

Freedom and Revelation

A Systematic Reconstruction of Schelling's Late Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a systematic reconstruction and defense of the project undertaken by Schelling in what is referred to as his late philosophy or *Spätphilosophie* – initiated with the Munich lectures on the *System der Weltalter* (1827) and including the Berlin lectures on the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (1841-42).

This project is commonly considered a failure.

In offering against such assessments a reconstruction of Schelling's project, I attempt to tease out, articulate, and defend as its fundamental thesis the idea that at the heart of philosophy lies the question of freedom; that there can be no freedom without revelation; and that a philosophical encounter with revelation is therefore neither a contradiction in terms nor a curious relic of the religious past, but a living concern. Whether – and if so, in what way – this concern can be *adequately* or *satisfyingly* addressed through Schelling's thought, or at least through what is living in it rather than dead, is a question which remains open.

I situate this reconstruction within the *historical* perspective of how, in the space of mere decades, German philosophy moves from the effective canceling out of the idea of revelation, through its partial historical and pedagogical validation, to Schelling's claim that it forms the horizon outside of which there can be no true philosophy. Revelation allows Schelling to transcend the frame of philosophy as a self-grounding, self-enclosing whole and articulate a philosophy characterized by an essential openness to what religion announces under the name of revelation – without, or so is the claim, relapsing into dogmatic theology.

I will be led in my reconstruction by the *systematic* question of the relation between philosophy and religion. To be clarified here is what it would mean for philosophy to relate itself to what is given in or as the phenomenon that exceeds it as its other. Can there be a purely philosophical account of givenness as revealedness or event that is not always already beholden to a concretely historical – and thus particular – Revelation, and if so, to what extent does this threaten to break down the project of philosophy as distinct from religion altogether? Can revelation, as religious idea, be recuperated for philosophy without subverting its own claims?

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Introduction

It was an indescribable delight, Kierkegaard reports in a diary entry of 22 November 1841, to have witnessed Schelling's second lecture in Berlin. With barely controlled enthusiasm he adds that when Schelling spoke the word "actuality", the fruit of thought leapt in him for joy like the child did in the womb of Elizabeth.¹ It was a joy that was unfortunately to last all too briefly. Three months later Kierkegaard would write to his brother that he was too old to

¹ A wealth of lecture notes, diary entries, letters, and reports connected to Schelling's 1841/42 lectures on the philosophy of revelation are conveniently found in Manfred Frank's edition of the so-called *Paulus-Nachschrift* (hereafter: *Paulus*). Kierkegaard's diary entry of 22 November 1841 (*Paulus*, 530). On Schelling's life and times more widely, see the standard biography by Arsenji Gulyga, *Schelling. Leben und Werk*.

listen to lectures, just as Schelling was too old to give them; and that Schelling's doctrine of potencies testifies only to the highest impotence.²

From indescribable delight to impotence in three months – this is not the highest achievement a lecturer might hope for. Yet Kierkegaard was far from alone in his underwhelmed assessment of Schelling's lectures. His Berlin auditors mocked Schelling's alleged religious obscurantism and his pretensions to *Wissenschaftlichkeit*. Posterity, to the extent that it has taken note of Schelling's late philosophy at all, has on the whole been only marginally more kind.³

Despite the bitter assessment of the Berliner audience, the following pages aim to provide a reconstruction of the project of Schelling's late philosophy. I attempt to tease out, articulate, and defend as its fundamental thesis the idea that at the heart of philosophy lies the question of freedom; that there can be no freedom without revelation; and that a philosophical encounter with revelation is therefore neither a contradiction in terms nor a curious relic of the religious past, but a living concern. Whether – and if so, in what way – this concern can be adequately or satisfyingly addressed through Schelling's thought, or at least through what is living in it rather than dead, is a question which remains open.

² Letter to Peter Christian Kierkegaard of 27 February 1842 (*Paulus*, 534).

³ Of the immediate reception of Schelling's Berlin lectures, the collected materials in *Paulus* gives a good impression. On the reception of Schelling's thought as a whole, see Guido Schneeberger, *Friedrich Joseph Wilhelm von Schelling: Eine Bibliographie*. Useful discussion of more recent material can be found in Markus Gabriel, "Sein, Mensch und Bewußtsein. Tendenzen der neueren Schelling-Forschung" and *Der Mensch im Mythos. Untersuchungen über Ontotheologie, Anthropologie und Selbstbewußtseinsgeschichte in Schellings Philosophie der Mythologie*, 8-26.

Philosophical questions do not of course fall from the sky. I therefore situate this reconstruction within the *historical* perspective of how, in the space of mere decades, German philosophy moves from the attempt to deny all genuine philosophical relevance to the idea of revelation, manifest in the very title of Fichte's *Kritik aller Offenbarung*, through its partial historical and pedagogical validation such as we find in Hegel's system, to its acknowledgement by the late Schelling as the horizon without which there can be no true philosophy. For over the course of his condensed and complex philosophical development, revelation is the term which comes to signify for Schelling that any logical system of thought will, when pushed with honesty to its limits, encounter an outside of reason which it itself can no longer draw into its circle of explanation. It is this thought of an outside of reason which allows Schelling to transcend the frame of philosophy as a self-grounding, self-enclosing whole and articulate a philosophy characterized by an essential openness to what religion announces under the name of revelation. Schelling's claim is that such openness to revelation does not mean a relapse into dogmatic theology, even if the outside of reason with which Schelling is concerned is situated in a speculative account of the history of religious consciousness. For religious consciousness finds itself always already situated over against the gods, in whatever shape it may please them to take, and in this relationship understands itself as being in the power of the divine. What religious consciousness finds itself over against as the divine is, I argue, nothing other for Schelling than the givenness of the world as a whole that precedes its being caught in our understanding. Schelling expresses this with a term no less of a curious neologism in German than it is in English, *das unvordenkliche Sein*. This unprethinkable being, which thought can only belatedly take into account, and never itself ground in a still-rational construction, opens the way not only for a Kierkegaard,

reluctant though he might have been to acknowledge it, but to Heidegger's philosophy of being and the turn to religion in French phenomenology associated with Levinas, Derrida, and Marion.

In reading Schelling's late philosophy as one in which freedom and revelation are essentially joined together, I am furthermore led by the *systematic* question of the relation between philosophy and religion. To be clarified here is what it would mean for philosophy to relate itself to what is given in or as the phenomenon that exceeds it as its other. Can there be a purely philosophical account of givenness as revelation or event, I ask, that is not always already beholden to a concretely historical – and thus particular – revelation, and if so, to what extent does this threaten to break down the project of philosophy as distinct from the religious altogether? Can revelation, as religious idea, be recuperated for philosophy without at the same time subverting its own claims of being more than an imposed, particular account for which no further reason can be given?

I will proceed by means of four chapters, briefly sketched below.

(1) The Irrelevance of Revelation in the Age of Metaphysics. Where modern philosophy begins to speak of revelation, it does so by presenting it as a source of knowledge different in kind from, and beyond the grasp of, natural reason. Yet if reason frames by its own powers what can be known, and is limited only by boundaries which it itself has marked and beyond which no knowledge can be attained, then revelation as that which exceeds reason cannot yield knowledge. To the extent that the fundamental project of modern philosophy is the

auto-constitution of self-sufficient reason, the status of revelation within it is one that has to be made harmless. Crucial for the development of my argument here is an investigation of the formal status and possible justification of revelation as conceived by Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte.

It is in Spinoza (§1) that the making irrelevant of revelation as philosophical project first manifests itself in full force. As we will see, the Spinozist account of revelation holds that the light of natural reason might be considered a form of revelation; yet the vulgar understanding of revelation or prophecy, which it is the task of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* to clarify, is that of a particular and certain cognition which, granted directly by God, escapes reason. That such a thing exists, Spinoza does not contradict, yet he severs such revelation off from the realm of the cognitive by assigning it solely to the faculty of the imagination, and allowing revelation thus conceived to be no more than the imaginative shaping, on the part of the highly sensitive nature of the prophets, of certain moral intuitions inhering in them as men of virtue. Thus revelation is reduced to either morality or politics – neither of which, however, have a basis in truth, or carry a more than instrumental value. If revelation is not quite a tool to instill obedience in those who are not philosophers, then at least it is a way to guide those not fully capable of guiding themselves by reason to live lives that nevertheless are in as great an accord with reason as is possible. It does not have a direct relation to God in truth. This resides only in the reasoned cognition of God, and of this only the philosopher is capable. If this is so, however, the cognitivist ideal enshrined in the *Ethics* does not lead to the apotheosis of discursive reason, but – more mysteriously – to Spinoza's notoriously cryptic third kind of knowledge, acquired through *scientia intuitiva*. Though this way of knowing remains under-articulated in the *Ethics*, it forms a strand which will

resurface within German Idealism as intellectual insight into the self-manifestation of the absolute.

In Kant (§2), too, the project of neutralizing revelation by reducing it to the moral sphere is pursued. Here, the moral sphere has a rationality of its own in the form of practical reason as the capacity for autonomous self-determination. The particular revelation that is the Bible must thus be explained – forcing the sense of the text where necessary – as according with the doctrines of practical reason. The moral law then for Kant is the one site of revelation, at the same time imposed by nothing than the subject's free, rational self-determination, and yet equally the will of the ruler of the world revealed through reason.

Fichte's position (§3) can be characterized as a further radicalization of that of Kant. The *Kritik aller Offenbarung* unrolls its argument in three fundamental theses: we cannot know whether there is such a thing as revelation; were we to admit there is, we would not be able to recognize it as such; were we to be assured that we are dealing with a revelation, this revelation still would not be able to tell us anything over and above what practical reason already discloses clearly and universally.

If Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte turn revelation into a philosophical irrelevance, and if there is – as is the leading intuition of this study, and remains to be confirmed along its course – no freedom without revelation, it follows that they must be unable to persuasively account for freedom in their systems. And indeed, though Spinoza seeks to recuperate the concept of freedom from what he claims is the misunderstanding of anthropologizing thinking, there is no doubt that he is committed to the principle of sufficient reason to the point of denying on mechanistic grounds the very possibility of the freedom of the will. Kant and Fichte for their

part may claim with more than a measure of justification to be thinkers of human freedom. But Schelling will pointedly argue that the conjunction of freedom and morality – that only that act is free which autonomous, and vice versa – found in Kant and Fichte is in danger of making a freely undertaken immoral action unthinkable. If it follows from pathological rather than free determination, it is an act in which the agent does not, strictly speaking, act himself, and thus not one he can be held accountable for; if on the other hand it is a freely undertaken act, then as a form of rational self-determination, it cannot be immoral.

The first objection to situating revelation merely in the moral realm Schelling presents is that reason, as a unified whole, cannot be content with an understanding of God's manifestation which restricts itself to the practical. Thinking freedom adequately requires revelation be thought as a form of disclosure of more primordial and more real a kind than that closed in by the domain of the moral. Though God as the source of revelation may be absent from the sphere of theoretical reason in the first *Critique*, Schelling like his fellow German Idealists will underline that God as transcendental ideal of reason, which guarantees that there can be such a thing as knowledge at all, is not an occasional hiccup in Kant's thinking but a central and necessary doctrine. The question is how this ideal, which for Kant remains something we must only be able to think without attributing existence to it, can *pace* Kant be shown to manifest itself. The means Schelling reaches for are provided by what in Spinoza and Kant escapes the reduction of revelation to morality: a *scientia intuitiva*, now understood in the light of Kant's remarks on intellectual intuition, of God as both spirit and nature.

(2) Freedom Rational and Ontological. This requires first a new account of the radicality of freedom (§1) that transcends the idealist conception of rational self-determination. This project which Schelling takes on most notably in the 1809 *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* and the great unfinished project of the *Weltalter* on which he works from 1811, is to be understood not, as has often been done in the abounding casual and dismissive readings of Schelling's work, as the avoidance of Hegel's criticism by withdrawing into theosophical enthusiasm, but as the attempt to fully integrate and radicalize this criticism so as to turn it against its source. If revelation is now to be understood not formally and immediately but through a mediated development, this is because the absolute itself is split by an inner dualism of ground and existence (§2), or between God's blind will to manifestation and the equally divine will to impose a reasoned order upon this manifestation – a dualism the overcoming of which is postulated eschatologically rather than as an achieved teleological goal.

Freedom – both in and of the absolute, both human and divine – is re-thought in this configuration not as moral but as an ontological freedom (§3). The polemic here waged beneath the surface of the texts suggests that the Hegelian dialectic, guided in Schelling's eyes from the outset by an outcome already presumed achieved, is itself merely a refined form of logical determinism. Despite Hegel's attentiveness to the concrete forms of historical religious consciousness, despite his insistence that those doctrines of Christianity that have usually been excluded from rational theology and ascribed to revelation – the Fall, the Trinity, the Incarnation – are of high philosophical relevance, these forms of religious

thought are in the end no more than the expression in image and interior feeling of what philosophy can conceptualize directly in the pure medium of thought.

Schelling's project fails however to achieve its aim of understanding the absolute's self-revelation as inherently free and historical; it ultimately collapses its own key features by articulating them in terms of a progression which is natural rather than spiritual – that is, cosmological rather than cultural – and does not achieve an understanding of the historical as evenemental, or actually and fully open.

(3) The Logical and the Revealed. Schelling's late philosophy rectifies these errors by establishing a fundamental distinction between the logical and the historical, the natural and spiritual, and the a priori and the a posteriori. Negative philosophy as purely rational science devotes itself to determinations of thought and leads to the idea of God as necessary being; positive philosophy seeks to show through a progressive speculative history of religious consciousness that this necessary being does indeed exist and reveals itself in history. Much of the scholarship on Schelling's late thought hinges upon the precise meaning of these claims and the way in which they are interrelated.

Against readings which turn Schelling into either an unreconstructed onto-theologist or a irrationalist theist, I defend the claim that onto-theology is neither embraced nor dismissed by Schelling. Rather it is analyzed as a deep-seated need which can nevertheless not be satisfied by pure reason's own resources. What Schelling will call “negative philosophy”, as the culmination of modern philosophy from Spinoza to Kant, has as its focal

point the idea of the necessary existence of a most perfect being. It does not aim to establish the claim that a priori reason can grasp and indeed prove the existence of such a being. Instead its aim is to underline that a priori rationality is as unable to give up on this idea as it is powerless to ascertain its instantiation.

This is most clear in Schelling's critical engagement with the ontological argument (§1) in Descartes and Spinoza, and its successor in Kant's ideal of reason (§2), which unlike much of the Anglo-American Kant scholarship Schelling sees not as a superfluous remnant of dogmatism within transcendental idealism, but – despite, or rather because of its merely regulative yet indispensable nature – as the very heart of its project. Negative philosophy ends in what Schelling terms a hunger for being (§3), in other words, in the philosophical need to grasp the actual existence not of this or that individual, but of what there is as such: the absolute or God; and this, not by means by Hegelian logic, which illegitimately draws from the a priori itself the proof of the actual existence of the absolute, but rather by vindicating against such a logic the priority of being over thought, as that given over and against which consciousness always already finds itself and which it neither creates nor masters. It is this givenness of being which positive philosophy will articulate historically rather than transcendently under the name of revelation.

(4) Being Revealed, Twice. Positive philosophy unrolls in three parts. First, it describes the being which thought belatedly encounters in its revealedness, not as a necessary being, but as a contingent occurrence. Schelling's name for this is, as we saw, is *das unvordenkliche Sein* or unprethinkable being. As such a being falls outside of the order of logical necessity, there

is no reason why it might not also not be – even if to thought it retroactively appears as that which cannot *not* be thought, or that which, to the extent there is anything at all rather than nothing, must be thought of as existing.

To the extent that this primordial being is conceived of not necessarily but freely, it must be described as free even with regard to its own existence. This is to say, in the language of religious consciousness, that God is not the necessary being, nor even the most perfect being, but has lordship over being. The divine assertion at the burning bush, *'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*, is thus not to be understood as “I am that I am”, the articulation of a supposed “metaphysics of the Exodus” in which God and eternal being are equated; this in fact is the fundamental error in Schelling's eyes of the onto-theological tradition from Spinoza to Hegel. It is rather to be read futurally as “I will be what I will be”, and this in two senses: I will be *whatever I want* to be – that is, according to my will; I will be what I *will be* – whether or not I will be, and what I will be in such case, is a question which not only happens not to be resolved yet here at the burning bush, but is structurally referred to the future.

Why should historical religious consciousness, however, be the privileged site for knowledge of that which a priori reason cannot know? If there is to be any philosophical merit in this position, it cannot be reliant on the dogmatic assertion that religious tradition is the direct beneficiary of a truth come down from on high. The positive philosophy must be read, rather, as a history of self-consciousness which does not reach its apex in necessary and fully transparent self-knowledge, but in a self-relation which acknowledges in its contingency its own ontological freedom – God being, in the final reckoning, merely the oldest and most enduring name under which such freedom may become apparent.

With the need for and goal of such a history of religious self-consciousness established, it can be pursued in its immediate form as a philosophy of mythology (§1). The critical aspect of mythological consciousness for Schelling is that it conceives of the divine itself as a natural theogonic process. In this sense, a philosophical account of mythology shows how religious consciousness, from primitive forms of monotheism through to the developed polytheistic systems of the ancient world, and culminating in the Greek mysteries, sees the Gods as subject to necessity – not, as modern philosophy, a logical necessity, but the chaotic generative force of fate. If the divine is, loosely speaking, revealed to religious consciousness in mythology, there is in stricter terms no revelation here, absent the idea of divine freedom. My focus here will be not so much on the concrete development of the mythological process through the wealth of mythical material which Schelling incorporates – a development the need for which is eminently questionable – as on the nature of myth in the philosophical perspective of Romanticism and Schelling's own early work.

The philosophy of revelation (§2) relates to mythology as spirit does to nature – while the one is the necessary ground for the other, there is nevertheless a rupture between the two. This rupture consists in religious consciousness becoming aware of itself not as bound to a theogonic force outside of itself, but as set free. Schelling's speculative Christology argues that the primordial being which philosophy seeks, while not identical with the always-belated reality of self-consciousness, is yet at one with it where it understands itself as exposed to the contingency of history and precisely in that exposure as free.

Despite the unmistakable Christian triumphalism which tinges the positive philosophy, Christ is the *end* of revelation not so much as its goal as its coming to an end; it

gives way to a philosophical religion (§3). How is such a religion to be understood? I argue that where mythology, as a natural religion in which necessity rules, is unfree, and where Christianity lets necessity disappear in the face of God's radical freedom to be what he will, philosophical religion is to be understood as the recalling of the experience that religious consciousness has made in grasping its own freedom. This does not mean that history has come to an end in reflection; but that what makes history such, its historicity, can in a philosophical religion as Schelling understands it itself become clear: being, which is always already given to consciousness, is itself inherently evenemental.

Chapter 1 – The Irrelevance of Revelation in the Age of Metaphysics

Introduction

Revelation, or so it may appear, is by the unspoken agreement of friend and foe alike a word of an eminently religious kind. Whatever one may think the domain of the religious is, and however one may wish to draw its boundaries, it seems clear that revelation belongs to its sphere so indisputably that it has little application that does not refer back to it; more strongly, it may seem to express the core of what makes the religious different – different, for better or for worse, not in degree but in kind – from all other human endeavor. Revelation thus understood would be what constitutes the very religiosity of the religious: that there is a certain kind of truth, a certain form of knowledge of a theoretical or practical kind, which,

though it is beyond our natural reason's power to attain, may be granted in a supernatural fashion at a particular place and time.

