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Review of *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's
Philosophy of Mythology* by Edward Allen Beach

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Edward Allen Beach. *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Pp xii + 317. Board, \$18.95.

An interesting theme of this book is the necessary ambivalence of human consciousness toward the object of religion. Parallel to this psychological ambivalence, objective ambiguities turn up in the history of religions: whether religion's object is one or plural, natural or spiritual, a completed entity or a developing one. Schelling devoted the last half of his life (in the lecture hall if not in print) to a two-sided attempt to revive theistic metaphysics and to "demonstrate" the reality of God in the history of religions. Beach's title, with its ambiguity about the number of deity, reflects Schelling's bold attempt to validate the sky-monism of hunter-gatherers and the polytheism of early agricultural peoples as genuine religious experience. He made them phases of the development of true, revealed (i.e., Christian) religion by making their objects necessary components (or *potencies*) of the divine essence, displayed in mock independence in the history of mythology, but once properly developed and subordinated, the support for the experiential revelation of the actual, personal God.

Schelling's programme in the late or Positive Philosophy is complicated both by its subject and its presentation in discrete lecture courses. Other scholars have treated the complexity of Schelling's attitude toward philosophy after the 1820s, his repudiation of the static conceptualism of his own Identity-Philosophy and of Hegel's system as merely "negative" philosophy, and his demand that will, decision (freedom) and actuality be taken as the supports and starting-points of a second or "positive" philosophy. The classic study here is Walter Schulz's *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (2nd ed., Pfullingen: Neske, 1975). Beach focusses instead on the complexity of the vehicle Schelling chose to convey this positive philosophy: the history of religions, or in Schelling's terms the philosophies of mythology and revelation. Though Schelling turned to theistic metaphysics late in life, he always regarded myth and symbol as the point where aesthetics, metaphysics, and religion converged. He developed an eye for the nuanced phenomena of religious experience, resisting the tendency of the nineteenth-century academy to reduce religious representations either to a flat mirroring of historical events or to an externalization of internal psychic conflicts. Beach shows how Schelling incorporated the historical and especially the psychological dimensions of religious experience into a nonreductive account of the unfolding of the divine reality in human cultures, inside a history generated not accidentally by the mere accumulation of unrelated events, but one driven by the logic

of the unfolding of the divine essence. The genius of Schelling's view of religion is to argue that "screens" placed by linguistic, cultural, and temporal differences do not divide the worshipper/intuiter from the "true God" but are preparatory vehicles necessary for the lived encounter with God.

Comparing Schelling's method to the "hermeneutics of suspicion" practiced by Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud which resulted in purely reductive theories—e.g., Feuerbach's thesis that the gods are simultaneous projections of human capacity and incapacity—Beach argues that Schelling's theory offers a "sublimated projection theory" of religion. Rooted in the conviction that human consciousness is "God-positing" but confronted with the facts that there are inconsistent paradigms of religion and its object(s), this theory first works deconstructively upon these ambiguities, then opens itself up for an "ecstatic," intuitive or experiential moment of spiritual illumination, but finally returns to rational discourse for a moment of "theodicy" or "confirmation." Beach abstracts this picture from Schelling's actual speculation, which is more technical and often pedantic, but all three elements are Schelling's novel contributions: (1) ambiguity—acceptance *and* rejection, fear *and* love—is central to religious experience and to the situation of the human vis-à-vis the divine; (2) the absolute is only in intellectual intuition; God is touched only in ec-stasy, i.e., departure from reason; (3) there can nonetheless be a historical-critical philosophical reconstruction of the revelatory event. Beach is evidently convinced these elements are necessary, if not sufficient, conditions of an authentic faith.

Beach grounds his argument in solid textual scholarship. He lucidly presents the background of nineteenth-century views on religion, and tellingly argues for Schelling's significance. Most importantly, he always conducts his discussion philosophically, with a critical eye for what is true (or plausible, or salvageable) in Schelling's theory. Since he takes the empirical criterion of verifiability as the touchstone of truth, he must reject much of Schelling's speculation as lacking logical ground. But since Beach tends to accept the irrational, the unconscious, and the volitional as *positive features* whose home is religion, his heart is often ready to accept teachings from Schelling which his head has decreed undecidable.

The book's flaw is that it presents Schelling's late, *unpublished* philosophy as his whole philosophy. Beach turns the shortcoming into a virtue, for a Schelling who always and only champions the volitional, the unconscious, and the irrational seems to present a clear alternative to Hegel's monolithic conceptualism. This makes for a tidy story, but it ignores the fact that Schelling invented idealistic conceptualism along with Hegel when they worked on the *Critical Journal*. Schelling had reason and unreason, the conscious and the unconscious, intertwined from the start. His later moves against conceptual idealism are in the main a preference for actuality over possibility, for existence over essence. Beach is right to see willing or need, the dynamic of the ground, as central to Schelling's later thought, and also the free choice of reason over unreason as the logic of the process of creation. But for Schelling these processes result in a world in which reason has secure purchase, even if it is derived from a superrational actuality. Though Schopenhauer was troubled by Schelling's anticipations of his voluntarism, no one confused the two.

Lucid and argumentative as this book is, it is somewhat premature. None of the texts Beach works upon are yet available in translation. This book may in time secure them a welcome.

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