

The Many Faces of F.W.J. Schelling¹

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The interpreter of Schelling faces a particularly difficult hermeneutical challenge: as soon as Schelling had developed a workable theoretical frame (say nature-philosophy or identity-philosophy), he seems to have abandoned it. Schelling appears to have been repulsed by the prospect of settling down into a system, as though the real always beckoned to him from the far side of whatever set of categories were recommending themselves, compelling him to leave for others the provisional paradigm he had constructed while he continued his restless search for the logical and historical relation between the infinite and the finite. For Heidegger, Schelling's flagrant disregard for the canons of consistency and coherence is not a sign of the weakness of his thought, but exactly the opposite: genuine thinking, according to Heidegger, never enjoys arrival, certainty, or stability.²

Schelling's surface inconsistencies notwithstanding, we can discern a set of recurring concerns in Schelling's collected works, leitmotifs, which do not a system make, but constitute a style of philosophizing which we can call Schellingian. First in appearance is a theme most characteristic of Schelling's nature-philosophy, but which also plays a central role in the philosophy of freedom and returns in the Trinitarian metaphysics of the late lectures: the notion of polarity. Schelling remains convinced, from his earliest treatises to his last lectures, that all intelligible structure, mental or material, physical or metaphysical, finite or divine, is characterized by polarity, opposition, and the creative and dynamic tension between incommensurables, a tension which must not be abrogated in a spurious logic that presumes to deny the principle of contradiction (Hegel's).

The production of being in Schellingian ontology is not by means of Hegel's *qualitative* differentiation, the collapse of the identical into the play of contradictories and the subsequent negation of and re-inscription of difference

¹ Some of the contents of this introductory essay first appeared in S.J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012), 2-11.

² Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985). For the context of Heidegger's remarks, see Philipp Schwab's essay in this issue.

into a higher standpoint, but by means of *quantitative* intensification, generation of difference within an essentially self-identical being through progressive potentization. For Schelling, contradictories are never fused, and the opposition between them highlights the primacy of will over thought, for in the face of incommensurable options, thinking can go no further until the will *decides*. However, Schelling is not Kierkegaard: all polarities are undergirded by a concealed commonality, a deep ground of unity that makes the opposites possible, for only that which is in secret alliance, according to Schelling, can be truly opposed. Only on the assumption of a hidden ground, however ineffable it remains, can the relationship of, for example, mind and body, thought and extension, good and evil, or essence and existence, be properly understood.

Thus the other-side of Schellingian polarity is the crucial notion of teleology: polarity is never something that just happens to be; it is always something that has come to be for the sake of a higher development, be it life, consciousness, the personalization of God, or the production of love. The one divides into two so that it might give birth to a one that knows itself as such and can be lovingly related to others.

The second recurring theme in Schellingian thought is the finitude of human experience, which is, for Schelling, neither a dogmatic assertion nor romantic *Schwärmerei*, but an experience of the crucifixion of thought against the real. The sense for finitude draws the middle Schelling to theosophy, but the late Schelling will reconsider this move, distancing himself from theosophy because the theosophist's enthusiasm for the non-rational is too cheaply purchased. For Schelling, the understanding must go the distance with reflection, concept, and logic, a distance which cannot be measured a priori but must be traversed to be known. The late Schelling stages a critique of "negative philosophy," rationalist idealism, which he more or less invented and Hegel perfected, but he always insists that the passage to "positive philosophy," the philosophy of existence, is only by means of negative philosophy. We cannot deduce existence from concepts but neither can we understand existence without concepts. Carried as far as it goes the understanding discovers unsurpassable limits, whether this be the subject-object identity of the early Schelling, the contingencies of history of the middle period, or, in the later Schelling, the existence of reason itself. These limits are not *concepts* (concepts represent no real limit to thought); they are, rather, *realities*. For the early Schelling, an anticipation of the real shows itself in the symbolic and aesthetic patterns of experience, which always disclose more than reflective reason can ever comprehend, but the full experience of the real is well beyond the scope of art and symbolization; in the late Schelling's view, the real is not an aesthetic experience but a religious experience, a revelation.