But if this understanding of revelation will sound obvious to some, it is not clear that it accords with what an innocent eye would find in those religions considered “revealed” and their Scriptures, taken both as describing the *taking place* of such a revelation and the *message* this revelation vaunts itself to transmit from the divine to the earthly realm. The many ways in which God is said to meet with man and speak to him in the Hebrew Bible, for one, is described in as many different words, none of which quite translate effortlessly into revelation.⁴ The New Testament may have given the word *revelation* to the English language, via Latin *revelatio* from Greek ἀποκάλυψις; but although the word occurs with some frequency, it either points to the Book of Revelation – a single, and rather marginal and contested book within the New Testament canon at that – or may point, on the

⁴ It is telling that the word Modern Hebrew uses for revelation, the substantive התגלות (*hitgalut*), does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Verbal forms of גלה in the reflexive (*hitp*) occur in the biblical corpus, but they have little to do with divine missives: Noah in his drunkenness “*was uncovered* within his tent” (Gen 9:21). Forms of גלה, to uncover, *do* occur in relation to the divine: God is said to appear (*ni*, lit.: became uncovered) to Jacob at Elbethel (Gen 37:7). But priests are equally commanded not to “go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness *be not discovered* thereon” (Ex 20:26), and to Ezekiel, the personified Jerusalem “*discovered* (*pi*) her whoredoms”, that is, fornicated with open shamelessness. Not all occurrences of גלה are revelatory, nor does the root appear wherever the God of the Hebrew Bible shows himself to man in word or deed; seeing and being seen (forms of ראה, חזה), of making known (ידע *hi*), and of prophecy (נבא) are no less prominent.

Bultmann comments (*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, lemma ἀλύπτω κτλ.; 3:579): “So zentral für die [alttestamentliche] Frömmigkeit die Idee der Offenbarung ist – ein festgeprägter Terminus entspricht ihr noch nicht”. Yet much as the lacking of a word does not mean the lacking of an idea, one might well ask whether there indeed *is* such a thing as a minimally consistent idea of revelation waiting to be discovered in the Hebrew Bible – hence Pannenberg’s caution in speaking of a “Vielschichtigkeit der biblischen Offenbarungsvorstellungen” (*Systematische Theologie*, 1:217-28). It is not, at base, the concern of the Hebrew Bible to ponder the way in which the divine manifests itself to man, but rather to show that it is the purpose of God, with whom man is already familiar through His many manifestations, to enter into a relationship with man – a relationship which is cast not as revelation but as covenant (ברית) and guidance (תורה).

other hand, to all manner of things becoming manifest, be they holy or profane, natural or supernatural.⁵ Things seem much the same when it comes to the third branch of the Abrahamic tree.⁶

That Scripture hardly expresses itself with clarity and rigor on the subject of revelation may seem a gratuitous remark; it is after all not much different when it comes to other seemingly guiding ideas that emerge in and through the narrative, legal, and prophetic streams of the Bible – say, such terms as covenant or law in the Hebrew Bible, more implicitly suggested than explicitly treated of, or the nature of the Christ and the Trinity, about which the New Testament remains notoriously tight-lipped. That a doctrine of revelation should be distilled from Scripture only by its later exegetes should therefore hardly be surprising. Yet the problem in the case of revelation is deeper still. Not only are the Hebrew and Greek

⁵ Classical Greek knows the word ἀποκαλύπτω (to uncover), but reserves it for banal kinds of uncovering of, say, one's head; when the numinous is in play, it is words like σημαίνειν (to show by a sign) that are preferred (*ThWNT* 3:568, 572); famously Heraclitus has it that “ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει” – the Lord who is in Delphi neither speaks nor hides, but gives signs (*D/K* fragm. 172-73).

In the Septuagint, ἀποκαλύπτω appears (often as translation of נָגַד) and may acquire a theological shade when said of God's words and deeds (e.g. Isa 52:10, 56:1). The New Testament employs ἀποκαλύπτω readily, flanked by words such as γνωρίζω (to make known), δηλώω (to make visible), φανερόω (to make manifest), ἐπιφάνω (to show one's self), ἐμφανίζω (to show forth), but here too there is no clear unequivocal meaning that these words, even when they are applied to the manifestation of the divine, point to: whether revelation is a past occurrence or an eschatological event to come, whether its seat is the world as God's creation or beyond it, and whether God reveals other than in and through the Christ – all these are questions the Synoptics and John, the Pauline and other epistles give vague and hard to reconcile answers to. For a detailed discussion of both the lexical items and the New Testament authors, see Schulte, *Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament*.

⁶ This is not the place, nor is the present author qualified, to say much of substance about the way the Qur'ān employs words such as *wahy*, revelation or inspiration (42:51, *Sūrat al-Šūrā*) or *nuzūl*, sending down (97:1, *Sūrat al-Qadr*). But if the Qur'ān is understood first and foremost not as a doctrine about God, but as his Law; and if this Law be thought of as depending on nothing but the sovereign will of God, then here too, perhaps, the concept of revelation as supernatural knowledge transfer may miss the heart of the Qur'ānic tradition.

Scriptures themselves curiously casual about the ways in which the divine manifests itself – the Rabbinic tradition and that of the Church Fathers alike are for a great many of the subsequent centuries astoundingly silent on the question of what revelation is supposed to be, and how it is meant to relate to human life and thought in the world unaided by such a divine gift.⁷

By the Enlightenment, by contrast, revelation will have emerged as the sole indubitable concept determining the relation between the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural, reason and that which, if there be such a thing, exceeds its grasp. These three pairs of oppositions, though they may seem similar, collapse into one another under a specific understanding of what revelation is. This understanding, which comes fully into place in what one might call the age of metaphysics, in which self-founding reason stakes a claim to sovereignty and autonomy, is above all an *epistemological* understanding: revelation as a form of *transmission of knowledge*.

But if it is the case that the idea of the supernatural giving of divine knowledge beyond the reach of natural reason is not, historically, the clear meaning which either holy writ or

⁷ Remarkably, the term has no real importance even for Luther and is equally absent from the deliberations of the Council of Trent. Avery Dulles comments, “Since revelation did not emerge as a major theological theme until after the Enlightenment, it may suffice to give a very cursory survey of the first eighteen centuries. In most of the early theologians, as in the Bible itself, there is no systematic doctrine of revelation. Although the word appears here and there, it is rarely used with the technical meaning it has acquired in modern theology.” (Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History*, 31). For similar conclusions within Christian theology, cf. the historical overview in Pannenberg and in Latourelle, *Théologie de la Révélation*. See also *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, lemma “Offenbarung” (6:1105-30), which despite providing detailed discussion of ancient and modern authors signals the same absence of a concern for revelation *as such*, i.e. as both a unified term and central problem, until the Enlightenment.

its rabbinic and patristic inheritors give to revelation, where does this idea come from? How does revelation end up in modern thought – and not until modern thought – as a matter primarily and for the most part to be treated in a theory of knowledge?

To hazard an answer we should perhaps look less at the concept of revelation itself, in its many inchoate and contradictory articulations, than at what comes to be presumed by the time of the Enlightenment as its antithesis – that is, at the philosophical self-articulation of reason. For if in what I have called the age of metaphysics, reason comes to be seen by philosophers and theologians alike as a free and self-sufficient force which can and must ground its own principles, then that which supposedly falls outside reason's bounds – whether by falling short of or exceeding them – comes, with a centrality and vigor not seen before, to be a problem.

This is not to deny the obvious fact that the opposition between faith and knowledge has a history that stretches back at least to late Antiquity. What it does mean is that this opposition was neither terminologically nor substantially one of reason and revelation, even less so one between natural and supernatural knowledge. When Paul opposes the wisdom of the Greeks with the Word of the Cross, he is not meddling in questions of epistemology. The antithesis between reason and revelation, in other words, is not an age-old and given one, but one which comes to the fore in modernity against the background of the idea of the universal sway of discursive reason.

Nor, it might be added, is the opposition we are dealing with here one between freethinking philosophers and pious theologians; it is rather that the epistemological model, in which revelation appears not unlike a miraculous telegram from the beyond, the purpose of which is to inform its happy recipient of the facts regarding the nature and will of God, is

one which is embraced by the unbeliever and the soundly orthodox alike, and serves the one as much to defend the idea of revelation as it does the other to subvert it.⁸

It is modern philosophy, then, which in setting revelation up as its other – as the outside of reason which, precisely as such, cannot stand in a genuinely productive relationship to it – both foregrounds and seeks to disarm the claim that reason cannot do without revelation. Now it is customary to think of the history of modern philosophy as starting with the Cartesian *cogito* – the moment in which thought seeks to provide itself with an unshakable foundation in itself and so become impervious to skeptical doubt. But despite his desire to find a principle of certainty upon which the whole of human knowledge may be built, Descartes is careful to avoid drawing into this project the revealed truths of Christian doctrine. Theology as the sum of the truths of *sacra scriptura* remains above reason and falls outside the purview of the philosopher.⁹

Such modesty in the face of theology cannot, however, be attributed to Spinoza. For it is his bold claim that it is the philosopher, and the philosopher only, who speaks properly of God – which is to say, speaks of substance as the one and all which is its own cause and which nothing but a relentless application of reason can directly and fully discover. It is Spinoza, then, who opens an era in which revelation is called upon to be judged by metaphysics. Kant,

⁸ On Aquinas and Suarez as forerunners of the epistemological model of revelation – the latter going as far as calling revelation a kind of *informatio* –, see chapter 1 of Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*.

⁹ Thus Descartes states at the end of the first part of the *Discours*: “Je révérais notre théologie, et prétendais, autant qu’aucun autre, à gagner le ciel; mais ayant appris, comme chose très assurée, que le chemin n’en est pas moins ouvert aux plus ignorants qu’aux plus doctes, et que les vérités révélées, qui y conduisent, sont au-dessus de notre intelligence, je n’eusse osé les soumettre à la faiblesse de mes raisonnements et je pensais que pour entreprendre de les examiner et y réussir, il était besoin de quelque extraordinaire assurance du ciel, et d’être plus qu’homme.” (*Discours de la Méthode*, 37; cf. AT VI:9-10).

the second thinker to be discussed here, has room only for a religion within the limits of strict reason; and as reason cannot, at the risk of entangling itself in self-contradiction, claim any form of theoretical knowledge of the supersensible, it is only in practical reason that the idea of revelation might have a place – an insight which subsequently Fichte will come to radicalize by *equating* God directly with a moral world order.

In all three of these thinkers, revelation is measured up against the ideal of theoretical knowledge; failing to live up to this standard, revelation is relegated to a place in the moral realm where it can be safely contained. Thus in Spinoza, revelation as to his mind the Hebrew Bible understands it – that is, prophecy – is a political art and aims at nothing more than imposing on a people a moral order according to what is useful rather than what is true; as we will see, what Spinoza ambiguously admits one might understand as *true* revelation, has nothing to do with Scripture or tradition, and everything with the philosopher's purely intellectual grasp of God's nature. The intervention of Kantian philosophy, on the other hand, is to disallow such an intellectual grasp of God. From our knowledge of our finite world, on principle no theoretical claims to knowledge of the infinite can be made to follow. This for Kant leaves us with the moral law, which is given through our pure practical reason, as the only, but as will become clear highly ambiguous, site for revelation in the modern world. It is perhaps unsurprising that Kant's generous suggestion – that one *might think* of our inborn practical reason, and the awe for the moral law inscribed within it, *as if it were* the manifestation of the will of the architect and ruler of the world – would soon be seen for just that, a generous suggestion which does nothing but throw a cloak of otherworldly sanctity over the purely rational apparatus of categorical imperative and universalizability of maxims. Fichte works his way to the inevitable conclusion that, however much one might

entertain revelation as a mere possibility, it can neither be attested in any particular instance, nor is it at all necessary for our moral lives as directed by autonomy.

I have suggested that where modern philosophy begins to speak of revelation, it does so by presenting it as a source of knowledge different in kind from, and beyond the grasp of, natural reason. Yet if reason frames by its own powers what can be known, and is limited only by boundaries which it itself has marked and beyond which no knowledge can be attained, then revelation as that which exceeds reason cannot yield knowledge of its own; it can at best suggest proleptically or confirm belatedly what reason is capable of grasping directly and certainly. Beyond this lies only a rhapsodic pseudo-knowledge which is not worth knowing at all. To the extent that the fundamental project of modern philosophy is the auto-constitution of reason as a self-sufficient and all-inclusive whole, the status of revelation within it is thus bound to be that of a foreign element which has to be made harmless. How this rendering irrelevant of the concept of revelation takes place will in each case require a closer look.

It is in Spinoza (§1) that this domestication of revelation first manifests itself in full force as a philosophical project. The Spinozist account of revelation holds that the light of natural reason might be considered a form of revelation. Yet the vulgar understanding of *prophetia sive revelatio* – directly equated in this Spinozist phrase – is that of a particular and certain cognition which, granted directly by God, escapes reason. That such a thing exists, Spinoza does not contradict, yet he severs such revelation off from the realm of the cognitive by assigning it solely to the faculty of the imagination, and allowing revelation thus conceived to be no more than the imaginative shaping, on the part of the highly sensitive nature of the prophets, of certain moral intuitions which already inhere in them as men of great virtue.

Two strands may be observed in this argument: one, that at the core of Scripture undone of its figurative form lies a minimal moral religion; second, that much of the particular content of Scripture, above all the Mosaic Law, is no more than the political institutionalization of a body of precepts, valid for a specific people in their geographical and historical situatedness. Thus revelation is reduced to either morality or politics – neither of which, however, have a basis in truth, or carry a more than instrumental value: they are tools with which to ensure obedience, and thereby produce an ordered and stable commonwealth in which all can realize, to the extent that their capacities allow them, as great an amount of rational happiness as they are capable of. Truth however resides only in the rational cognition of God, and of this only the philosopher is truly capable. If this is so, however, the cognitivist ideal enshrined in the *Ethics* does not lead to the apotheosis of discursive reason, but to the goal of achieving through intuition the so-called third kind of knowledge. Though this way of knowing remains under-articulated in the *Ethics*, and has formed a crux of Spinoza scholarship from the beginning, it forms a strand which will resurface within German Idealism as intellectual insight into the self-manifestation of the absolute. To this question, we will have reason to return.

Kant (§2), too, pursues the project of pulling the fangs of revelation by reducing it to the moral sphere. The moral sphere has a rationality of its own in the form of practical reason as the capacity for autonomous self-determination. The particular revelation that is the Bible must thus be explained as according with the doctrines of practical reason. The moral law is the site of true revelation, for as Kant will argue in *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, it is at the same time imposed by nothing other than the subject's free, rational self-determination, and yet must also be seen as the will of the ruler of the world revealed

through reason. The precise force of this *must*, however, Kant fails to make clear in a manner consistent with his commitment to the purity of moral obligation in the absence of all reward or compensation.

Fichte (§3)'s position is a further radicalization of that of Kant, the three theses of the *Kritik aller Offenbarung* running: we cannot know whether there is such a thing as revelation; were we to admit there is, we would not be able to recognize it as such; were we to be assured that we are dealing with a revelation, this revelation still would not be able to tell us anything over and above what practical reason already discloses in full clarity and completeness, to everyone at all times and in all places.

What makes these three thinkers of particular relevance for present purposes is that they were assiduously read, critically digested, and aptly deployed, as needed, by Schelling in all stages of his philosophical development, and together pose for him the fundamental problem of how philosophy could be conceived of as a complete and systematic whole which yet does not crush the possibility of human freedom, but makes it its cornerstone. If, over the course of that development, he will turn to the idea of revelation to mark his philosophical distance from these three, it is under the force of the criticism aimed at their positions by someone from it from *outside* philosophy.

The crucial outsider who spurs on Schelling's thoughts here is Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. It is Jacobi's challenge that philosophy is at heart nothing but the determined, consequent investigation by discursive reason of reality, seen as an iron succession of causes and effects. The world as philosophy investigates it can only show up as a closed system of necessity, which can leave no room either for a human will which could escape the dictates of effective causality or for a genuinely transcendent God. Philosophy can thus only end in

fatalism and atheism. Jacobi from this position ignited all three of the major philosophical controversies of Schelling's lifetime – the *Pantheismusstreit*, targeting the mechanist determinism of Spinoza, the *Atheismusstreit* surrounding Fichte's idea of God as moral world order, and finally the *Theismusstreit* against Schelling's own *Naturphilosophie*.

Though Schelling evinces little respect for Jacobi's attempts at articulating his ideas, he admits him as an *intimate* enemy of philosophy, one who, as he will later say, like an ironically unselfconscious Moses leads philosophy to the promised land he himself will remain barred from entering, or who like the prophet Balaam sees his curses on philosophy turned into blessings.¹⁰ This promised land, I argue, is for Schelling's late philosophy the philosophical understanding of revelation as the condition of freedom.

Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte alike are philosophically committed to thinking of revelation along the lines of a telegram from the beyond, and all rule out, be it on epistemological or metaphysical grounds, that such a telegram could have anything to reveal about the nature of the divine. This means they not only restrict the contents of such miraculous messages to the realm of the practical, but assign them one of two roles: that of

¹⁰ See the 1827/28 Munich lectures entitled *System der Weltalter*: "So stand Jacobi auf der Grenze zwischen zwei Zeiten, über die eine, die des Wissens ging er in seinem Sehnen hinaus, ohne die erreichen zu können, sowie es Moses nicht vergönnt war, das gelobte Land zu sehen – aber Moses erkannte es in sich daß darin sein Volk Ruhe finden würde, was aber Jacobi nicht ahndete daß die Philosophie in dieser anderen Sphäre Ruhe finden könnte. So war er gleichsam zum unfreiwilligen Verkünder einer besseren Zeit geworden; ich sage zum unfreiwilligen, denn indem er im Eifer gegen die herrschenden Systeme die Philosophie verdammt, hatte er nie eine solche Vereinigung des Glaubens und Wissens geahndet. Und so hat sich sein Fluch wie das des Profeten Bileam in Segen verwandelt und Jacobi ist insofern eine der merkwürdigsten Erscheinungen im Gebiete der Philosophie" (*SdW*, 64-65). To this the fuller treatment of Jacobi in *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* adds that unlike Moses, who with confidence looked forward to his people entering the land, Jacobi not only failed to enter the land, but held it for impossible anyone else would either (*SW* I.10, 182).

merely contingent political utility, or that of a miraculously doubling practical reason, a doubling which is neither attestable nor necessary. They are, in other words, committed either covertly or openly to making revelation as a philosophical term redundant.

