schelling, followed him closely only in matters of terminology and periodization of the epochs of revelation. But he accepts Schelling's core thought only in an agnostic and relativistic sense. It is convenient to call godhead or the Father *abgründig*—one need say no more. And it is likewise convenient to define the Christ only in terms of his acceptance as Messiah by early communities, and completely prudent to talk of the Spirit's presence in human communities as *ambiguous*. But this is quite a dilution of Schelling's daring as Christian thinker.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> One example of the German Idealist 'Kant to Hegel' narrative is Johann Edaurd Erdman, *Versuch Einer Wissenschaftlichen Darstellung Der Geschichte Der Neuern Philosophie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt : Frommann-Holzboog, 1977). Walter Schulz argued that Schelling begins the rebellion against idealism in *Die Vollendung Des Deutschen Idealismus In Der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen : Neske, 1975 ). Karl Jaspers finds in Schelling the origin of existentialism; see *Schelling; Grösse Und Verhängnis* (München, R. Piper [1955]). Martin Heidegger finds a regrettable turn to onto-theology or 'metaphysics' in Schelling's philosophy of freedom: *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985). Paul Tillich wove Schelling's thought deeply into the structure of his monumental quasi-existentialist reinterpretation of Christian theology in *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Two recent thinkers who see in Schelling a foreshadowing of psychoanalytic theory are Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss Of Freedom: Ages Of The World* (Ann Arbor [Mich.]: University of Michigan Press, 1997) and S. J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Wilhelm Metzger, *Die Epochen des Schellingschen Philosophie von 1796 bis 1802* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1911).

<sup>iii</sup> STI 229-233.

- <sup>iv</sup> Robert F. Brown in the one critic who has consistently pointed to Schelling's 'musical' practice of anticipating later development in his thinking either by insufficiently noticing how novel turns of thinking have entered his repertory or failing to meet 'crisis points' or loci of systematic stress head on when he first encountered them. See *Schelling's Treatise on the Deities of Samothrace* (Missoula: University of Montana, 1974) and "Is Much of Schelling's *Freiheitschrift* (1809) Already Present in His *Philosophie und Religion*?" in Hans Michael Baugartner & Wilhelm Jacobs, ed. *Schellings Weg zur Freiheitschrift Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Fromann - Holzboog, 1996), pp. 110-131.
- <sup>v</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, "Timaeus" 1794, mit Einem Beitrag von Hermann Krings: Genesis und Materie – Zur Bedeutung der "Timaeus" Nachschrift für Schellings Naturphilosophie, Hartmut Buckner, ed. (Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Fromann - Holzboog, 1994), pp. 59-75.
- <sup>vi</sup> "Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses oder die Kategorien der Physik" in *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jena & Leipzig: Gabler, 1800) p. 100 = SW I/4, 3-4.
- <sup>vii</sup> See Schelling's early meditations on time and modality, IPP 217-227. Schelling will later reverse his course of thought and assign *necessary existence* to the initial position of thesis, and [real] possibility or *contingency* to the final position of the synthesis.
- <sup>viii</sup> IPP 208.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* 1801 in J. G. Fichte/F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1900-1802)*, trans. & ed. By Michael G. Vater & David W. Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), pp. 141-145. Cited hereafter as *Presentation* (1801).
- <sup>x</sup> HMP 120.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), tr. Klaus Ottmann (Putnam, CN: Spring Publications, 2010), pp. 43-45.  
xii "Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses oder die Kategorien der Physik" in *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jena & Leipzig: Gabler, 1800) pp. 83-87 = SW I/4, 75-78.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Presentation* (1801), pp. 145-46.
- <sup>xiv</sup> SGP 155.
- <sup>xv</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung [Paulus Nachschrift]*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 154. Hereafter cited as *Offenbarung/Paulus*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Bruno, or On the Divine and Natural Principle of Things* (1802), tr. Michael Vater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) pp. 151, 180-81. Hereafter cited as *Bruno*.

- <sup>xvii</sup> EHF 51. Schelling anticipates this idea of the human as the central being in a quasi-materialistic fashion in the conclusion of 1804 *Naturphilosophie*, where he argues for the analogy between the entire natural universe and the human brain. The human is not so much a being of the center, he say there, but it itself the center. SGP 488-91.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Faust, Der Tragödie Erste Teil*, vv. 1223-1237.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Bruno*, 222. On *Verklärung* and the dependence of that hope upon a bond between the divine and nature reestablished by Christ, see F. W. J. Schelling, *Clara, or On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*, tr. Fiona Steinkamp (Albany: Sate University of New York Press, 2002) pp. 60-61, and also EHF 70. For the "indivisible remainder", see EHF 72
- <sup>xx</sup> SGP 554-58.
- <sup>xxi</sup> SGP 559-64.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Cp. EHF 70 and SGP 407-408.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> EHF 21.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> AW 12-13.
- <sup>xxv</sup> AW 107-108.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 125-148.
- <sup>Xxxvii</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 163-64.
- <sup>Xxxviii</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 167-69.
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 164, 169.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 165-66.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 168-69. Cp. 178-79.
- <sup>Xxxii</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 194-95, 197-98, 204-207.
- <sup>Xxxiii</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 214-218.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 260-71. Cp. 296-99.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> *Offenbarung/Paulus* 318-321.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) in SW I/7, 476-84.