The third Schellingian theme is contingency. The teleology of spirit is undergirded, qualified, and to some degree undercut by the formlessness of matter: older than order is accident, more basic than necessity is spontaneity. About this proto-existentialist/proto-materialist/proto-Marxist Schelling, much has been said. Schelling's 'irrationalism' can be overstated: without order and

necessity, thought cannot exist, for the ordered, the ruled, and the necessary constitute the proper medium of thought, the warp and woof of the ideal. From his earliest rebellion against subjectivistic interpretations of transcendental philosophy, to his re-evaluation of negative philosophy at the end of his career, Schelling rejects any suggestion that ideality, however insufficiently explanatory, is illusion, virtual, a merely subjective synthesis. Ideality is one face of the absolute; to be sure, it is not the whole, but neither is it merely reflective of “the hard-wiring” of the mind. The absolute manifests itself in the ideal to some degree and therefore order and necessity are undeniable on a certain level of experience. However, in the maximum reach of the understanding, every order is revealed to be *in fact* contingent, grounded in something “ruleless,” something *which has been brought to order* but which is not in itself ordered.

We see these three motifs, polarity, finitude, and contingency, in the early Schelling, especially in the nature-philosophy; we also see them at play in the middle Schelling, in the dialectic of ground and existence and the combusive interaction of the three potencies; and in the late Schelling, the motifs come to mature expression in the last version of the doctrine of the potencies and the distinction between negative and positive philosophy.

That said, Schelling’s work can hardly be described as a continuous evolution of thought: a sea-change separates the later from the early Schelling. Schelling was transformed when he moved to Munich in 1806, whether this be because he came to a new appreciation for the catholic middle ages,³ or discovered the significance of Jacob Boehme for the question concerning nature,⁴ or had a religious experience,⁵ or perhaps all three. Something changed in him in any case, and the change was momentous. The works prior to 1809 have as their focus the objectivity of the ideal and the infinity of nature; after 1809 Schelling is predominantly concerned with questions concerning ethics, mythology and its relation to revealed religion, speculative theology and what we might call political theology. We should not speak of a *break* in 1809 but of a *turn*, and not in the sense of a reversal but in the sense of a bend in the road—from nature-philosophy to philosophy of religion. The turn is not a break because Schelling *never* opposes nature and spirit as Hegelians might. The religious issues that pre-occupy the later Schelling—the distinction between good and evil, the idea of *creation ex nihilo*, the concept of revelation and its presupposition, a personal divine creator, the history of Christianity as the unprethinkable occurrence of transcendence become immanent. These new themes are never permitted to displace Schelling’s earlier notions of nature, time, and identity. They rather supplement them, just as the positive philosophy does not contradict negative philosophy but *applies* it to a situation that could not be deduced from within it.

³ See John Laughland, *Schelling v.s. Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Aldershot, UK: 2007).

⁴ See Horst Fuhrmans, *Schellings Philosophie der Weltalter. Schellings Philosophie in den Jahren 1806-1821. Zum Problem des Schellingschen Theismus* (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1954).

⁵ Friedemann Horn, *Schelling and Swedenborg: Mysticism and German Idealism*, trans. George F. Dole (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997).

The 1809 *Freedom* essay is the *hinge* of the two principle phases in Schelling's thought: nature-philosophy and philosophy of religion. A hinge does not disconnect the two that it hinges together; on the contrary, it is the principle of their connection.

Consistent between the later and the early Schelling is the refusal to follow the trajectory of early modernity and split consciousness from nature. It is in this historical context that we must read the passage from the *Freedom* essay in which Schelling attempts to resolve the modern philosophical problem of freedom by moving the discussion to a deeper level of analysis in which both freedom and determinism can be understood as essential moments in freedom's experience of itself. Schelling is still doing nature-philosophy in the *Freedom* essay; another name for "ground," Schelling tells us, is "nature."⁶

The early notion of nature as "visible spirit"⁷ becomes, in the middle Schelling, "ground," God's dark other, which leaves its trace in the impenetrable and inexplicable reality of things, "the irreducible remainder" (*der nie aufgehende Rest*), never to be subsumed into a concept and frustrating reason's every attempt at system.⁸ Nature for the early Schelling is not mindless material awaiting the synthesizing powers of subjectivity to give it sense and structure but spirit in its undeveloped potency for consciousness. Freedom in the middle Schelling is not nature-transcending consciousness but consciousness *of* nature (subjective genitive). The *Freedom* essay is a continuation of nature-philosophy by other means: Schelling's impulse—to bring freedom and nature within one comprehensive view—remains the same as in his first explorations of post-Fichtean metaphysics. For the middle Schelling, the opposition between freedom and nature is overcome when nature is no longer understood positivistically as a substance or a network of substances, but rather onto-dynamically as *production* (and therefore as differentiation of the activity that produces and the product thereby produced). "Nature in general is everything that lies beyond the absolute being of absolute identity."⁹ Essential to the middle Schelling's naturalization of personality and personalizing of nature is his replacement of the Kantian notion of existence (position in space and time) with the Oetingerian notion of life as spontaneous self-revelation.¹⁰ Freedom is the potentization of organic life, just as

⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809, SSW I/7: 331-416), trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006), 27.

⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, "Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature as an Introduction to this Science" (1797, SSW I/2: 1-73), trans. Priscilla Hayden-Roy, in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 1987), 202.

⁸ Schelling, *Freedom*, 29.

⁹ Schelling, *Freedom*, 28.

¹⁰ See Schelling, *Freedom*, 228. On the influence of vitalism and vitalist theology on Schelling, see Robert Schneider, *Schelling und Hegels schwäbischen Geistesabnen* (Würzburg, 1938); Ernst Benz, *Schellings theologische Geistesabnen* (Wiesbaden: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1955), and more recently, Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy. Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2011). On Friedrich Christoph Oetinger see Martin Weyer-Menkoff, *Christus, das Heil der Natur. Entstehung und*

organism is the potentization of non-organic life, a perfection of the power of internal causality that is latent in the non-organic and first manifest in the lowest living organism. The archetype of both human freedom and organic life is the self-actualizing freedom of God.¹¹ As image of God, nature is no mechanism but a living, developing, self-moving life, the pinnacle of which is reached in man, who not only moves according to internal principles, but brings the dynamic of self-movement to its highest expression by authoring himself.

Although the absolute in itself, the unground, lacks nothing, the middle Schelling sometimes speaks of it as though it did, for what is brought about by the unground's decision—creation, difference, consciousness—is understood after the 1809 personalist turn as a real increase in being, a revelation of the real. By the late philosophy of mythology and revelation, Schelling will change his view yet again and insist that God as a free and personal creator lacks nothing and does not depend upon creation to become personal. This is where we would do well to emphasize the tension (not the split) between Schelling's 1809 philosophy of freedom, with its breakthrough to the concept of personality, and the earlier identity-philosophy, in which Schelling explores the opposite perspective, the impersonal and eternal self-sufficiency of the absolute. Identity-philosophy argues that, from the vantage point of the absolute, multiplicity, consciousness, and history are appearances produced by deficiencies in knowledge, degrees of separation from intellectual intuition: "All that is is, to the extent that it is, One: namely, it is the eternally self-same identity, the One that alone exists, and that therefore is all that can be known."¹² In his middle period, Schelling argues, to the contrary, that difference is not an imperfection: the absolute is in process, giving birth to itself by means of producing duality, multiplicity, and history. The late Schelling returns to the assumption of the divine aseity characteristic of the identity-philosophy and corrects the theological 'error' of ascribing historical development to God. If we suspend the theological problems resulting from a God who begins imperfect and creates the world to perfect himself and, for a moment, follow Žižek in interpreting the theogony of the middle Schelling as a metapsychology, an analysis of the structure of personality by means of a projection of these structures unto a model of the absolute personality¹³—for whatever else the middle Schelling is doing he is clearly also writing a psychology of the unconscious—we discover a narrative that anticipates not only Lacan and the resolution of the Oedipal complex in psychoanalysis but also the birth of the hero in analytical psychology: a being that begins in unconscious unity with the system that produces and initially

Systematik der Theologie Friedrich Christoph Oetingers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

¹¹ See Schelling, *Freedom*, 228.

¹² F.W.J. Schelling, "System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular" (1804, SSW I/6: 131-156), trans. Thomas Pfau, in Thomas Pfau, ed., *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory. Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 153.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Other Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

sustains it, achieves personal consciousness, individuality, and freedom by dissociating from that system and establishing a conscious relationship to it.