If, as I will be claiming, the core of Schelling's late philosophy can be seized upon succinctly in the idea that there is no genuine freedom without revelation, any attempt at arguing for the viability of Schelling's thought will need to show that Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte are in some sense unable to persuasively articulate such genuine freedom in their systems. Spinoza's embrace of all-encompassing effective causality, which explicitly disallows for such a thing as freedom of the will to either God or finite beings such as ourselves, might be said to speak for itself in this regard. Though the Spinozist system by no means renounces the term *libertas*, and even makes it its highest goal, it is a freedom thus exalted that is restricted to agreement with and insight into necessity. That freedom and necessity are to be joined in some way is not what is philosophically problematic here – Schelling himself will embrace this idea. The problem rather lies in the fact that for Spinoza the necessity in question is that produced by the principle of sufficient reason, applied purely and abstractly. Jacobi will see such necessitarianism as the result of any philosophy that has the courage of its convictions.

The case of Kant and Fichte may seem different, for they understand themselves explicitly as thinkers of human freedom. And yet the question remains whether their philosophy is adequate to this self-understanding. The strict conjunction of freedom and morality – only that act is free which autonomous – found in Kant and Fichte is in danger of making a freely undertaken yet immoral act unthinkable; for if an immoral deed follows *by definition* from our allowing ourselves to be determined by the passions, rather than by our

free *self*-determination, it is an act in which we do not, strictly speaking, act ourselves, and thus not one we could be held accountable for; if on the other hand it is a freely undertaken act, then as a form of rational self-determination, it cannot be immoral. The doctrine of radical evil through which Kant later attempts to account for evil sooner underlines than solves this problem; and, as Schelling himself will argue later in the *Freiheitsschrift*, in failing to account for evil Kant – and by extension Fichte – fail equally to account for genuine freedom.

My aim here is no more than to make appealing the suggestion which lies at the heart of Schelling's thought: that the philosophical dismantling of a genuine role for revelation leads to an inability to grasp and articulate human freedom in its emphatic sense. Thinking freedom in this sense requires revelation be thought as a form of disclosure of more primordial and more real a kind than that of the merely moral. What will set Schelling on the road to understanding revelation precisely as such a form of self-disclosure of the divine are those strands in the thought of Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte which escape the neutralizing reduction of revelation to morality. For as we will see later, it is the great achievement of Schelling to show that such a concept of a moral revelation cannot suffice, and that our openness towards the divine – granted that there is any purpose in speaking of it, and whatever it may be – must be thought in more originary a fashion, namely as God's self-manifestation. What this might mean will require careful reconstruction – all the more so because Schelling's road to his late philosophy of revelation passes through the stations of *art* as the one true eternal revelation in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* and the attempts at a natural-philosophical *theogony* in the *Freiheitsschrift* and the *Weltalter*. Schelling attempts to show how, just as being precedes thought, the self-manifestation of the

divine exceeds our merely logical attempts to secure and comprehend it. Yet what such a claim might mean in terms of his own philosophical and religious allegiances – whether or not, to broach two perennial questions for readers of Schelling, his late thought is to be seen as a form of idealism or not, and whether he is to be seen as a religious, even a Christian thinker – cannot be discussed until later.

§1 Revelation or the Political Art of Prophecy in Spinoza

In turning to Spinoza, I claim to be turning to a paradigmatically modern philosopher.¹¹ This does not altogether speak for itself. An eminent historian of philosophy once suggested Spinoza has two sides; as someone who speaks in the austere language of geometry, he is the first of the moderns; as a thinker who is deeply steeped in Aristotelianism and, despite his loud accusations against it, broadly agrees with its spirit, he is the last of the medievals.¹²

If this were true, Spinoza would merely be adopting the rhetorical trappings of modernity, leaving the core of his thought squarely in the medieval tradition – like so much old wine in new sacks. Yet this will not do. For whatever the status of the *more geometrico* presentation Spinoza chooses to give the *Ethics*, his thought is founded on a decidedly novel premise: that everything that is, from the simplest bodies and the most trivial thoughts to

¹¹ This judgment is of course precisely that of Hegel: “Spinoza ist Hauptpunkt der modernen Philosophie: entweder Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie.” (*Werke*, 20:163-64).

¹² “[T]here is, on the one hand, an explicit Spinoza, whom we shall call Benedictus. It is he who speaks in definitions, axioms, and propositions; it is he, too, who reasons according to the rigid method of the geometer. Then there is, on the other hand, the implicit Spinoza, who lurks behind these definitions, axioms, and propositions, only occasionally revealing himself in scholia; his mind is crammed with traditional philosophic lore and his thought turns along the beaten logical paths of mediaeval reasoning. Him we shall call Baruch. Benedictus is the first of the moderns; Baruch is the last of the mediaevals” (Wolfson, vii).

God himself, is subject to the same laws of causality; and that such causality is to be understood in one way only, as efficient causality. Nothing is without a cause – and if God cannot be exempt from this universal demand of reason, and if God is nevertheless, in a fundamental sense, all there is, then he must be his own cause.¹³ Yet in what sense might one wish to maintain that Spinoza is a religious thinker? His thought was during his lifetime characterized by many not only as heretical and blasphemous, but as atheist. This characterization, however, is one he himself strongly resisted. Thus, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he laments the fact that the unlearned, who know God only through created things that they do not know the causes of, are not ashamed to accuse philosophers of atheism.¹⁴ What is more, Spinoza turns the accusation of atheism back against those who would slander him. True, he does deny that there can be anything outside the order of effective causality; miracles are therefore impossible. But is that enough to be branded an atheist? Belief in miracles is not a mark of true faith, Spinoza counters, but the admission

¹³ Spinoza's philosophical modernity must be sharply distinguished from a certain idea of cultural modernity which some have in recent years erroneously tried to pin on Spinoza, as the supposed father of a “radical Enlightenment”, an egalitarian democrat who bravely fights tyranny and the power of religious institutions. Much the contrary, Spinoza is full of contempt and fear for the masses, who by his lights are simply too dim to be educated out of their entrenched illusions and destructive desires, and thus must be controlled by the State, preferably with the help of an official Church which teaches the masses to obey. See part two of Melamed, “Charitable interpretations” for an excellent putdown of the view of Spinoza as a tolerant egalitarian democrat, as presented by Steven Nadler and, most influentially, Jonathan Israel.

¹⁴ “Et, pro dolor! res eo jam pervenit, ut, qui aperte fatentur, se Dei ideam non habere, & Deum non nisi per res creatas (quarum causas ignorant) cognoscere, non erubescant Philosophos Atheismi accusare.” (*TTP*, ch. 2, G III 30); Schelling uses this quotation as an epigraph to his 1812 *Denkmal der Schrift von den göttlichen Dingen c. des Herrn Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*.

that something could contravene the universal order of nature established by God – and is thus an open invitation to atheism.¹⁵

Spinoza's readers have not necessarily agreed with this sentiment. Jacobi, for one, did not. His 1785 publication of an exchange of letters with Mendelssohn revealed to the German public that their mutual friend Lessing, deceased some years before, had been a devoted Spinozist. Jacobi argued that the spirit of Spinozism lies in its unreserved allegiance to the principle *a nihilo nihil fit* [sic], that is to say, that the world lies in chains of cause and effect extending all the way to an impersonal absolute first principle immanent in the world; despite his respect for Lessing's genius, this meant for Jacobi that his friend had thrown in his lot with a doctrine that excludes not only the possibility of a transcendent God in favor of pantheism, but in doing so made human freedom impossible as well. Jacobi's book ignited a *querelle* over Spinoza's legacy that not only drew in most of the intellectual luminaries of the time, but made Spinoza, whose dogmatist rationalism might otherwise have seemed old hat in the wake of the event of Kant's critical philosophy, a force to be reckoned for thinkers emerging in the 1790s.¹⁶ For what Spinoza now seemed to offer is precisely what was found

¹⁵ *TTP*, ch. 6, G III 87. Spinoza in his correspondence also defends himself against the accusation of atheism leveled at him by the vulgar and the learned alike: see Ep. 30, 42, 43.

¹⁶ On the *Pantheismusstreit*, see ch. 4 of Eckart Förster's *Die 25 Jahre der Philosophie*, Kurt Christ's *Jacobi und Mendelssohn*, and ch. 1 of Essen and Danz, *Pantheismusstreit, Atheismusstreit, Theismusstreit. Philosophisch-theologische Kontroversen im 19. Jahrhundert*. Förster underlines two particularities of Jacobi's sketch of the spirit of Spinozism: first, Spinoza does not begin with finding the condition for every conditioned thing, and lead it back to a first cause; rather he begins with substance as the one thing which needs nothing else to explain it. Secondly, Jacobi's exclusive emphasis on discursive reason obscures that the highest ideal of knowledge in the *Ethics* is not that of discursive reason, which Spinoza calls the second kind of knowledge, but insist on a third, intuitive kind of knowing above it. More will be said about this latter point. As to the former, it must be underlined that though Spinoza begins his system with substance, he – unlike Aristotle, Aquinas, or Descartes – admits readily that the substance itself does not escape from the universal requirement of having a cause; as

lacking in Kant: a way of thinking the world not as a realm of finite discrete items but as an unconditioned systematic whole, thus allowing us to break out of the subjective prison house of the transcendental I to which Kant's idealism seemed to have condemned thought. Such a way of thinking would naturally also be a new way of conceiving God precisely *as* this whole. Far from being an atheist, Novalis would therefore say admiringly, Spinoza is saturated with God and drunk on him;¹⁷ there is so much God in Spinoza, Hegel would later counter more critically, that there is hardly any room for anything else in the world – he is not an atheist but an a-cosmist.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the weight and actuality of Spinoza was no less evident to Schelling.¹⁹ Yet the primary question for the moment is not whether Spinoza is a theist, a pantheist, or an atheist; even if Spinoza's God is both nature and spirit, the one and all, our question here is: can this God be said, other than speciously,

there is nothing outside or before substance which could cause it, it must be seen as *causa sui*. It is precisely Spinoza's unreserved embrace of this term which sets him apart. We will return to the question of *causa sui*.

¹⁷ Novalis, from *Fragmente und Studien 1799/1800*: fragment 336, "Der Spinotzism [sic] ist eine Übersättigung mit Gottheit. Unglaube ein Mangel an göttlichen Organ und an Gottheit. Es gibt also direkte und indirekte Athëisten. Desto besonnener und ächt-poëtischer der Mensch ist, desto gestalteter, und historischer wird seine Religion seyn." (1:810) and fragment 346: "Spinotza ist ein gotttrunkener Mensch." (1:812).

¹⁸ See e.g. the lectures on the history of philosophy: "Gott ist nur die *eine* Substanz; die Natur, die Welt ist nach einem Ausdruck des Spinoza nur Affektion, Modus der Substanz, nicht Substantielles. Der Spinozismus ist also Akosmisus. Das Weltwesen, das endliche Wesen, das Universum, die Endlichkeit ist nicht das substantielle, – vielmehr nur Gott. Das Gegenteil von alledem ist wahr, was die behaupten, die ihm Atheismus Schuld geben; bei ihm ist zu viel Gott." (*Werke*, 20:163). For a critical account of the acosmist reading of Spinoza in (inter alia) Hegel see Melamed, "Acosmism or weak individuals?".

¹⁹ We have already seen Hegel's judgment "Spinoza ist Hauptpunkt der modernen Philosophie: entweder Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie." (*Werke*, 20:163-64). Schelling declares himself a Spinozist in a famous letter to Hegel from 1795 with the joyful exclamation "Ich bin indessen Spinozist geworden!" (1795.02.04 Schelling to Hegel, *HKA* III,1 20-23). His complex relation to Spinoza we will have reason to return repeatedly.

to *reveal* himself? What is the status of revelation within the clockwork mechanism of Spinoza's thought?

It is by no roundabout way that Spinoza approaches this question in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Revelation or prophecy is the “certain cognition of a particular thing revealed by God to man”; a prophet is he who mediates the certain knowledge he himself has received for the benefit of others who have not, and who therefore can only take it on at second hand as a mere belief.²⁰ This model of revelation is epistemological – revelation is the transmission of a certain cognitive content – and its hallmark is certainty. The prophet possessed of this certainty does not have to *believe* in what is revealed to him; belief is a derived and inferior form of accepting a cognitive content, one based merely on authority. The prophet knows, the people believe – or fail to do so. Such a concept of revelation hardly distinguishes it from our natural cognitive access of the world, Spinoza admits:

From the definition just given, it follows that natural knowledge [*cognitionem naturalem*] can be called Prophecy. For what we know by the natural light [*lumine naturali*] depends only on the knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees. But because this natural knowledge is common to all men (depending, as it does, on foundations common to all), the common people, who always thirst for things rare and foreign to their nature, who spurn their natural gifts, do not think highly of it. When they speak of prophetic knowledge, they mean to exclude natural knowledge.

Nevertheless, we can call natural knowledge divine with as much right as anything else, since God's nature, insofar as we participate in it, and his decrees, as it were, dictate it to us. It differs from the knowledge everyone calls divine only in two respects: the knowledge people call divine extends beyond the limits of natural knowledge, and the laws of human Nature, considered in themselves, cannot be the cause of the knowledge people call divine. But natural knowledge is in no way inferior

²⁰ “Prophetia sive revelatio est rei alicujus certa cognitio a Deo hominibus revelata. Propheta autem is est, qui Dei revelata iis interpretatur, qui rerum a Deo revelatarum certam cognitionem habere nequeunt, quique adeo mera fide res revelatas amplecti tantum possunt.” (*TTP*, ch. 1, G III 15)

to prophetic knowledge in the certainty it involves, or in the source from which it is derived, viz. God [...].²¹

If philosophers, and all those who know by the light of natural reason and teach what they know to others, are not prophets in the vulgar sense, it is because they do not depend on the authority of a particular revelatory experience to make others believe, but teach what others can themselves perceive and embrace in the same manner as they do.²²

If we put aside for now the question of the natural light of the intellect, and whether it might not more justly and authentically be called prophecy than what people take that word to mean, Spinoza's position here seems more than accommodating to the vulgar concept of revelation: he does not challenge directly that there is such a thing as revelation, such as encountered in Biblical prophecies; that revelation gives whoever receives it knowledge that is certain, and that this certainty is the foundation of authority over others. This would be a strange conclusion for a work of so ill a reputation among the orthodox that one contemporary called it "a book forged in hell".²³

It need not surprise us, then, if this image of prophecy swiftly dissolves upon closer scrutiny. By what means does the prophet receive his revelations, if it has nothing whatsoever to do with the intellect? It is not through the intellect but solely through the faculty of the imagination. Now it is characteristic of the imagination to work through words or images, be they false or true, and by nature it is wandering and inconstant (*vaga et*

²¹ *TTP* ch. 1 G III/15-26; tr. Curley (lightly modified).

²² "At quamvis scientia naturalis divina sit, ejus tamen propagatores non possunt vocari prophetae. Nam quae illi docent, reliqui homines aequali certitudine et dignitate, ac ipsi, percipere possunt atque amplecti, idque non ex fide sola." (id.)

²³ See Steven Nadler's reception history of the *Tractatus Theologico-Philosophicus* under that name.

inconstans). Not only does the imagination not need the intellect, it is opposed to it; for those who have the liveliest imaginations have the weakest powers of reason, just as great intellects tend to have their imaginations too clearly under control to let it run off with them.²⁴

By attributing prophecy to the imagination as radically distinct from the intellect, Spinoza with one stroke distances himself from the project of Arabic Aristotelian rationalism from al-Fārābī to Ibn Rušd and Maimonides. Prophecy in this tradition no doubt springs from the imagination, but only as the result of the overflow of the prophet's intellect; all true prophets are philosophers as well, and for those of us who have advanced enough in the perfection of the intellect, it will be clear that Scripture, when understood properly, has at its core the same truths as Aristotelian physics and metaphysics do. Throughout the *Tractatus*, Spinoza pours scorn on this idea, and insists that the Biblical prophets, while no doubt men of outstanding morals and above all with highly sensitive imagination, were altogether unlearned. There cannot be such a thing, therefore, as a philosophical religion.²⁵

The claim which revelation has to being as a source of knowledge is thus no sooner granted by Spinoza than it is subverted. It is with malicious irony all too palpable beneath

²⁴ "Possumus jam igitur sine scrupulo affirmare prophetas non nisi ope imaginationis Dei revelata percepisse, hoc est, mediantibus verbis vel imaginibus, iisque veris aut imaginariis." (TTP, ch. 1, G III 28).

²⁵ On the idea of a philosophical religion in Spinoza, see Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*. Fraenkel argues that Spinoza is in fact of two minds on the possibility of a philosophical religion: the figure of Christ in particular seems to tempt Spinoza to the possibility of interpreting Christianity in this light, a tendency which however he ultimately forgoes in favor of a more trenchant criticism of religion. Against Fraenkel it must be remarked that, whatever the potential of religious tradition to serve as a pedagogy to bring people closer to philosophy, whatever its usefulness and perhaps even indispensability as a political tool, there is *no* sense in which for Spinoza religion has anything to add to what reason alone uncovers.

the surface of the text that he writes of the richness of prophecy: “As the prophets perceived the revelations of God by means of the imagination, it is undoubtedly the case that they have been able to perceive many things beyond the limits of the intellect; because from words and images, many more ideas can be put together than from those principles and concepts alone, on which all of our natural knowledge is built.” That is to say, plainly rendered – if the prophet can speak such marvels as he does, it is only because an imagination unrestrained by the intellect can always keep on spinning fables and riddles.

The certainty that comes with prophecy is likewise of an odd kind. As it is not based on a clear and distinct idea, as the fruits of natural reason are, revelation as such does not come with its own mark of certainty. Such certainty as revelation must be accorded is only added onto its contents by means of a divine sign,²⁶ which proves the revelation is not a mere dream but can be said to come from God. What it means in Spinozist terms for a revelation to come from God, however, is by no means explained yet. Nor are such divine signs a sufficient criterion for the certainty of revelation. For the Bible itself utters the possibility that a prophet, even one who has signs and miracles to back him up, might offer a false teaching, and should therefore be put to death.²⁷ The final criterion of the certainty of all things revealed is that those who prophetically announce them have their intention “only inclined towards the just and the good”.²⁸

Whether the imaginative utterance of the prophet counts as revelation, and is accorded certainty, is thus made dependent on morality. God does not deceive the

²⁶ *TTP*, ch. 2, G III 30.

²⁷ Deut 13:1-5.

²⁸ “quod animus ad solum aequum et bonum inclinatus habebat” (*TTP*, ch. 2, G III 31).

imagination of good, pious men, and such men do not prophecy what is contrary to justice. Now if Spinoza reduces the scope of revelation to morality, it may seem that the importance of revelation as a source of moral certainty is upheld strongly. But this cannot be the case either, for it is not by revelation that we can know, or at least believe, what is good. It is rather our sense of what is good and just that sits in judgment over revelation, and separates the true from the false. If it is the case that one must be moral to recognize a revelation when one encounters it, and if revelations themselves have no content but a moral one, then revelation can only teach morality to those who are already moral; it is, in other words, strictly speaking redundant as a source of knowledge. Spinoza's reduction of revelation to the moral sphere is, in this sense, its being rendered irrelevant.

Matters become worse yet if one asks what the status of the moral as such is for Spinoza. Can it be said to be a form of knowledge? The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is vague on this matter. It claims that the Bible, as the sum total of all revelation, teaches but one simple matter, and demands only one thing: obedience to God.²⁹ Such obedience consists solely of love of one's neighbor, and whoever practices it has faithfully fulfilled God's law.³⁰ But here one might well object that, even if we accept that the one message of Scripture is the duty to love one's neighbor, it is far from clear what this duty posed in the abstract would demand in any concrete situation, just as it remains unclear why we should shoulder the burden of this duty. Why should loving one's neighbor be accepted as binding on all? Not, because it is a revealed truth – for only if we already judge it to be moral can we accept it as revealed. What then is the source of our moral knowledge according to Spinoza?

²⁹ *TTP*, ch. 13, G III 167.

³⁰ *TTP*, ch. 14, G III 173.

A brief historical digression on the Aristotelian legacy of which Spinoza is the rebellious inheritor might provide the key to this riddle. To Aristotle himself, there is a clear division between different realms of knowing, each of which has a specificity of its own. Theoretical knowledge (σοφία) strives for what is true always and everywhere, and therefore it is knowledge of God, who abides in eternal perfection, which is highest kind of knowledge. But in practical knowledge (φρόνησις), we are dealing with the autonomous domain of human flourishing in the life of the household and of the city. Ideas about the good and the bad, which are inherently social and cultural, are things which “might be otherwise”.³¹ This does not for Aristotle deprive the moral realm of either its inevitability or its justification.

Aristotle's followers in the Arabic world, however, drew a different conclusion: if human perfection lies in knowledge, and true knowledge is knowledge of that which is eternal, then only theoretical knowledge has ultimate validity. Ethics and politics – and for *falsafa*, much as it may raise the eyebrows of the orthodox, the divine Law itself falls only under this heading – have as their measure not a standard internal to themselves, but whether they produce a society capable of creating philosophers who are able to actualize the metaphysical knowledge of God in which alone man attains perfection. This means an orderly society in which religion teaches the masses docility and obedience, while allowing philosophers in private to pursue contemplation, unhindered philosophically by the useful but cognitively empty dogmas the rest of society is guided by.

³¹ “πρακτὸν δ’ ἐστὶ τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον καὶ ἄλλως ἔχειν”, *De An.* III 10, 433a30

Part IV of the Ethics, where Spinoza elaborates his practical thought, similarly has no genuine room for a moral sphere. Good and bad are no more than masked expressions for what is advantageous or harmful to one's self – the expression of one's striving to maintain one's existence and increase one's power. This fundamentally amoralist position makes it impossible to describe an act as useful yet evil. This does not mean that every wicked act which seems attractive to its doer is justified, for people are often mistaken about what is truly advantageous – indeed, to Spinoza most people are mistaken most of the time about this matter. But it does mean that the values of justice and obedience which Spinoza sees as the true message of any revelation are themselves subjected to the pursuit of power. The highest form of power is true knowledge of the essence of things, and if philosophers are to achieve such knowledge, they are in need of a well-ordered, peaceful society around them. While the philosopher sees that it is in his own interest, all other things being equal, to live cooperatively and benevolently in such a society, most people are, and will always remain, too blinded by their passions to do so. They must therefore be persuaded to adopt such behavior not by reason, of which they are capable only to a limited extent, but by the authority of revelation.

Seen in this perspective, Spinoza's theory of revelation is one in which revelation is not only reduced to morality, and eliminated as a source of discursive or intuitive knowledge; it is one where revelation is made the instrument of a political art. This is not to say that revelation serves only as a tool on the part of a cynical lawgiver to keep the masses in their place. It is a crucial social institution through which the body politic can acquire stability and order, and people can be brought to live lives that accord more closely with reason than their passions would otherwise allow them. As a result it allows to all members of the body politic

to enjoy as great a measure of joy as they are capable of. Yet Spinoza leaves little doubt that for most people this will at best mean living not out of an understanding of the precepts of reason, but merely living in accordance with those precepts.

Where, however, does this leave the question of freedom? Spinoza defines that thing as free, which exists only from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to act only by itself.³² Freedom is thus not opposed to necessity but one of its expressions – that in which necessity is self-generated actively and internally to the thing’s essence, rather than an external determination which the thing passively receives from outside. But as God is the cause of both essence and existence of all things, it follows that God alone is a free cause, and determines from his own nature the being and the actions of all things.³³ To this scheme the will is no exception. It is not that the will is not at all cause, as if it were an epiphenomenon of the mind unaware of what truly determines one’s being and one’s actions; it is rather that the will, though to the willing agent it may seem free, is itself determined.³⁴ As much as man may vaunt himself to be an *imperium in imperio*, a realm unto himself not beholden to the larger sway of nature, this exception is altogether unwarranted. The nature of God and the

³² E1d7.

³³ “Deus enim solus ex sola suae naturae necessitate existit [...] et ex sola suae naturae necessitate agit [...]. Adeoque [...] solus est causa libera.” (E1p17c2), “In rerum natura nullum datur contingens, sed omnia ex necessitate divinae naturae determinata sunt ad certo modo existendum, & operandum” (E1p29).

³⁴ “Voluntas non potest vocari causa libera, sed tantum necessaria.” (E1p32); cf. “In Mente nulla est absoluta, sive libera voluntas; sed Mens ad hoc, vel illud volendum determinatur a causa, quae etiam ab alia determinata est, & haec iterum ab alia, & sic in infinitum.” (E2p48).

mind of man fall under the same principles and are to be treated of following the same geometrical method as are mathematical figures.³⁵

It will be clear, from all this, that Spinoza's reduction, neutralization and instrumentalization of revelation, while he does not present them as motivated by his determinism, is like his determinism rooted in the same unbending commitment to the principle that nothing, not even God, is without a cause – and that therefore, nothing is outside the realm of necessity.

How Spinoza could nevertheless become a standing obsession of Schelling and his contemporaries, who in one form or another all see the philosophical defense and articulation of the idea of freedom as their highest task – Schelling himself repeatedly calls freedom the alpha and omega of philosophy – can become clear only once Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva* and the third kind of knowledge which it yields, the very aspect which Jacobi had failed to draw into his account of Spinozism, have been shed light on. If, beyond our discursive grasp of finite entities, there is indeed such an intuitive taking in of the unconditioned *deus sive natura*, might this be a way to understand Spinoza's tantalizing suggestion that natural cognition might itself be called revelation?³⁶

³⁵ "De affectuum itaque natura et viribus ac mentis in eosdem potentia eadem method agam, qua in praecedentibus de Deo et mente egi, et humanas actiones atque appetitus considerabo perinde, ac si quaestio de lineis, planis aut de corporibus esset." (E3prae).

³⁶ See the passage commented on above from the opening of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: "cognitionem naturalem prophetiam vocari posse. Nam ea, quae lumine naturali cognoscimus, a sola Dei cognitione ejusque aeternis decretis dependent." (*TTP*, ch. 1, G III 15)

§2 The Moral Law as the Ambiguous Site of Revelation in Kant

Kant's critical philosophy represents a sustained and frontal attack on the central tenets of Spinozism.³⁷ To name but three points where it intends to cut off the possibility of Spinozist rationalism, critical philosophy denies that nothing is without cause or reason, or rather denies that such a principle can be universally applied; it destroys the possibility of an ontological proof of God's existence, such as Spinoza founds his metaphysics on; and finally it seeks to demonstrate that human freedom seen as the causality of an itself uncaused human will, so stridently denied by Spinoza, is not only not impossible, but from the practical perspective is even a pure fact of reason, a *Faktum der Vernunft*.

What allows all three of these criticisms is Kant's iron distinction between the finite, conditioned world of phenomena such as we encounter in experience, and the infinite and unconditioned noumenal substrate which we cannot but assume underlies it. Thus, while it is true that in the world of experience all effects have some cause from which they follow by necessity, this does not legitimate the extension of this principle beyond the conditioned world to the inference to a first cause. Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason, that nothing is without a cause, can only be upheld if it is limited to the phenomenal world.

Likewise, Kant may agree with Spinoza that we have the concept of a perfect being, yet there is no possible sensible intuition of such a being we could have to substantiate its existence; nor is its existence included in its concept. As Kant famously argues, existence is not a predicate; three hundred *Thaler* are neither more nor less when they are there than when they are not. But this does not mean that Kant thinks the rationalist idea of a most

³⁷ For a penetrating recent discussion of Kant from this perspective, see Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*.

perfect or a most real being are purely and simply foolish mistakes. They represent the authentic desire of reason to find its own unconditioned condition, even when we come to recognize that we cannot ever establish the objective existence of such a highest being. Nor could we get rid of this highest being as transcendental ideal, as if it were a noble wish to which nothing in the world or in our thoughts could ever have a relation. As a complex part of Kant's transcendental dialectic tries to show, our rational grasp of the world requires that the world be a systematic unity, in which in principle all things are fully determined and could be known as such. But experience never shows us such a thing. For there to be a coherent possibility of knowledge, we must therefore assume the transcendental ideal of reason as a subjective, regulative principle which guides our knowledge of the world, even if we are not allowed to take it as a constitutive fact about the world of which we could have knowledge.

This to Kant is the unhappy state of theoretical reason, torn between God as a subjective condition it needs and the strict objective impossibility of knowing there is such a God. To practical reason, however, matters look somewhat different. Our morality is not in the first instance based on God, but rather on the fact that whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, we are as agents in the world fundamentally shaped by our moral awareness of duty. Duty is the simple and unavoidable fact that practical reason imposes on us an *ought* – that is to say, that one cannot coherently think of oneself as a rational agent and not feel the force of moral obligation. From this very obligation, Kant argues, it follows that we are free. One cannot be obliged to do what one cannot do, and therefore, if we take the force of this obligation seriously, then we must conclude that we not only *ought* to do what duty dictates, but that we *can* in fact do so – that our actions are not merely the outcome of the determinist

mechanism of the phenomenal world, but at least *can* be caused freely by our noumenal selves. Freedom is thus a fact of reason.³⁸

If through practical reason we are both directly aware that we have a duty and that we are free to pursue it following nothing but reason's own categorical imperative, it would seem that Kant has successfully banished God from the moral sphere as well. Yet there is a catch. Practical reason makes me aware as an intellectual being of the moral law within me, and unconditionally demands my obedience to it out of nothing but reverence for its universal bindingness upon all beings both rational and sensible; yet as I am indeed also part of the sensible realm, I am naturally motivated to achieve my own happiness. Now, if there were no connection whatsoever between following the moral law, on the one hand, and achieving happiness on the other, or worse, if following the dictates of rational duty would mean that in this world I have to forego happiness altogether, then practical reason would command me to do that which I cannot possibly desire. This would mean a conflict within reason itself: reason would demand that which is altogether unreasonable, namely to pursue my own undoing. Only if there is a guarantee that it is at least *not impossible* to achieve happiness while following the moral law can I see myself as a consistent moral being. But the

³⁸ Kant introduces the paradoxical term fact of reason as follows: "Man kann das Bewußtsein dieses Grundgesetzes [i.e. the thought of pure formal lawfulness as such] ein Faktum der Vernunft nennen, weil man es nicht aus vorhergehende Datis der Vernunft, z.B. dem Bewußtsein der Freiheit (denn dieses ist uns nicht vorher gegeben), herausvernünfteln kann, sondern weil es sich für sich selbst uns aufdringt als synthetischer Satz a priori, der auf keiner, weder reinen noch empirischen Anschauung gegründet ist, ob er gleich analytisch sein würde, wenn man die Freiheit des Willens voraussetzte, wozu aber, als positivem Begriffe, eine intellektuelle Anschauung erfordert werden würde, die man hier gar nicht annehmen darf. Doch muß man, um dieses Gesetz ohne Mißdeutung als *gegeben* anzusehen, wohl bemerken, daß es kein empirisches, sondern das einzige Faktum der reinen Vernunft sei, die sich dadurch als ursprünglich gesetzgebend (*sic volo, sic iubeo*) ankündigt." (*KpV*, A55-56).

often messy and unpleasant world such as we know it does not give any such guarantees – much the contrary, those who live according to the moral law, Kant readily admits, are often surrounded on all sides by those who do not, and who win their happiness by immoral means at the expense of those who do uphold their duty.³⁹

But if it is given that the moral law is felt as binding upon us, this imbalance between virtue and happiness in this world cannot have the last word. The only way to redress the balance is if there is an all-knowing judge who scrutinizes our behavior and rewards virtue with a corresponding happiness in the world to come. In this sense, Kant argues, God is a necessary postulate of practical reason, and we can have moral certainty of His existence even when we cannot have any theoretical knowledge of him.⁴⁰

But what sort of a thing, one might well ask, is this postulated God of practical reason? How does he comport himself in relation the world and to mankind? Can he in any meaningful sense be said to enter into a relationship with it at all? Can he seen as be the source of revelation? Not, it would seem, when it comes to the moral law. For if the postulate of God's distributive justice in a world to come is what makes a life lived under the moral law not an inherently irrational pursuit, it is nevertheless not enough to act in accordance with the law so as to receive the reward of blessedness after. Morality demands rather that we act not merely *in accordance with*, but purely *out of reverence for* the law, aside from any benefits

³⁹ Note that Kant's argument here is not to be misunderstood as a psychological observation on what one can or cannot bring oneself to be convinced of, but rather asks what it means for a law to be rationally binding upon a rational subject as such. For the distinction between virtue as the supreme good and the conjunction of virtue and happiness as the complete good, see "Von der Dialektik der reinen Vernunft in Bestimmung des Begriffs vom höchsten Gut" (*KpV*, A198-203).

⁴⁰ See "Das Dasein Gottes, als ein Postulat der reinen praktischen Vernunft" (*KpV*, A223-37).

this might bring. Nor is the moral law to be seen as an external imposition on our behavior; its origin is our *own* practical reason, and therefore in subjecting ourselves to the moral law, we subject ourselves to nothing but a law of which we ourselves are the author. Practical reason in its autonomy needs no God to proscribe its rules – merely one to prevent the threat of destructive civil war within itself that would result if morality and happiness were to remain forever separate.

Kant nevertheless asserts that while we are to obey a law which we prescribe to ourselves, we yet must also regard this law as the will of the ruler of the world, which has been revealed to us through reason, and that the principle of a pure religion of reason is a non-empirical, divine revelation to all people which takes place continually at every moment. Practical reason is thus from one point of view purely self-sufficient, yet from another, the law it makes must be seen as the outcome of divine revelation, that is, rational revelation of the divine will. The trappings of historical faith, from its holy books, its statutes and observances, to its caste of priests are – and in this Kant follows Lessing – of potential use for a pure rational religion to establish itself, but may equally become hindrances once that rational core itself becomes apparent. Revelation in the sense in which it is honored in historical faith – as the manifestation of God to his finite creatures in Biblical narrative, or of the moral and ceremonial laws which Scripture establishes from the outside – can and ultimately must be put aside in favor of a rational, non-empirical interior revelation that is nevertheless also to be seen as the expression of God's will.⁴¹

⁴¹ Thus Kant speaks of the disappearance of the distinction between clergy and laity, "weil ein jeder zwar dem (nicht statutarischen) Gesetz gehorcht, das er sich selbst vorschreibt, das er aber zugleich als den ihm durch die Vernunft geoffenbarten Willen des Weltherrschers ansehen muß [...]" (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, drittes Stück, ch. VII; 164). In this sense our awareness of the moral law and our duty not

This may seem contradictory, but the contradiction is resolved once the nature of the need for regarding the moral law as a revealed law is made clear. This necessity stems from the fact that following the law brings blessedness only if the law indeed accords with the divine will; for only then will God accordingly award punishment and reward in the hereafter. But this divine will itself is not a free and sovereign will, in the sense that it could be conceived of as choosing what to praise and what to censure; it itself consists of nothing but practical reason. The self-sufficiency of the moral law and the need nevertheless to see it as divinely revealed are no more than two sides of the same coin: from reason, by reason, through reason, the moral law is a rational a priori system through and through. The suggestion that it is revealed to us at every moment, that it *takes place*, is nothing but the rhetorical form in which its a priori nature is clothed.

If Kant insists that we call this religion, it is because what is promised here, the unification of duty and happiness in the highest good, is not something which is already achieved, but something we are bound to hold onto in a rational, moral belief that it will come about. Not only that, but we are ourselves obligated to help bring about this unification of duty and happiness, which Kant also glosses as the Kingdom of God, in this world. Practical rational religion is in this sense not merely a moral project, in which we through reverence of duty may hope to be rewarded with blessedness, but equally a social and a historical one.

merely to follow it by ourselves but to establish its reign in the world can be called revelation: "In dem Prinzip der reinen Vernunftreligion, als einer an alle Menschen beständig geschehenden göttlichen (obzwar nicht empirischen) Offenbarung, muß der Grund zu jenem Überschnitt zu jener neuen Ordnung der Dinge liegen [...]" (id, 165).

There is therefore to Kant no genuine sense in which revelation, as a philosophically relevant source of knowledge rather than as an accidental exterior shell or as a pedagogical tool, is a matter of experience as particular, empirical, and contingent. On this question, cf. chapter 5 of Allen Wood's *Kant's Moral Religion*.

This is fine and good, a critic might reply, but does it make sense still to speak of revelation when this concept has been completely dissolved into that of autonomous practical reason? Does the rational hope for the highest good, which needs nothing outside itself, and the duty to bring the highest good about that follows from it, not rather make the idea of revelation altogether redundant? Does revelation, if it is to have any substantive meaning at all, not imply that what is revealed is something we do not yet have by a priori reason alone?

This suspicion that, when all is said and done, the concept of revelation is in fact redundant here becomes all too clear when we look closer at Kant's philosophy of religion in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* and the distinction made there between the pure religion of reason such as Kant constructs it and his remarks on what he calls historical or ecclesiastical faith. The many actually existing religious traditions, and the scriptures which they claim to be revealed, can have validity only insofar as they carry within themselves the precepts of practical reason. Whatever is not of a moral nature in various religious traditions is not only, from the Kantian point of view, a-religious, as it does not further the cause of achieving the Kingdom of God on earth; it is irreligious, because it suggests that in order to please God, one needs to flatter him by performing arbitrary prayers and ceremonies which have no other goal than to beg for his favor without, from a moral point of view, bringing about anything to make us deserving of it; in other words, they try to make God less than just. What makes matters worse, the supposed need to flatter God by such superstitious means delivers believers into the hands of priests and scribes, who are all too keen to establish their authority of others by posing as the guardians and true interpreters of the ceremonial law, and thus frustrate people's own use of practical reason.