Given that he cut his teeth in the opposite camp, in transcendental idealism, how does Schelling arrive at the extreme form of transcendental realism characteristic of his late period, alternatively described as the overcoming of idealism¹⁴ or its completion¹⁵? The answer to this question would involve us in a systematic overview of Schelling's long career, only the main moves of which can be outlined here. Identity-philosophy is the first step towards positive philosophy since it problematizes the main assumption of historical immanentism, that the absolute could be contained within a historical world-process. Identity-philosophy produces a conundrum for Schelling for it presumes to deploy absolute knowledge, intellectual intuition, but only by denying the reality of freedom, contingency and the finite. Schelling's disciple C.H. Eschenmayer suggested a solution: we must distinguish the appearance of being, with its dualities of subject-object, substance-attributes, infinite-finite, from being itself, which is one, undivided and timeless; philosophy concerns itself with the former, finite being sundered into inevitable dichotomies, religion with the latter, the absolute in itself.¹⁶ Schelling's answer to this suggestion was the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion* treatise.¹⁷ Schelling argues against Eschenmayer that finitude is more than mere appearance; it is, rather, an indication of an historical break in the absolute. The question then becomes: Why did this break with the absolute occur? The answer Schelling provides in 1809 is the great thought of the later Schelling, perhaps his one great thought, which had to be wrested from his own pantheistic systems of nature-philosophy and identity-philosophy: being is free and freedom in anarchic, the capacity for good and evil (*ein Vermögen des Guten und des Bösen*¹⁸). The unity of the absolute is not necessary to spirit and the break with unrelated infinity ushers in not only human self-consciousness and responsibility but all of the evils of finite existence: sin, disease, madness and death. The 1809 turn in Schelling's thought is not merely a qualification of the identity-philosophy's impersonal notion of the absolute (the timelessly undifferentiated), it is also the dawning of a fundamentally new concern in Schelling's work: the real problem for philosophy is not the absolute as such but the freedom which has deprived us of it.

Why does such freedom exist? What purpose does it serve? It is clear enough to Schelling in 1809 that freedom must be able to disrupt the absolute, otherwise nothing would exist. But since such disruption must be possible, the monism of identity-philosophy is thrown into question: only a real power can

¹⁴ Horst Fuhrmans, *Schellings letzte Philosophie. Die negative und positive Philosophie im Einsatz des Spätidealismus* (Berlin: Hans Tietzsch, 1940).

¹⁵ Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Stuttgart: Koehlerhammer, 1955).

¹⁶ C.H. Eschenmayer, *Die Philosophie in ihrem Übergang zur Nichtphilosophie*, published in 1803. For a summary, see Fuhrmans *Schellings letzte Philosophie*, 31-32.

¹⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion* (1804, SSW 6: 11-70), trans. Klaus Ottmann (Putnam, Conn.: Spring Publications, 2010).

¹⁸ Schelling, *Freedom*, SSW 1/7, 352.

disrupt reality. The existence of such freedom, Schelling concludes, cannot be known a priori; hence the identity-philosophy, which aimed at the construction of an a priori system, was not wrong in denying the existence of negative freedom; it was only wrong in assuming that idealist philosophy could be adequate to reality. The existence of negative freedom can only be discovered a posteriori, in real history, especially the religious history recounted in the Old and New Testaments. For here, philosophy discovers a religious solution to its problem, albeit one that still needs to be thought through philosophically: the break with the absolute can only be the result of a rebellion of freedom. Evil now becomes a real issue for Schelling, and he sympathizes greatly with Jacob Boehme, for whom it is *the* only issue, one that drove Boehme to overhaul conventional understandings, not only of God, but of the nature of the human being. Evil is not simply a power of self-destruction original to man, as Kant would have it, it is the primal otherness in being, which God himself must be ultimately responsible for, else he is not God, an otherness which shows itself in all phenomena, the dark ground of the singularity of material being, the basest inclinations of the human spirit, and the personal identity of the individual.

Most of the papers collected in this issue of *Analecta Hermeneutica* originated in the context of the first two meetings of the North American Schelling Society: Seattle (2012), and London, Ontario (2013). They have been selected for this issue because of their intrinsic merit and also because together they cover the full spectrum of Schelling's career, from the earliest work in *Naturphilosophie*, to the late speculation on eschatology and ecclesiology. That we are in the midst of a Schelling renaissance in the English speaking world cannot be denied. After decades of neglect, we are re-discovering the wealth of conceptual resources contained in Schelling's oeuvre and putting it to use in thinking the most fundamental problems facing philosophy and theology today.

This issue is dedicated to the founding members of the North American Schelling Society, especially Iain Hamilton Grant, Jason Wirth, Tilottama Rajan, Bruce Matthews, and Lore Hühn. The society would not have come into existence were it not for a satellite session of the International Institute for Hermeneutics held at the annual meeting for the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Arlington Virginia, 29 October 2009. Following that memorable panel, a lunch discussion with Andre Wiercinski led to the enthusiastic resolve to establish a society dedicated to the advancement of Schelling studies in North America.

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