In order to avoid the potential a-religious and irreligious effects of any given historical faith, the revelation which such a faith claims to possess is therefore to be interpreted as having as its one meaning only that which accords perfectly with the practical rules of a pure religion of reason. This way of reading a revealed text can often seem forced, and indeed, Kant admits, often is forced; but this is still preferable to capitulating before what is otherwise, on a literal reading, a- or immoral in supposedly revealed Scriptures.⁴² It will come as no surprise therefore that Kant has little admiration for the figure of Abraham, who sacrifices his son upon the altar of his piety when commanded to; for no command, whether it comes to us from the pages of a holy book or booming straight from the heavens themselves, could countermand what reason has universally and eternally legislated.⁴³

⁴² "Um aber nun mit einem solchen empirischen Glauben, den uns dem Ansehen nach ein Ungefähr in die Hände gespielt hat, die Grundlage eines Ansehen nach ein Ungefähr in die Hände gespielt hat, die Grundlage eines moralischen Glaubens zu vereinigen (er sei nun Zweck oder nur Hülfsmittel), dazu wird eine Auslegung der uns zu Händen gekommenen Offenbarung erfordert, d. i. durchgängige Deutung derselben zu einem Sinn, der mit den allgemeinen praktischen Regeln einer reinen Vernunftreligion zusammenstimmt. Denn das Theoretische des Kirchenglaubens kann uns moralisch nicht interessiren, wenn es nicht zur Erfüllung aller Menschenpflichten als göttlicher Gebote (was das Wesentliche aller Religion ausmacht) hinwirkt. Diese Auslegung mag uns selbst in Ansehung des Texts (der Offenbarung) oft gezwungen scheinen, oft es auch wirklich sein, und doch muß sie, wenn es nur möglich ist, daß dieser sie annimmt, einer solchen buchstäblichen vorgezogen werden, die entweder schlechterdings nichts für die Moralität in sich enthält, oder dieser ihren Triebfedern wohl gar entgegen wirkt." (*Religion*, 113). Kant follows this with a discussion of the idea of divine vengeance in Psalm 59:11-16, which despite *historically* being clearly about God's thirst for revenge, is nevertheless better read *morally* as an injunction not to take revenge into one's own hands.

⁴³ In a footnote to a later work, Kant makes no secret of his disapproval of the patriarch's actions, which since Kierkegaard have become the philosophical paradigm of the religious: "Zum Beispiel kann die Mythe von dem Opfer dienen, das Abraham, auf göttlichen Befehl, durch Abschachtung und Verbrennung seines einzigen Sohnes – (das arme Kind trug unwissend noch das Holz hinzu) – bringen wollte. Abraham hätte auf diese vermeintliche göttliche Stimme antworten müssen: "Daß ich meinen guten Sohn nicht töten sollte, ist ganz gewiß; daß aber du, der du mir erscheinst, Gott sei, davon bin ich nicht gewiß, und kann es auch nicht werden,

Kant's call for a moral exegesis thus amounts to no more than a concession to the contingent historical fact that we already find ourselves in societies in which ecclesiastical religions and their holy texts happen to be deeply rooted and are accorded an authority which cannot simply be discounted. Were we ever, despite and beyond our human frailty and perverse inclination to silence the demands of duty in us, to achieve on earth the Kingdom of God as the unification of the rule of the moral law and of happiness, then all historical and ecclesiastical faiths would simply disappear, and leave nothing behind them but the pure universal religion of reason.

Kant's theoretical philosophy, restricting knowledge to the sphere of possible experience, rules out access to the divine, and leaves us with the transcendental ideal of reason as a merely regulative function of our cognitive powers. His practical thought allows and even requires that we postulate God as judge; but this postulate, necessary as it may be to the integrity of our moral being, grants only a moral certainty. God-the-postulate exhausts himself in his role as mere guarantor of the possibility of morality, and thus cannot meaningfully be said to reveal himself. In his philosophy of religion, it is not the purpose of Kant to provide an account of what revelation might be and argue for or against its possibility or reality, but rather to call all texts and traditions supposed sacred by ecclesiastical faith before the tribunal of practical reason, the judgments of which are founded on universal a priori necessity rather than on the supposed event of God's manifestation.

This is not to suggest that a religion built upon the dictates of practical reason along these lines eliminates the very thought of revelation as such a manifestation. To the extent

wenn sie auch vom sichtbaren Himmel herabschallte". (*Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 102-103). To Schelling's own, idiosyncratic reading of the Binding of Isaac we will have occasion to return.

that one philosophically speaks from within the boundaries of finite human reason, it cannot be denied that revelation in this sense might be possible or even a historically needful instrument.⁴⁴ But despite such epistemological modesty, the fact remains that rational faith consists of knowing what is commanded of us by God through the sense of duty which the moral law inspires in us. Once we have such rational faith, the question of revelation becomes an irrelevance.⁴⁵

The ultimate irrelevance of revelation, Kant's more popularly written lectures on philosophical theology is directly addressed. Here revelation is discussed explicitly in the context of moral rather than transcendental theology. Kant distinguishes between inward revelation – that is, the rational faith we have through the moral law and what it presupposes – and outward revelation. This outward revelation is distinguished again in God's works in the world and in God's words. It is only on the basis of the inward revelation of reason, which shows God to be a being who governs the world in accordance with the highest morality, that

⁴⁴ The rationalist in matters of faith “wird [...] weder die innere Möglichkeit der Offenbarung überhaupt noch die Notwendigkeit einer Offenbarung als eines göttlichen Mittels zur Introduktion der wahren Religion bestreiten; denn hierüber kann kein Mensch durch Vernunft etwas ausmachen.” (*Religion*, 208).

Equally, Kant will remark later that “religion within the limits of reason” is not to be understood as “religion out of reason alone, aside from all revelation”: “Denn das wäre zu viel Anmaßung gewesen; weil es doch sein könnte, daß die Lehren derselben von übernatürlich inspirierten Männern herrührten” (*Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 6n1).

⁴⁵ This is not to dispute the awareness Kant has that the realization of the rational “kingdom of ends” is a problematic affair, or can be achieved without faith. For if there is such a thing as radical evil – that is to say, if the human will is constitutively inclined to abdicate its task of rational self-determination – then how we might turn away from this inborn tendency to move towards the kingdom of ends becomes obscure to reason. The supposed outer shell of ecclesiastical faith will then not be a disposable instrument but an enduringly necessary form of mediation of rational faith, even while enduringly contaminating and de-stabilizing it at the same time. For a deconstructive reading along these lines of the entanglement of the rational with the ecclesiastical, see Jacques Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie* as well as ch. 1 of Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence*.

any such external revelation could be recognized as such. Thus “the religion of reason always has to remain the substratum and foundation of every investigation. [...] So it must precede every other revelation and serve as a yardstick”.⁴⁶

As with Spinoza, then, it would seem there is in Kant’s thought no philosophical encounter with revelation that does not end in depriving it of a genuine philosophical role to play. And yet there remains one avenue in critical philosophy, so far unexplored here, which though Kant himself breathes not a word of revelation in discussing it, will become a crucial resource for Schelling to articulate a concept of revelation which escapes being absorbed into practical reason. This avenue, about which much will remain to be said in the next chapter, is that of the experience of the beautiful. For it is in this experience, or so Kant sees himself forced to conclude, that it first becomes possible to think how the world of causally determined nature outside us, which the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* had shown to be inescapable to theoretical reason, and the freedom of which as a practical reasoner I am directly aware as a *Faktum der Vernunft*, might be thought together. These two ideas do not necessarily clash, but they sit most uncomfortably next to another once one begins to ponder how my freedom as a noumenal subject could be realized in the mechanistically regulated phenomenal world outside me. The Kantian solution is that both not only can but *must* be thought of as grounded, beyond the realm of possible experience, in a supersensible substrate in which nature and spirit are one. What would this unity be, Kant’s Idealist successors would ask, if not Spinoza’s *deus sive natura*, the one and all which philosophy perennially strives for, yet which Kant earlier seemed to have placed beyond all human ken?

⁴⁶ *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 162.

If such a unity announces itself in the experience of the beautiful, might such an experience not be rightly called revelation, indeed the only true revelation of which we are aware? This is precisely the conclusion Schelling will draw in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*.⁴⁷

§3 A Moral World Order Without Revelation in Fichte

⁴⁷ In several ways the sketch here provided of Kant's views does not do full justice to the richness and complexity of his philosophical development. In particular, it must be noted that the doctrine of God as a postulate of practical reason is neither stable nor does Kant maintain it to the end. Where the Canon of the first *Critique* introduces God and his distributive justice as motivation (*Triebfeder*) for following the moral law, the second *Critique* rightly modifies this. If God were the motivation for morality, that would plunge practical reason back into heteronomy. Only if we act out of respect for the moral law can our actions be deemed autonomous, therefore both free and good; God's distributive justice merely serves as a guarantor that autonomous action *can* be thought together with one's own interest.

This is the position commonly attributed to Kant, and the one followed here. But the development of Kant's ethico-theological thought does not stop there. Matters become considerably more complicated if one considers the historical turn which Kant's thinking on the relation between God and morality takes. In the third *Critique*, we might say in the briefest of summaries, it becomes a necessity for thought – though, as ever, regulatively rather than constitutively – to see mankind as the goal of creation. This goal is reached, the *Religionsbuch* elaborates, with the ideal of a universal ethical community of mankind on earth. This goal is not only a moral duty all must strive towards, but would also, once established, provide on a social and historical level the harmony between morality and blessedness which the practical postulate of God was meant to provide individually in a putative afterlife. But this does not mean the elimination of the need for God, for given that we are constitutively inclined to allow ourselves to be determined by desires rather than reason, it is not clear how such a universal ethical community, as the goal of this world, could come about without some sort of divine aid. How this is to be understood remains inscrutable, as Kant admits: before us opens “der Abgrund eines Geheimnisses von dem, was Gott hiebei thue” (*Religion*, 6:139). As we will see, the historical turn in Kant's moral thought will be taken up with greater radicality by Fichte and equally occupies Schelling greatly in the years to come.

On the complex development of Kant's ethico-theology see Eckart Förster, “Die Wandlungen in Kants Gotteslehre” and “Was darf ich hoffen? Zum Problem der Vereinbarkeit von theoretischer und praktischer Vernunft bei Immanuel Kant”.

Where Kant reduces the concept of revelation to the a priori precepts of autonomous morality, I have argued, he effectively does away with it. The most outspoken formulation of such a rendering irrelevant of revelation was given not by Kant himself, but in an anonymous work which upon its first appearance was thought to be by his hand. The man who did author it, and who in 1792 was catapulted out of obscurity to philosophical fame when his authorship was revealed, was Fichte.

In his *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, Fichte lays out with unsparing clarity the consequence of Kant's project when it comes to any particular, historical revelation; it can be presented in a concise, three-step argument. Revelation in Fichte's terms is a supernatural effect in the world of the senses through which God announces himself as moral legislator.⁴⁸ First, whether or not the divine ever reveals anything to man in history is something which can never be known by our finite human reason. Second, even if we were to grant that such a revelation could in theory take place, how would we then judge whether any particular event which seems to us a miraculous occurrence or divine message is really what we think it is? Is such a belief not structurally vulnerable to the skeptical doubt that we might as well be mistaken? Third, even if we could somehow both be sure of the general possibility of revelation, and the particular reality of this or that revelation, what could such a revelation teach us? Surely nothing that goes against the moral law. But if what it teaches us is in accordance with the moral law, then why should anyone need such a hard to fathom, miraculous revelation at all? To what end should the divine send telegrams which contain

⁴⁸ "Durch eine übernatürliche Wirkung in der Sinnenwelt sollte sich uns Gott, laut des Begriffs der Offenbarung, als moralischen Gesetzgeber ankündigen." (*Kritik aller Offenbarung* §5, GA I.1.45).

nothing more or better than what every single human being can already know directly, at any place and time, and with absolute certainty at that?

Indeed, one might say – though Fichte is careful not to do so – that it is a bizarre God who would come up with such an unhelpful way of speaking to his creation; would such a God not be exposed to ridicule by his own bungling attempts at speaking? Not, perhaps, if an individual should find himself bound to such amoral ways, or if a society as a whole should find itself immersed in such barbarous customs, that the voice of conscience through which the moral law announces our duty to us could be largely drowned out.⁴⁹ But if this were the case, any revelation would present itself to those who have grown deaf to morality not as a call to follow the moral law of which we ourselves are the rational authors, but merely as the imposition of the will of a being mightier than us – not a source of autonomy, in other words, but merely as a form of heteronomy predicated on the wish to gain reward and escape punishment. Even if revelation is to be thought of not so much as the genuine source of moral knowledge but rather as a pedagogical tool to bring to the light of practical reason those whose moral awareness is somehow impaired, it is an imperfect and temporary tool at best. For a revelation to be recognized *as* revelation, after all, its intrinsic holiness would have to be clear; but as this holiness consists in a revelation's accordance with the moral law, it is only those whose sense of autonomous morality is unimpaired who could judge any utterance deemed to be a revelation to indeed be imbued with such holiness. Whoever would need revelation, in other words, will be unable to see it for what it is, and it is unclear how

⁴⁹ See *Kritik aller Offenbarung*, §6 (GA I.1.45f).

they might be elevated to autonomy by it; those who can see revelation as revelation have no need for it.

Through all of this speaks Fichte's insistence on the self-sufficiency of the subject, an insistence which will not only grow stronger but receive its proper transcendental foundation in the 1794/95 *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. Here Fichte makes two critical interventions in transcendental philosophy. In the briefest of terms, he provides, first, a unified account of Kant's faculties of sensibility, understanding, and reason by deriving them through a pragmatic history of self-consciousness, in turn founded on the original act of the self-positing I. Secondly he eliminates as both incompatible with and superfluous to transcendental philosophy thus conceived the unknowable *Ding an sich*. While for Kant the world of the *an sich*, the supersensible substrate which we must think of as underlying our world of appearances, may not be *knowable* as such – with the notable exception of our direct awareness of our own freedom as noumenal subjects – it nevertheless might be said to *announce itself* in the experience of the beautiful. Fichte no longer has a need for such announcements, for the I generates both theoretical and practical reason out of its own spontaneity. And where Kant in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* insists on the need for a moral God as restorer of the equilibrium between duty and happiness to ward off a civil war within practical reason, Fichte comes to brush this need aside as a vestigial heteronomous desire. For if there is nothing *outside* the transcendental I to which it could in the spontaneity of its own striving be beholden, not even a God, it follows that the one place where the divine might be found is in ourselves. This conclusion becomes explicit in the 1798 piece “Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung”, where Fichte equates God with nothing but the drive inherent to our reason to establish a moral world

order. The world of the senses appears in this light as nothing but the material site in which this moral world order is to be constructed, and as such, Fichte argues, one might even say that a belief in the world of the senses is a “revelation” of our duty to construct a moral order.⁵⁰ This moral order of the world itself is the only God which transcendental philosophy can admit.⁵¹

God as a mere moral world order which our own striving is to bring about – this was one bridge too far for the orthodox. In the ensuing *Atheismusstreit*, Fichte would end up without his university chair, and was accused by Jacobi in an open letter of “nihilism”. This charge amounts to the claim that Fichte is unable to think anything outside the subject; for, or so Jacobi’s accusation runs, the transcendental I creates both itself and its world out of the not-I, which is in reality nothing at all. But if, as Jacobi holds, morality is more than the consequent application of the laws of a priori practical reason, that is, if morality is more than the subject’s identity with itself, then such a transcendental *creatio ex nihilo* is as powerless to found morality as it is to find God.⁵²

⁵⁰ “So, als das Resultat einer moralischen Weltordnung angesehen, kann man das Prinzip dieses Glaubens an die Realität der Sinnenwelt gar wohl Offenbarung nennen. Unsre Pflicht ist's, die in ihr sich offenbart.” (“Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung” (GA I.10.9).

⁵¹ “Dies ist der wahre Glaube; diese moralische Ordnung ist das Göttliche, das wir annehmen. Er wird konstruiert durch das Rechtthun. Dieses ist das einzig mögliche Glaubensbekenntnis: fröhlich und unbefangen vollbringen, was jedesmal die Pflicht gebet, ohne Zweifeln und Klügeln über die Folgen. Dadurch wird dieses Göttliche uns lebendig und wirklich; jede unsrer Handlungen wird in der Voraussetzung desselben vollzogen, und alle Folgen derselben werden nur in ihm aufbehalten.” (id).

⁵² Jacobi does not so much argue against self-founding moral rationalism as hymn its counterpart, with a poetic fury worth quoting in full: “Ja, ich bin der Atheist und der Gottlose, der, dem *Willen der Nichts will* zuwider – lügen will, wie *Desdemona* sterbend log; lügen und betrügen will, wie der für Orest sich darstellende *Pylades*; morden will, wie *Timoleon*; Gesetz und Eid brechen, wie *Epaminondas*, wie *Johann de Witt*; Selbstmord beschließen wie *Otho*; Tempelraub begehen wie *David* – Ja, Aehren ausraufen am *Sabbath*, auch nur darum,

Whatever the merits of the accusation of nihilism against him, it is clear that Fichte in the works running up to the *Atheismusstreit* does eliminate the possibility of a philosophical recourse to revelation, at least if such a revelation is supposed to originate from outside the pure awareness of duty constituted by the transcendental subject itself; if the divine might be said to manifest itself at all, it is through our creation in history of the moral world order. The validity of this position depends, of course, on whether morality and freedom can indeed be understood on the basis of nothing but a successive unrolling in the world of a practical rationality based on a priori principles. Does the subject ever achieve such being at one with oneself, or is there rather at the heart of subjecthood always something which escapes the subject's full awareness? And can God be adequately thought as an ordering principle, that is to say little more than the shadow which the I's moral activity throws over the world? Schelling, as we will see, will continue to be troubled by these questions.⁵³

weil mich *hungert*, und das Gesetz um des Menschen willen gemacht ist, nicht der Mensch um des Gesetzes willen. Ich bin dieser Gottlose, und spotte der Philosophie, die mich deswegen Gottlos nennt; spotte ihrer und ihres höchstes Wesens: denn mit der heiligen Gewißheit, die ich in mir habe, weiß ich – daß das *privilegium aggratiandi* wegen solcher Verbrechen wider den reinen Buchstaben des absolut allgemeinen Vernunftgesetzes, das eigentliche *Majestätsrecht* des Menschen, das Siegel seiner Würde, seiner Göttlichen Natur ist." (*Jacobi an Fichte*, 32-33).

⁵³ Fichte's philosophy of religion does not stop evolving after the *Atheismusstreit*. In a series of popular publications – foremost among which the 1800 *Bestimmung des Menschen* and the 1806 *Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* – Fichte will choose to write in a register more hospitable to religious imagery, all the while working in more purely philosophical terms on the same questions within the successive later versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – which however remained unpublished during Fichte's lifetime. Schelling's later judgment on the Fichte of the popular writings is unforgiving: "Hier wurde die Sache freilich verständlich genug, aber in gleichem Verhältniß denen, die zuvor etwas Höheres in der Wissenschaftslehre erkannt hatten, ungenießbar. In noch späteren Schriften suchte er gewisse ihm anfänglich fremde Ideen mit seinen ursprünglichen in Verbindung zu setzen. Aber wie war es möglich, mit dem absoluten göttlichen Sein, von dem er jetzt lehrte, es

Conclusion

Both in Spinoza and Kant, the concept of revelation is denied connection to theoretical knowledge, and consigned instead to the realm of morality. This, as we have also seen, has very different consequences in both cases. For Spinoza, morality as we commonly understand it is nothing but an illusion; good and evil are, when understood in the light of reason, nothing more than what is useful or fails to be so. The simple, moral goal of all revelation, which is to teach those who are not philosophers the values of obedience and love of one's neighbor, is in the final reckoning a way of guiding those of lesser powers of reason to live as reasonable lives as they are capable of. Only the philosopher grasps how all that is can be derived by necessity from God's essence as necessary, self-causing cause. Freedom from this perspective is nothing but the understanding of how we ourselves are determined.

For Kant, on the contrary, knowledge of God eludes finite reason by its very nature, much as philosophy may long for it, and much as theoretical reason may need this ideal as a regulative principle to make our knowledge of the world possible at all. Practical reason, on the contrary, gives us moral certainty that there is a God, but this God-postulate cannot announce itself other than through the moral law. Why, one might counter, call this revelation at all, if it is strictly universal and a priori? And if the only God human reason can

sei das einzig *Reale*, noch denen Idealismus in Verbindung zu bringen, dessen Grundlage vielmehr gewesen war, eines jeden Ich sei die einzige Substanz? Fichte hätte in der That besser gethan, rein Er selbst zu bleiben [...]” (*Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, third lecture; *SW* II/3, 53-54). Note the malicious barb against the identity of the Fichtean transcendental I here. On the question of God in the later, unpublished versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – an important question in its own right – see Christoph Asmuth, *Begreifen des Unbegreiflichen*.

truly reach is the moral God who promises in some future time happiness proportional to virtue, would it not be more consequent to show, as Fichte does, this God as what he is – nothing other than the moral world order which human endeavor is in the light of duty to create in this world?

The young Schelling will altogether agree with this sentiment. The 1798 piece *Über Offenbarung und Volkserziehung* begins with the cold assertion: “Es ist Zeit endlich, daß man aufhöre, den Offenbarungsbegriff als *Vernunftidee*, oder gar als ein *Postulat der praktischen Vernunft* zu betrachten”.⁵⁴ This tendency, here described as smuggling back in through the back door of the postulates what had been gotten rid of through the front door of philosophy, Schelling had already ridiculed in a letter to Hegel while still at the Tübinger Stift:

All possible dogmas have already been branded postulates of practical reason, and where theoretical-historical proof are ever insufficient, there practical (Tübinger) reason cuts the knot. [...]

It is a delight to watch just how they know to pull the strings of the moral proof – before you know it, the *deus ex machina* jumps out – the personal, individual being that sits up there in heaven!⁵⁵

Asked by Hegel in his response letter whether he believes we cannot reach a personal God, Schelling replies he is surprised an intimate of Lessing should pose such a question. For as Lessing had confessed to Jacobi in his credo of *hen kai pan*, so too for Schelling “the orthodox

⁵⁴ *Über Offenbarung und Volkserziehung* (1798), HKA I.4.247.

⁵⁵ 1795.01.06, Schelling to Hegel: “Alle möglichen Dogmen sind nun schon zu Postulaten der praktischen Vernunft gestempelt, und, wo theoretisch-historische Beweise nimmer ausreichen, da zerhaut die praktische (Tübingsche) Vernunft den Knoten. [...] Es ist eine Lust, anzusehen, wie sie den moralischen Beweis an der Schnur zu ziehen wissen – eh' man sich's versieht, springt der *Deus ex machina* hervor – das persönliche, individuelle Wesen das da oben im Himmel sitzt!” (HKA III.1.15-16).

concepts of God are nothing any longer”.⁵⁶ There cannot be a personal God, for being a person implies the unity of consciousness, and consciousness is consciousness *of something*, of an object outside to which it relates itself. Yet this is precisely what cannot be the case if one thinks of God as the all-encompassing original unity which both Spinoza’s *deus sive natura* and Fichte’s absolute I are attempts at articulating.

Once one reduces revelation to an external aid to morality, so Schelling continues his argument in *Über Offenbarung und Volksunterricht*, one destroys the concept; for it is incompatible with the sovereignty of autonomous practical reason to suggest it should need an external aid. A morality not already grounded in practical reason, on the other hand, would not know what to do with a revelation. If Kant has cut off the way for a theoretical justification of revelation, which would found a claim to know how a personal God acts in the world of the senses and on the human spirit, the pseudo-philosophical attempt to save revelation from a purely practical perspective no less fails. For all its dogmatic nature and despite its philosophical falsehood, there was a certain coherence and probity to religious orthodoxy on its own terms; but where, Schelling approvingly quotes a *bon mot* of Lessing’s,

⁵⁶ 1795.02.04, Schelling to Hegel: “Noch eine Antwort auf Deine Frage: ob ich glaube wir reichen mit dem moralischen Beweis nicht zu einem persönlichen Wesen? Ich gestehe, die Frage hat mich überrascht, ich hätte sie von einem Vertrauten Lessings nicht erwartet – doch Du hast sie wohl nur getan, um zu erfahren, ob sie bei *mir ganz* entschieden sei, für Dich ist sie gewiss schon längst entschieden. Auch für uns sind die orthodoxen Begriffe von Gott nichts mehr. – Meine Antwort ist: wir reichen weiter noch, als zu einem persönlichen Wesen” (HKA III,1 20-23). Though biography cannot replace argument in philosophy, it is nevertheless poignant that at the age of 79, Schelling was still capable of writing to his son, “Hen kai pan, ich weiß nichts anderes, sagte seiner Zeit Leßing. Ich weiß auch nichts anderes” (quoted in Gulyga, *Schelling. Leben und Werk*, 377).

one tears down the wall of separation between orthodoxy and philosophy, one does not make rational Christians, but rather irrational philosophers.⁵⁷

Yet if the Enlightenment has torn down this wall, Schelling continues, there is no rebuilding it; the task of philosophy is instead to construct the *one* road that runs through both domains. Here too, Lessing points the way. His 1780 *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes* pictures revelation – here no longer seen as the individual intervention of God in the world and in the human spirit, but rather as the successive conceptions of the divine which mankind has adhered to through history – as the progressive education, from recalcitrant childhood to the ripeness of reason, of mankind. Revelation is not opposed to reason, nor could it yield to mankind any knowledge it might not attain on its own strength; it is merely reason’s catalyst,⁵⁸ and any revealed truth has been so revealed to be turned into a truth of reason.⁵⁹ Mankind is in its childhood when it passes through the Old Testament, where it learns God is one; the New Testament is its adolescence, as it becomes aware of the immortality of the soul. Ultimately, Lessing presages, mankind will enter into a

⁵⁷ “Man reißt die Scheidewand nieder und macht uns, unter dem Vorwand, uns zu vernünftigen Christen zu machen, zu höchst unvernünftigen Philosophen.” (SW I.1.478). No doubt there is a certain irony in the use of the Biblical metaphor of the “wall of separation” – the wall between believers and unbelievers, Jews and Gentiles, which Jesus has come to tear down (Eph. 2:14f).

⁵⁸ *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes*, §4: “Erziehung giebt dem Menschen nichts, was er nicht auch aus sich selbst haben könnte: sie giebt ihm das, was er aus sich selber haben könnte, nur geschwinder und leichter. Also giebt auch die Offenbarung dem Menschengeschlechte nichts, worauf die menschliche Vernunft, sich selbst überlassen, nicht auch kommen würde: sondern sie gab und giebt ihm die wichtigsten dieser Dinge nur früher. (Werke und Briefe in zehn Bänden, 10:75).

⁵⁹ See §76: “die Ausbildung geoffenbarter Wahrheiten in Vernunftwahrheiten ist schlechterdings notwendig, wenn dem menschlichen Geschlechte damit geholfen sein soll. Als sie geoffenbaret wurden, waren sie freilich noch keine Vernunftwahrheiten; aber sie wurden geoffenbaret, um es zu werden.” (Id, 10:94). Schelling will still quote this passage approvingly at the conclusion of the *Freiheitsschrift*.

third age, the time of completion and of a new eternal Gospel, where the good will be done for its own sake alone.⁶⁰

Lessing's *Erziehung* is the primary formative influence on the philosophy of religion and history of the period and continues to exercise the philosophical imagination of both Hegel and Schelling throughout their careers. Yet the concise, provocative treatise raises as many philosophical questions as it answers. Why it is that mankind needs revelation at all, and cannot grasp directly the independent truths of reason it supposedly conveys; by what way it is that revealed truth comes to manifest itself; and how its relation to the God of whom Lessing continues to speak is to be thought – on all this, Lessing remains silent. Schelling's treatise, appearing almost two decades later at the point where the *Atheismusstreit* surrounding Fichte is about to break out, suggests boldly that just as everything in reality is a development of absolute reason, so too what may appear as providence is nothing but reason ordering human history towards a moral world order; the history of religion is revelation in that it is the successive unfolding of symbolic representations of the ideas of morality.⁶¹ If this is the case, however, then revelation – that is, the full historical edifice of

⁶⁰ On Lessing's philosophy of religion more generally, see Wolfgang Förster, "Lessings Religionskritik und Geschichtsphilosophie – Kulminationspunkt der deutschen Aufklärung".

⁶¹ "Die Geschichte der Religion ist dann eine fortgehende Offenbarung oder symbolische Darstellung jener Ideen [i.e. of morality], sowie überhaupt die ganze Geschichte unsers Geschlechts nichts anders ist, als die fortgehende Entwicklung des moralischen Weltplans, den wir als prädestinirt durch die Vernunft (insofern sie absolut ist) annehmen müssen. [...] So nun, da alles, was in der Wirklichkeit vorkommt, nur Entwicklung einer absoluten Vernunft ist, müssen wir auch in der Geschichte, und insbesondere in der Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes, überall die Spur jener absoluten Vernunft finden, die uns vom empirischen (lediglich praktischen) Standpunkt aus als Vorsehung erscheinen wird, die zum voraus gleichsam alles so angeordnet hat, wie wir es in der Wirklichkeit finden." (SW I.1.480-81).

changing conceptions of the divine that hold mankind captive – is nothing but the sum of childish things which, once no longer a child, one puts away in favor of practical reason alone.

Lessing's reading of revelation as the history of religious consciousness, it must be remembered, is situated against a stark contrast between truths of reason and truths of history – the one, eternal and undoubtable; the other, merely contingent and always open to skeptical challenge. Contingent historical truths can never found claims to universal truths of reason, Lessing holds, for between them lies a gap that cannot be spanned: "Das, das ist der garstige breite Graben, über den ich nicht kommen kann, so oft und ernstlich ich auch den Sprung versucht habe".⁶²

Once this is admitted, the Spinozist conclusion that philosophy, and philosophy alone, can speak properly of God becomes seemingly inescapable. But a philosophy that wishes to speak in this manner would have to show how Spinoza's *deus sive natura*, now understood as the supersensible substrate underlying the phenomenal world, might be accessible to it despite the strictures imposed by Kant's first *Critique* on the limits of discursive reason. It must do so, furthermore, while maintaining human freedom.⁶³ Fichte's step beyond Kant – his claim that the I must be conceived through an act of original self-positing, which as a form of intellectual intuition escapes merely discursive reason – is fatally one-sided, Schelling

⁶² *Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*, 8:441-44. Whether Schelling's late thought *does* manage this leap is a question we will return to.

⁶³ Lessing himself seems to have been less troubled by this question. Challenged by Jacobi whether he was happy to renounce freedom as a Spinozist, he goaded his pious interlocutor with the reply that as an honest Lutheran, he of course believed there was no freedom of the will. (Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, 76). On the question of Lessing's Spinozism, or lack thereof, and its relation to the free will, see Reinhard Schwarz, "Lessings 'Spinozism'" and Louise Crowther, "Freedom and necessity: Spinoza's impact on Lessing".

argues, for the absolute must be shown to be both spirit and *nature*. In the *System des Transzendentalen Idealismus*, Schelling's attempt to think both of these together will culminate in the thesis that it is in art and in art alone – neither in theoretical nor in practical reason – that consciousness achieves awareness of the unity of nature and spirit. Art can thus lay claim to the title of the one eternal revelation there is.

Yet despite this rehabilitation of revelation as art, the true importance for Schelling's thought of revelation would only appear with the 1809 *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*. It is to this we now turn.

Chapter 2 – Freedom Rational and Ontological

Introduction

Schelling's early thinking of revelation, as we have seen in *Über Offenbarung und Volksunterricht*, was reductive rather than productive; only a muddled philosophy comes out of the attempt to salvage a rational conception of revelation, once the principles of critical philosophy are given – even if the idea of revelation remains of use as a popular pedagogy. Schelling's first philosophical attempts in this sense are strictly in the line of Lessing.

Yet they would not long remain exclusively so. It is the systematic elaboration of the idea that philosophy can only exist securely in the form of an all-encompassing whole that brings Schelling to a first rehabilitation of the idea of revelation. Kant's three *Critiques* had provided the building blocks of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic reason; yet for Kant himself, it seemed to those who came in his wake, these merely sat side by side in their discrete moments. How they could be seen as the expression of a single philosophical impetus remained unclear. Fichte had brought this program along in the dual project of a

theoretical and a practical science of knowing. In the practical sphere, as we have briefly sketched above, this led to the idea of God as not a given, but an assigned task: the moral world order which we ourselves bring about by determining ourselves absolutely under the moral law, transforming the world of nature into one governed by reason. But Fichte failed to include the project of a teleology and the aesthetics that the third *Critique* had provided.

The task which Schelling's 1800 *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* sets itself then is to provide a *unified* theory of how the I, as the unconditioned principle of all knowledge, can become aware of itself as the one ground of nature and spirit. It is in this light that Schelling takes up the task of thinking revelation as the self-manifestation of the divine: not the communication of a particular fact or order, but the absolute's unveiling itself in and through the forms of nature until its full blossoming in the human spirit.

The 1800 *System*, in some ways the most complete and well-rounded work of philosophy Schelling published, requires an extensive reading in its own right. This cannot be given here. Instead we will merely point out, for the sake of our larger question of how freedom and revelation are to be thought together, how the *System* brings itself to thematize explicitly the idea of revelation. Interestingly, it does so not once but twice. On the one hand, Schelling takes over more or less wholesale Kant's idea of the establishment of the universal moral law in history as the kingdom of ends, which Fichte in his bold equation of the moral world order with God had brought to a consequent head.

History as a whole is a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the absolute [Die Geschichte als Ganzes ist eine fortgehende, allmählich sich enthüllende Offenbarung des Absoluten]. Hence one can never point out in history the particular

places where the marks of providence, or God Himself, is as it were visible. For God never *exists*, if the existent *is* that which presents itself in the objective world; if *He existed* thus, then *we* should not; but he continually *reveals* Himself. Man, through his history, provides a continuous demonstration of God's presence, a demonstration, however, which only the whole of history can render complete.⁶⁴

It will be crucial for the development of Schelling's further thought that this moral God of history is only ever a result, the *end* of our practical reason; it is not a God who can intervene or contribute in any way to this order coming about. But how this is to be achieved remains obscure. For as Kant had already worried, it would require human beings *acting* on the moral law with which their reason has equipped them – but the world as we know it shows that largely, they do not; and no amount of philosophical preaching on how needful this is will make it come about. The *conversion* that would be required, the decision to actually allow the moral law to determine us, is something we may hope for, but remains frustrated by our tendency to let practical reason be overcome by our sensuous cravings. Fichte for his part seems to lack a sensitivity to this problem in his earlier work – for one reason, perhaps, because on the abstract level of the absolute freedom of the I to determine itself, our failure to do so is merely that. That something in human nature should fundamentally resist the moral law – in Kantian terms, that there is a steady propensity, a propensity that is not merely the natural draw of the passions but itself an intellectual phenomenon, for reason to abdicate its powers of self-determination – is therefore not something he can countenance. Schelling for his part may hope that actual history – which he sketches in the briefest terms in three periods – overcome this difficulty, but has no more arguments to offer for it.

⁶⁴ *System des transzendental Idealismus*, SW I/3, 603; tr. Heath, 211.

It seems then that Schelling's earlier skepticism regarding the idea of a revelation of reason seems justified. If God is indeed a moral world order, the end of practical reason, then he cannot intervene in the process of his own establishment in history. But even if, in what amounts to little more than a metaphorical way, we were to speak of the unfolding of a moral world order as revelation, then there is nevertheless a sense in which what and who we are is not exhausted by our moral self-determination. Our freedom cannot be so exhausted, because it does not yet allow us to understand ourselves fully as purposeful beings beyond the limits of our ability to come together under the moral law; for this, our organic nature as embodied beings and our spiritual nature as owners of signs and symbols would also have to be understood. Here, however, the *System* has another role for revelation to play. Fichte had largely ignored the third part of Kant's system, the teleology and the aesthetics, and it is here, in particular in the form of art, that Schelling mobilizes a second concept of revelation that cannot be restlessly absorbed into reason. For where consciousness to Fichte is always at least potentially purely rational, purely self-transparent, and stands under the enduring obligation to become so actively, Schelling has an abiding sense for that which by its very nature cannot become fully articulate in human nature. One way in which Kant had already thematized this matter is in the notion that we are forms of organic life, and as such must understand our organic nature as beyond mere mechanistic description; if we want to see our bodily nature as a self-generating whole, we must *assume* it is teleologically structured, even if it is only in reflexive judgment, therefore never as a knowledge claim, that such assumptions can be made. But that would mean that nature, as an unconscious force, produces what can only appear as a conscious product.

In this it prefigures the work of art and the artistic drive that produces it, which in the

System is the locus of the remaining non-transparency of the self. The reason for this is that in art, it is nature itself – not the determined finite world of nature we are empirically aware of, but the higher, noumenal nature that makes up the supersensible substrate – which is at work in the genius to produce the work of art. As such it combines both the unconscious noumenal drives of the I and its conscious, shaping powers in the bringing forth of the work, and it is in and through the work of art that the I has the objective presentation of the conscious and the unconscious being not opposed, but joined.

Now every absolute concurrence [*Zusammentreffen*] of the two antithetical activities [conscious and unconscious]] is utterly unaccountable, being simply a phenomenon which although incomprehensible [Schelling adds in footnote: from the standpoint of mere reflection], yet cannot be denied; and art, therefore, is the one everlasting revelation which yields that concurrence, and the marvel which, had it existed but once only, would necessarily have convinced us of the absolute reality of that supreme event.⁶⁵

Appearances to the contrary, then, and pointedly against Fichte, Schelling's 1800 *System* does not end in the deification of the self-sufficient I; it is in *aesthetic* intuition that the supersensible substrate unifying nature and spirit, which Kant had declared unknowable, is unveiled. Art and only art, as conditioned representation of the unconditioned in the ever-renewed, ever-particular proliferation of works of art, discloses to us this supersensible substrate. When Schelling famously ends the *System* with the call for philosophy to flow back into poetry and so form a new mythology – a term about which we will have more to say when we turn to the *Philosophie der Mythologie* of Schelling's late philosophy – then this is

⁶⁵ *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, SW I/3, 617-18; tr. Heath, 223.

to be understood as the attempt to embed the function of the artistic intuition not merely in the individual genius, nor even in those who through the work of art are presented with the reality of the unity of the conscious and the unconscious – connoisseurs and critics, say – but in a universal social harmony that transcends the merely rational and the merely moral.

The fundamental insight on which Schelling will later build a concept of revelation equally takes its departure from a critique of the rational self-determination of the subject. He does this in the 1809 *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* by developing a new and radical concept of freedom that can no longer be dissolved in reason, because it inherently goes deeper than the moral law (§1). This admittedly leads Schelling's philosophy into murky territory. It has to bypass the usual categories of moral philosophy to uncover a deeper experience of what it means to be a person – an experience Schelling feels sooner reflected in the theological tradition, and that he discusses in a cosmological language borrowed in part from his reading of mystical authors. Yet this does not mean Schelling's philosophy, having failed to grasp the world through reason, now retreats into theosophy. However colorfully it may be expressed, however inchoate it may be thought out – and the barely eighty pages of the treatise are admittedly more than saturated with philosophical ideas that are evoked rather than nailed down, indicated rather than articulated – there is at its heart nevertheless a thesis about the nature of what it means to live one's freedom as a human being which can be spelled out in clear lines. Such an account must focus on the distinction between what Schelling calls the two forms of the will which are also the two forms in which being now is said to manifest itself: *ground* and *existence* (§2). As with that distinction Schelling's ontology becomes an ontology of the will, so too freedom must now not be thought as the possession of a rational agent, but as an

ontological freedom (§3).

§ 1 – The Radicality of Freedom

One might be forgiven, upon opening Schelling's *Philosophical investigations into the essence of human freedom and matters connected therewith*, for thinking that the awkwardly titled treatise smuggles in its dubious goods under a false flag.⁶⁶ Though it calls itself a philosophical treatise, it may appear at first sight less of a sober tractate than a cluttered and opaque diatribe; where it promises a probing investigation, it tends to brusquely posit rather than argue in detail for the most arresting of its theses; perhaps most exasperatingly, it devotes most of its attention not to man and his freedom, but to the metaphysics of evil and to a grand theosophical vision of God – all this to conclude in exhorting, with Saint Paul, that love be “all in all”.⁶⁷

Why, one might ask, should the question of human freedom be approached here by so divine and seemingly esoteric a route? The heart of the matter is that Schelling, in stark contrast to both his fellows in the enterprise of German Idealism as well as to his own

⁶⁶ On the form of presentation of the *Freiheitsschrift*, see Thomas Buchheim's introduction to the Meiner edition, XXVI f.

⁶⁷ The full rapturous phrase is “die allgemeine, gegen alles gleiche und doch von nichts ergriffene Einheit, das vom allen Freie und doch alles durchwirkende Wohltun, mit Einem Wort, Die Liebe, die Alles in Allem ist” (7:408); cf. 1 Cor 15:28 (ἵνα ἢ ὁ θεὸς πάντα ἐν παῖσιν). Kant had already used this quotation as the figural description of what a religion of reason is to lead to: the universal kingdom of ends on earth (*Religion*, 6:121f). Schelling will return to the idea of the “all in all” in the conclusion to the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*: “Dann ist Gott wirklich Alles in Allem, der Pantheismus wahr” (*SW I/7*, 484). Note how the latter makes clear that the One in All is not a given but a goal set for human freedom to attain. Schelling in the late philosophy will still hold onto this – though sever absolutely the connection to pantheism.

Identitätsphilosophie, insists in the *Freiheitsschrift* that human freedom, if it is to be worthy of the name at all, must be a capacity *for both good and evil*;⁶⁸ evil cannot be a mere lack or *privatio boni*, but must have a positive reality of its own, if what is at stake in the exercise of freedom is truly a free choice. This genuine possibility of evil Schelling finds not primarily, as one might expect, in the constitution of the moral life of the finite agent, but on much grander a scale, in the metaphysical distinction between that which *exists* and that which is merely the *ground* of existence – between, that is, God, who insofar as he exists can only be good, and that *in* God which yet *is not* God – the primordial will.⁶⁹

To understand the reason for this profound yet profoundly bewildering claim of an original distinction in God, and to show how this distinction between ground and existence serves to found the genuine possibility of evil, however, two questions demand a preliminary answer. First of all, why should an account of the nature of evil be sought at all? Why does Schelling maintain such an account is necessary? Are there no grounds to think that evil, as the failure to achieve the good, is amply contained in thinking the good itself, and so is not in its own right an *explicandum* of a philosophy of freedom? Secondly, if we were to grant that an account of the nature of evil is necessary in order to explain human freedom, in what way has the throng of accounts which the history of thought has already furnished failed to provide such an explanation? Are they, each in their own way, accidentally mistaken, or is there a common root to the failure to think through the nature of evil?

⁶⁸ “Der reale und lebendige Begriff aber ist, daß sie ein Vermögen des Guten und Bösen sei” (SW I/7, 352). The terms real and living here needless to say require further exposition.

⁶⁹ The distinction, founded by the philosophy of nature, “zwischen dem Wesen, sofern es existiert, und das Wesen, sofern es bloß Grund von Existenz ist” (SW I/7, 357).

Why, then, should an account of the nature of evil be a philosophical *desideratum* at all? If Schelling's earlier philosophy of nature or philosophy of identity do not betray much of a concern for the question of evil, his academic work at the *Tübinger Stift* does. His philosophical dissertation, an interpretation of the myth of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3, and its theological counterpart, on the early Christian heretic Marcion, grapple with the origins of evil both in relation to man in his freedom and to God in his goodness. In the former, it is man's *spontaneitas*, his free choice between sensibility and rationality, which occasions his departure from paradise.⁷⁰ In the latter, Schelling argues that the dualism commonly attributed to Marcion, which distinguishes between the tyrannical Demiurge of the Old Testament and the God of Love of the New, should be understood not as describing two different beings, but rather two perspectives on one and the same.⁷¹ *In nuce*, then, Schelling's dissertations at the *Tübinger Stift* give us an indication of the path the *Freiheitsschrift* will take – evil is to be conceived, in finite terms, through man's originary free act of self-determination, and, in absolute terms, through an inner dualism in God.

⁷⁰ *Antiquissima de prima malorum humanorum origine philosophematis Genes. III explicandi tentamen criticum et philosophicum*. Man is, in good Kantian terms, "sensibus ex altera parte adstrictus, ex altera civitatis intelligibilis socius" (I.1 94); in paradisaical state he was merely passively led by his senses or instinct ("homo, dum aureum aetatem viveret, natura paruit tantum, instinctum (Gen. III, 2. 3.)" yet as soon as he took use of his spontaneity, he left this state: "Sed simul spontaneitate sua usus erat, quoniam in statu naturae sensibus tantum paruit, tum primum ex illo statu discessit" (I.1 95). Note how Jacobs's translation in the *Akademieausgabe* renders *spontaneitas* here, but not elsewhere in the dissertation, as *Willkür*. The implied parallel with the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* in Kant's *Religion* may well be justified, as Schelling non-specifically quotes that work on the first page of the dissertation.

⁷¹ *De Marcione Paullinarum epistolarum emendatore*. "Neque enim sine dubio credidit, Judaeorum legislatorem mundique conditorem viuersum a supremo numine *Deum existere*, sed indicabat eo discrimine diuersas de Deo *opinionēs*" (SW I/1, 253).

That, however, does not answer the question why one must speak about evil at all. To give but two vignettes on opposite ends of the history of philosophy – to Socrates, no man would fail to do the good if he would but know it, and evil is thus no more than an intellectual error; to Nietzsche, the distinction between good and evil is the mendacious imposition of herd mentality on the original distinction between good and worthless. In either case, there is no place for evil in philosophy.

Yet neither of these alternatives are open to a mode of thought which seeks to hold onto two ideas which inform the *Freiheitsschrift*. The first is the idea of systematicity. Not only must thinking proceed as a self-founding, self-articulating whole, but it can and must be so because the world itself, which philosophy mirrors and completes in thought, is itself such a self-founding, self-articulating whole, Spinoza's *deus sive natura* made dynamic and alive. The second idea is that if there is to be human freedom, the agency of the finite individual cannot be absorbed into the whole, for this would make him but a cog in the universal machine rather than a being endowed with free choice. The Socratic option, though it posits a good at least potentially accessible to human understanding, fails to account for genuine freedom; the Nietzschean one, while granting a freedom beyond the restrictions imposed by a moral framework, shatters the possibility of systematic knowledge of the whole.

The *Freiheitsschrift* opens with both the assumption of freedom and systematicity. First, it is asserted that an immediate feeling (*Gefühl*) or awareness of the fact of freedom (*Tatsache der Freiheit*) is implanted in all of us; though such a feeling is far from an adequate concept of freedom, it nevertheless provides a given from which philosophy is to proceed. Secondly, if our knowledge is to deserve the status of *Wissenschaft* at all, it must form a whole which comprehensively describes the world, as it is the very nature of reason to search for

such unconditioned unity; even if, hypothetically, knowledge of this unity were beyond our finite minds, it must exist in the divine understanding.⁷²

Given these two presuppositions – our freedom, of which we are directly aware, and systematicity, which follows from the nature of reason – a system of freedom, in which the fact of freedom is embedded in an all-encompassing account of the whole should at least theoretically be possible. And it is one of the most pressing tasks of such a system of freedom to answer the Augustinian question *unde malum* – whence does evil come?

How have previous attempts failed to provide this? Schelling tersely remarks that all other explanations leave both the understanding and the ethical consciousness unsatisfied.⁷³ This they do in two ways – either such accounts end up attributing evil to God, a blasphemous enormity which would leave us with no God at all, or they marginalize evil to the point of denying it. A system of *immanence*, for example, would need to place evil either in God, which would destroy the idea of God's perfection, or outside of God, and as such make it less than real; but that would mean there is no genuine freedom either. Were we to think the relation between God and finite creatures more loosely as *coherence*, the same problem emerges; for if creatures depend upon an omnipotent God who nevertheless allows them to embrace evil,

⁷² “[...] daß, da die individuelle Freiheit doch auf irgend eine Weise mit dem Weltganzen (gleichviel, ob es realistisch oder idealistisch gedacht werde) zusammenhängt, irgend ein System, wenigstens im göttlichen Verstande, vorhanden sein muß, mit dem die Freiheit zusammenbesteht.” (SW I/7, 336-37). Schelling's sparse remarks here do not seek to trace, let alone defend, the necessity of the system, but take as given that nature and spirit are unified in the supersensible, and that this unity, whether thought as indifference, absolute identity, or God, can be known through intellectual intuition. On the question of the system in relation to the *Freiheitsschrift*, see Heidegger's magisterial outline in *Schelling's Abhandlung*, 27-58 as well as Franks, 337-84.

⁷³ “Alle andern Erklärungen des Bösen lassen den Verstand und das sittliche Bewußtsein gleich unbefriedigt” (SW I/7, 367).

either God himself must be seen as co-responsible for evil, or the reality of evil must somehow be denied, and with it, once again, freedom.

Taking the other horn of the dilemma, one might opt for *dualism*; a good God and a separate source of evil might, both within in their own sphere, be able to co-exist. But taken radically this is would mean reason splitting itself in two. If on the other hand dualism is conceived such that the relation of evil to God is one of *dependency*, it remains inconceivable how a first evil act could have taken place. Equally one has to reject *emanationism*, because if evil is actively ejected by God, God has made it evil; or if God overflows, as if by nature, nothing is explained by this overflowing; or if the finite world has torn itself loose from God, it is precisely that first act of rebellion which needs to be explained. None of these traditional accounts thus escape the dilemma of denying freedom or destroying the possibility of systematicity.

Contrary to this catalogue of candidates which all too hastily seek to assign evil a place in a cosmological scheme is the solution attempted from the practical perspective of the finite agent by idealism. This, so Schelling insists, the first formal (*formell*) and authentic (*eigentlich*) concept of freedom.⁷⁴ What is the idealist concept of freedom, and in what sense

⁷⁴ "Denn bis zur Entdeckung des Idealismus fehlt der eigentliche Begriff der Freiheit in allen neuern Systemen, im Leibnizischen sogut wie im Spinozischen; und eine Freiheit, wie sie viele unter uns gedacht haben [...], wonach sie nämlich in der bloßen Herrschaft des intelligenten Prinzips über das sinnliche und die Begierden besteht, eine solche Freiheit ließe sich [...] auch aus dem Spinoza noch herleiten." (SW I/7, 345; cf. 371). On the designation "formal", Kosch: "transcendental spontaneity in the Kantian sense" (93), yet this does not seem quite enough, for it is not so much the origin of freedom as it is force of self-positing which is at stake here; Heidegger in a stronger sense equates formal and authentic: "forma ist das Bestimmende, das Wesen überhaupt" (100), "der eigentliche, d. h. "formelle" Begriff der Freiheit als Eigenständigkeit in der Entfaltung des eigenen Wesens" (102).

does it provide a decisive step towards the concept of freedom towards which the *Freiheitsschrift* is moving?

What Schelling here elliptically refers to as idealism is far from unambiguous, but it is I think best approached from the perspective of Kant's practical philosophy. To Kant, famously, there is a reciprocal relation between our absolute spontaneity, that is, our capacity to begin without being determined by anything but our own freedom, and our being bound by the moral law.⁷⁵ Practical reason through the moral law shows our world to us in such a fashion that, even when we are least inclined to follow the dictates of morality, we know we *ought* to engage upon certain causes of action. But the force of this *ought* can only be understood if indeed we *can* perform such an action, for if not, reason would demand what we are simply unable to do, which would be altogether irrational. We cannot be simply determined by outside mechanistic forces or, what would amount to much the same thing, the sensuous inclinations to escape harm and gratify desires which our embodied nature exposes us to, or we would not experience the *ought*. Through the force which the moral law exerts upon us as agents, we thus know that we are able to determine ourselves in accordance with the dictates of reason; we are autonomous in that we can impose upon ourselves a moral law of which we can justly see ourselves as authors through our practical reason. Yet if that is possible, we cannot but possess the absolute spontaneity which makes such self-determination possible. Conversely, to the extent that we exercise our spontaneity, that is, to the extent that we are able to escape both mechanistic and pathological

⁷⁵ On the reciprocity thesis, see Henry Allison, "Morality and Freedom: Kant's Reciprocity Thesis".

determination, we must be self-determined by the moral law. The moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, and freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law.

The crucial advance which according to Schelling this conception of freedom represents is that, rather than merely allowing man to overcome inclination by means of an intelligible principle, it understands this overcoming as the act through which man himself essentially posits his own essence.⁷⁶ Man as self-positing, self-determining entity is nothing but his own – indeed, one might want to say, his ownmost deed. For all the value of this advance, the question remains whether the notion of autonomy grasps the act of self-determination in its original force.

One reason for doubting it is that freedom as autonomy, too, does not fare particularly well in explaining the nature of evil. For if our spontaneous freedom is essentially tied to rational self-determination through the moral law, an unpleasant consequence seems to obtain. All actions which do not fall under the moral law cannot be called autonomous, but as autonomy is the touchstone of freedom, this means that they cannot be called free either. An unfree act, however, is not something one can be held accountable for. This threatens to leave us with a dichotomy between free acts, which, as rationally self-determined, are necessarily moral, and sensuously determined acts, which are by definition unfree, and thus in the strict sense cannot be called moral or amoral any more than an apple falling from a tree or a cat playing with a mouse can. An *act* of wickedness, and with it the possibility of evil *as evil*, thus becomes either impossible or altogether incomprehensible.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ “das Wesen des Menschen ist wesentlich *seine eigne Tat*” (SW I/7, 385).

⁷⁷ “Gesetzt aber, die Sinnlichkeit oder das leidende Verhalten gegen äußere Eindrücke brächte mit einer Art von Notwendigkeit böse Handlungen hervor, so wäre der Mensch in diesen doch selbst nur leidend, d.h. das

This charge, as old as Kant's contemporaries, remains the subject of fierce debate until today.⁷⁸ Here, let it suffice to note that the difficulty of accounting for evil under a conception of freedom as autonomy seems to have perturbed Kant himself enough to devise a response to it. This is the doctrine of radical evil. In the briefest of terms, radical evil is the steady tendency in man to adopt in his character a fundamental disposition to perversely allow the claims of sensuousness to prevail over those of the moral law. Such evil, the corrupting influence of which attaches not individual acts but rather to our moral life as a whole, is not itself a given of sensuousness but rather an inborn propensity which yet through free choice (significantly, *Willkür*) we either embrace or spurn, and thus bear responsibility for.⁷⁹ With the doctrine of radical evil Kant also makes explicit another crucial element of what will become the *Freiheitsschrift's* conception of freedom – that in freely resisting or giving in to the radical evil that is part of our nature, we establish our character in a fundamental act of freedom which, as such, pertains to us as noumenal selves, and thus cannot take place in time, but must be an eternal act.

The concept of radical evil as an indwelling principle of our nature as self-constituting agents, perpetually at war with the good principle of the moral law, seems to answer the question of how evil as evil is possible. And yet as soon as one asks where such a radically evil principle comes from, there is nowhere for the idealist to turn to for an explanation. It

Böse hätte in Ansehung seiner, also subjektiv, keine Bedeutung, und da das, was aus einer Bestimmung der Natur folgt, objektiv auch nicht Böse sein kann, hätte es überhaupt keine Bedeutung" (*SW* I/7, 371-72).

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Allison 418f and Kosch 46-57.

⁷⁹ "Wenn nun ein Hang dazu [i.e., to subject in one's highest maxim the claims of the moral law to the demands of sensuousness] in der menschlichen Natur liegt, so ist im Menschen ein natürlicher Hang zum Bösen; und dieser Hang selber, weil er am Ende doch in einer freien Willkür gesucht werden muß, mithin zugerechnet werden kann, ist moralisch böse." (*Religion*, 6:37)

stems neither from practical reason, for that would mean reason would solicit us to turn against reason, and thus be at war with itself, nor from the side of our sensuousness nature, because the very purpose of the concept of radical evil was to elucidate how allowing one's self to be determined by sensuousness can justly become the object of moral censure; sensuousness furthermore does not affect us as citizens of the intelligible realm. The propensity towards evil, though an indwelling and ineradicable principle of human agency, thus for Kant avowedly remains a strictly inexplicable fact.⁸⁰

§ 2 – Ground and Existence

Let us retrace our steps briefly. The *Freiheitsschrift* is concerned to demonstrate the possibility of evil. It must do so, if it is to hold on to its two fundamental assumptions: that the One and All can be known, as the post-Kantian concept of reason promises, and that the finite agent is in its freedom nevertheless not simply absorbed in the whole, as our immediate feeling of freedom seems to vouchsafe. The searched-for possibility of evil cannot be explained by accounts of an immanent, dualist or emanationist kind, for these invariably end up either imputing evil to God, thus offending reason, or surreptitiously eliminating evil, and destroying freedom along with it. The formal and authentic concept of freedom provided by idealism overcomes this dilemma in describing the finite agent as determining itself through an eternal act of freedom in choosing between the good and the evil principle. But

⁸⁰ "Das Böse hat nur aus dem moralisch-Bösen (nicht den bloßen Schranken unserer Natur) entspringen können; und doch ist die ursprüngliche Anlage (die auch kein anderer als der Mensch selbst verderben konnte, wenn diese Korruption ihm soll zugerechnet werden) eine Anlage zum Guten; für uns ist also kein begreiflicher Grund da, woher das moralische Böse in uns zuerst gekommen sein könne." (*Religion*, 6:43)

whereas reason in its practical form as legislator of the moral law provides the origin of the good principle, no account can be given on idealist terms of the evil principle.

This now is the task of the *Freiheitsschrift* – to dig down to uncover the origin of the evil principle. This it does through criticizing what it perceives to be an unwarranted dogma of Kantian idealism – the unknowability of the noumenal. Kant himself had demonstrated that although the noumenal realm as such seems to lie altogether beyond our ken, there is at least one morsel of knowledge of the supersensible which we undoubtedly have: we know through the force which the *ought* of the moral law exercises upon us that our noumenal self is free to determine itself – a determination which is, however, strictly speaking outside of space and time. The problem is how such freedom could be reconciled with the claim held no less strongly by Kant that the world of phenomena is causally deterministic. The solution of the apparent contradiction between these two famously lies in the idea that in the supersensible substrate, there need not be a contradiction between freedom and determinism. Yet if we can know this much, the barrier erected against our knowing the supersensible threatens to break down. Going a step beyond Kant, Fichte asserts that the I not only determines itself practically, but that more originally it posits itself in and as its own act, from which original act theoretical and practical reason then stem. Schelling in his turn argued from his earliest works on that, if nature and spirit are *per* Kant unified in the supersensible, and if *per* Fichte we know that the noumenal I is self-positing, then equally it should be possible to disclose nature as a self-positing whole generating and articulating

itself out of its own contradictions. Nature in this meaning, as supersensible – the *natura naturans* of Spinoza – must thus also be free and outside of time.⁸¹

Idealism – and by this term Schelling on the whole tends to indicate a roughly Fichtean position of transparent self-determination – wilfully closes its eyes to nature so conceived, and so cannot but miss the origin of evil.⁸² Only the realism of the philosophy of nature, or so Schelling claims, can complement it so that a living whole can emerge. For philosophy of nature here provides the distinction which allows for the question of the origin of evil to be resolved. This distinction, which we have worked towards since the beginning of this discussion, is between that which *exists* and that which is merely the *ground* of existence.⁸³ How is this distinction between ground and existence, which Friedrich Hermanni has helpfully called “internal dualism”, to be conceived?⁸⁴

Nothing can be before or outside of God. Therefore, if God has a ground, he must have the ground of his existence in himself. This no doubt has the ring of Spinoza’s *causa sui*, but rather than a mere causal force or rational principle, ground is to be understood here as something real and actual. The ground of existence which God has in himself cannot be God

⁸¹ “Es wird aber immer merkwürdig bleiben, daß Kant, nachdem er zuerst Dinge an sich von Erscheinungen nur negativ, durch die Unabhängigkeit von der Zeit, unterschieden, nachher in den metaphysischen Erörterungen seiner Kritik der praktischen Vernunft Unabhängigkeit von der Zeit und Freiheit wirklich als korrelierte Begriffe behandelt hatte, nicht zu den Gedanken fortging, diesen einzig möglichen positiven Begriff des An-sich auch auf die Dinge überzutragen, wodurch er sich unmittelbar zu einem höheren Standpunkt der Betrachtung und über die Negativität erhoben hätte, die der Charakter seiner theoretischen Philosophie ist.” (SW I/7, 351-52)

⁸² “Der Abscheu gegen alles Reale, der das Geistige durch jede Berührung mit demselben zu verunreinigen meint, muß natürlich auch den Blick für den Ursprung des Bösen blind machen” (SW I/7, 357)

⁸³ SW I/7, 357.

⁸⁴ See Friedrich Hermanni, *Die letzte Entlastung*.

taken absolutely, i.e. to the extent that he exists, but through an internal distinction within God, it can be described as “nature – in God”, or the divine to the extent that it is self-positing, self-articulating supersensible nature. Of the name God Schelling insists on a twofold meaning – on the one hand, God specifically as existence and, on the other God as the whole comprising ground and existence, so as to express that ground, while distinct from God, but is not separable from him; nor is there a before and after or a hierarchical relation between the two, for if God were not to exist, the ground would not be either, and conversely, there cannot be existence without ground.

Against Spinoza, Schelling maintains that this distinction is not to be taken as static, but essentially as inscribed in a dynamic of becoming. The ground is the productive desire to self-manifestation of the divine, or the longing of the eternal One to give birth to itself, but precisely as such longing it is not yet the unity of reason and nature it seeks to become. It is will, for, as Schelling has boldly posited before, willing is primordial being;⁸⁵ not yet what the will for idealism will be, the self-conscious, rational, moral world order, but a blind will that strives towards producing an *it knows not what*. That we know little of this primordial will cannot be surprising, for with the manifestation of God, order and form have been imposed on the world; yet this manifestation cannot be explained without the will, nor can the order of God’s existence alchemically transform it into itself altogether; the source of the reality of

⁸⁵ The celebrated passage from the introduction runs in full: “Es gibt im letzten und höchststen Instanz gar kein anderes Sein als Wollen. Wollen ist Ursein, und auf dieses allein passen alle Prädikate desselben: Grundlosigkeit, Ewigkeit, Unabhängigkeit von der Zeit, Selbstbejahung. Die ganze Philosophie strebt nur dahin, dieses höchsten Ausdruck zu finden” (SW I/7, 358).

things is an “indivisible remainder” of blind unreason which stubbornly remains withdrawn in the ground.⁸⁶

From this unconscious, unguided longing springs God’s reflexive self-image as existence, the principle of reason which, fed by desire, sets out to freely create in and out of the ground. Yet the ground is not so easily conquered; resisting the rational will’s formal impulse, it seeks to withdraw in itself and remain in its state of fecund formlessness. It is in the interplay between these two wills in and of God, the cosmic tug of war between rational order seeking to impose itself as a structured universal one and all, and the blind desire to subtract itself from such an articulated unity, that a world of individual, graspable things comes about.

So far Schelling’s “natural-philosophical deduction”⁸⁷ of the inner dualism of ground and existence in God. But this theogony, though it pits against God’s rational, and thus also moral, existence a ground resisting such moral order, and thus first indicates where the origin of evil might be sought, it does not yet explain how evil is a positive possibility for the individual finite agent. A “deduction of the possibility of evil” remains necessary. This the *Freiheitsschrift* pursues by noting that, just as there are two sides to God, so too this distinction must be mirrored in his creatures in all their varieties, who are after all in and of him; in them, too, there are two poles between which a productive tension exists. The first is that of the creature’s self-will. Such a will is no more evil, taken for itself, than the eternal longing of the ground is; but to the extent that it is not guided by another principle, it is naked

⁸⁶ “Dieses ist an den Dingen die unergreiflich Basis der Realität, der nie aufgehende Rest, das, was sich mit der größten Anstrengungen nicht in Verstand auflösen läßt, sondern ewig im Grunde bleibt” (SW I/7, 359-60).

⁸⁷ Schelling thus refers to this passage on his calendar; see the Meiner edition, 169.

desire. The opposite is the understanding as universal will in the creature, which seeks to subject and bring to order the creature's self-will. These two poles are found in all individual things, but it is in one place only that the universal will can fully join with and so structure the self-will: in man, who alone has the capacity for free rational self-determination. This means not only man is the high point of creation, but more fundamentally, that it is only in man and through him that God's self-manifestation as the actual and true unity of ground and existence, that is, as spirit, can be accomplished.

No doubt, this is a flattering picture; yet for all the seeming optimism contained in its view of mankind as the crown and final goal of God's becoming, we know that human beings, insofar as they are free, are capable of evil, and this not accidentally, as a mere failure to implement the rational will. How to understand such evil positively? For this to be possible, one more distinction needs to be drawn between the human being and God. In the latter, ground and existence are *inseparably* identical; God cannot manifest himself as evil. In man, however, where the unity of ground and existence is rather a *living* identity in the individual soul, thus the product of the free act of self-positing, the harmonious union in which ground is subjected to existence is never a given, but a wager. For God to manifest himself through man as Spirit, as such living identity in the soul, it is therefore necessary that the identity of the principles of ground and existence can be severed.

It is this potential for a rupture between ground and existence which forms the possibility of good and evil, because in man's free act of self-determination, ground and existence are configured and brought together in the soul in such a way that their union can, but need not, be a true one. Evil, the titanic defiance of the rational order, is the twisted, corrupted union of ground and existence in which the latter is subjected to the former, and

made to serve its bidding. It thus manifests itself as a diseased will, yet one that is for all its depravity no less will, no less intellect.

By the inner dualism of ground and existence in God and man, Schelling provides the possibility of thinking evil no longer as *privatio boni* but as the positive reality brought forth by man's free act. In doing so, he overcomes a fundamental aporia of the idealist conception of freedom as autonomy, or purely rational self-determination. Whether this overcoming is to be seen, however, as a necessary correction and expansion of the idea of rational self-determination, or rather threatens to push altogether beyond autonomy towards the idea of authenticity, is a larger question.

§ 3 – Ontological Freedom

It will not have escaped the attention of the reader of the *Freiheitsschrift* that the distinction between ground and existence, even if it resolves the problem of evil, has precious little concrete bearing on *what is to be done* – on how in fact we are to lead our lives. That the moral law cannot be our only guide is clear; for under the moral law in its Kantian sense we may be rationally self-determining beings, but we cannot in a full sense be free. One might say that rational self-determination, in asserting the claim of practical *rationality*, forgets about the *self*. But what is a self, and how is one to go about being one? Only the vaguest of answers has been forthcoming. It must lie – somehow – in the productive tension between the will to self-assertion, the dark ground, and the will to universality Schelling calls existence. But we have not come much closer to grasping what it is, in one given situation of life or the other, that these two wills demand in us, and how we are to reconcile such demands. It may seem that either Schelling's thought on the matter is altogether

undeveloped, or that he is being willingly obtuse. But in fact, neither is the case: if there is no account of how one becomes a self in normative terms, it is because on principle no such account can be given.

A clearer view of the situation can be reached if we drop the common notion that the proper locus of freedom is the practical sphere, that it is above all a question of the normative. The human will as the *Freiheitsschrift* describes it is rooted deeper in our being than the practical narrowly construed – it is a matter not so much of what we are to *do*, say follow the dictates of rational duty as expressed in the categorical imperative, nor even what we are to be *morally*, say rationally self-determining by placing ourselves under the moral law, but of what we are to be, *tout court*. Just as primordial being is nothing but the will, so to our own sense of being a self is a question of our being. Our being is radically free for both good and evil, but good and evil are here no longer categories for which clear criteria could be at hand. The negotiation we have to accomplish between the will of the self and the will of the universal, so that the former does not simply reject the latter but forms its enduring, nourishing ground, and the latter does not choke the former but allows it in and sustains itself by it, cannot itself be expressed in a universal form itself. The inchoate account of what it is like to live this tension which the *Freiheitsschrift* presses for what we might therefore call *ontological* freedom. Of what such freedom amounts to, a fuller picture will only emerge with the philosophical anthropology which Schelling will provide in his late philosophy.

Conclusion

The path we have followed through the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* and the *Freiheitsschrift* has brought to light that the self cannot become fully present to itself as a

practical agent. In the *System*, the problem lay with the limited nature of what with Hegel we might call objective spirit, the realm of the practical realization of freedom in the social and historical world. For although the *System* pins great hopes on history, and even goes so far as to call it revelation, it can only deal with us qua practical reasoners, and therefore it cannot bring us to what the *System* itself demands it deliver on – an understanding of consciousness as rooted in the supersensible substrate that is both nature and spirit. That task, as we saw, remains reserved for the work of art as the concrete objective presentation of that union, or perhaps for the philosophy of art which allows us to *comprehend* that this is what is at work in the work of art. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, the critique of objective spirit is deepened by the realization that the freedom which rational self-determination brings is not so much limited as it is *false*; for it fails to explain even on the level of practical rationality how such a thing as evil can be conceived. Without the genuine possibility of evil, however, there can be no human freedom at all; for that freedom can only be conceived as a freedom for both good and evil. The account of such freedom as the *Freiheitsschrift* provides remains, as we have seen, on the frustratingly abstract level; its realization lies, as Schelling tantalizingly hints, in allowing the divine to manifest itself in and through us, who precisely as selves, as persons, are the actualization of the freedom of a God who too must be thought of as personal.

But were we to accept such a sketch of freedom, as evocative as it remains obscure, the question remains how we might speak about it philosophically. If the strived-for unity of ground and existence, for which Schelling here also chooses the term un-ground, is so singular that no further philosophical account might be given of it, then the great threat looms that we have bought the knowledge of good and evil the treatise was after at the price of being able to do philosophy in a meaningful matter at all. This, however, is not Schelling's

intention. The *Freiheitsschrift* closes on the re-assertion that philosophy, even if its highest concern is the free self-manifestation of the absolute, and thus has at its heart the idea of revelation, cannot throw its hands up in favor of poetic musings or contemplative exercise:

If the dialectical principle, that is, the understanding which is differentiating but thereby organically ordering and shaping things in conjunction with the archetype by which it steers itself, is withdrawn from philosophy so that it no longer has in itself either measure or rule, then nothing else is left to philosophy but to orient itself historically and to take the tradition as its source and plumb line to which it had recourse earlier with a similar result. Then it is time, as one intended to ground our poetry through acquaintance with the poetic works of all nations, to seek for philosophy a historical norm and basis as well. [...] Nevertheless we believe that the truth may lie closer and that we should seek solutions for the problems that trouble our time first in ourselves and on our own territory before we turn to such distant sources. The time of purely historical belief is past, if the possibility of immediate cognition is given. We have an older revelation than any written one – nature.⁸⁸

And so, in closing the *Freiheitsschrift* not only re-affirms its commitment to philosophy, but to philosophy as the understanding of the absolute that can and must be approached not in reference to religious tradition, but through the conceptual working through of the inner workings of nature itself. The *Weltalter*, the great project which Schelling would spend the next decade mulling over, was meant to make good on this promise. In doing so, he would come to wrestle anew with the inherent tension between philosophy as a conceptual exercise and the nature of time and history, which stubbornly refuse to be reduced to the merely conceptual. The failure of the *Weltalter* is the failure to think through these thoughts in a manner that avoids “purely historical belief”, or reconstructs it in a transcendental theory of time which itself does not muddy its hands with actual history. Why this attempt

⁸⁸ *Freiheitsschrift*, SW I/7, 415-16.

could not but fail is something the late philosophy, to which we now turn, will have something to say about.

Chapter 3 – The Logical and the Revealed

Introduction

Approaching Schelling's late philosophy is a troublesome endeavor first and foremost because it does not exist. Or so it might be said. The name itself amounts to testimony of an embarrassment on the part of scholars, taking refuge as it does in the vague periodization of life and work, as the art historian might do with a painter, rather than giving insight into what this philosophy is about, or how it goes about, in terms of content or method. Schelling was content to call it *his* system or, with characteristic modesty, *the* system of philosophy.

The problem runs deeper than the name. The last work of philosophical substance Schelling published was the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*. That in no way prevented him from

thinking, writing, and lecturing for the better part of the time up to his death in 1854, and revising and rethinking his philosophy as he did so. Yet neither the project of the *Weltalter* nor the thought Schelling unfolded in the lectures he gave from his return to a university chair in 1827 made it to the printing house during his lifetime, despite his earnest intentions to the contrary.⁸⁹ It would be easy to conclude from this that the late philosophy, despite the many hundreds of pages of manuscripts and lecture notes Schelling left, never achieved architectonic form and systematic coherence.

Nor, some have added, was this failure accidental. The task the late philosophy sets for itself is that of giving philosophy a complete systematic form yet enshrining at its heart a concept of freedom beyond rational self-determination, of capturing in logical form the nature of essence while insisting equally on the irreducibility of existence, and of daring to speak from the point of reason the encompassing truth about a God who yet sovereignly transcends reason. This task, it has been argued, is an inherently impossible one to achieve; and so the late philosophy, whatever flashes of insight it may have to offer, however many thought-provoking anticipations of the work of later thinkers it may contain, was from the moment of its conception structurally doomed to fail.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ On Schelling's sparse publications between 1809 and 1815 and his repeated attempts to see the *Weltalter* into print, see Furstmans, *Schellings Philosophie der Weltalter*, 196. In 1829/30 he plans to have some form of the *Philosophie der Mythologie* published; see Hutter, *Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 387.

⁹⁰ It is Heidegger who sees things in this light: Schelling's *Zeit des Schweigens* is occasioned by the failure of his thought to adequately grasp and address the radicality of the question of freedom posed by the *Freiheitsschrift*. This however is in Heidegger's reading not so much Schelling's personal failing as it stems from the fact that the historical moment of philosophy in which he found himself did not provide the conditions under which such a task *could* have been achieved.

Yet such would be an overhasty conclusion to draw from the outward state of Schelling's literary remains. For whatever their shape, it is nevertheless incontrovertibly the case that a fundamental programmatic and thematic thrust underlies all of the work Schelling pursues from the 1827/28 lectures in Munich on, and that this thrust at the same time marks a clear caesura from his previous philosophical endeavors.⁹¹

This turning point lies in one deceptively simple thought – in the claim that philosophy, as the rational and comprehensive understanding of what there is, can only live

Thus he claims in his 1936 lectures on the *Freiheitsschrift*: “Schelling aber mußte – wenn das gesagt werden darf – am Werk scheitern, weil die Fragestellung bei dem damaligen Standort der Philosophie keinen inneren Mittelpunkt zuließ. [...] Das ist das Anzeichen des Heraufkommens eines ganz Anderen, das Wetterleuchten eines neuen Anfangs. Wer den Grund dieses Scheitern wahrhaft wüßte und wissend bewältigte, müßte zum Gründer des neuen Anfangs der abendländischen Philosophie werden.” (*Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), GA 42, 5). That Heidegger aspires to this mantle of founder of a new beginning of philosophy will be clear, but is it to be regretted that he dispensed with the late philosophy itself on these grounds. On Heidegger's reading of the *Freiheitsschrift*, see the useful collection of materials and interpretative essays in Lore Hühn and Jörg Jantzen (eds), *Heideggers Schelling-Seminar (1927/28)*. Of further relevance are GA 28, 49, 86, and 88.

What little Heidegger does have to say about the *Spätphilosophie* can be found in GA 88, 137-148. Characteristic of his reading remains the idea that the late philosophy is a “Rückfall” compared to the *Freiheitsschrift*, and proceeds in “christlich-theologischen restaurativen Weise”; “Deshalb liegt auch *nicht* in der Spätphilosophie das eigentlich erregende des Schellingschen Denkens, sie ist in dem Bereich, den sie bezieht (die christlich-aristotelisch-platonische Welt), nur der rettende Hafen für das Schiff auf der Sturmfahrt der *Freiheitsabhandlung*. Warum ist Schelling nicht auf hoher See “geblieben”?” (*Seminare (Übungen) 1937/38 und 1941/41*, GA 88, 141).

⁹¹ Schelling himself speaks of a “Wendepunkt meines ganzen geistigen und wissenschaftlichen Lebens” in a letter to the king of Bavaria; see Fuhrmans, “Schelling-Briefe”. A useful overview of Schelling's lectures in Munich and Berlin from 1827 on and the titles under which they were presented is given in Hutter, *Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 387-88. More extensive biographical and philological considerations on Schelling's activity as a lecturer, and the manuscripts he left behind can be found in the appendix to Horst Fuhrmans' *Schellings letzte Philosophie*.

up to its task if it is pursued as a system consisting of two halves which are distinct yet intrinsically belong together. Schelling will come to call these two halves of the system negative and positive philosophy. But these terms do not yet appear as such in the earlier lectures, and this perhaps with good reason. All too easily do they seem to invite connotations of a false or defective philosophy as opposed to a right and true one, or of the simple negation as opposed to blunt positing of philosophical claims.

Even where such deceptive connotations are put aside, the great many things Schelling says about the negative and the positive, and the way in which they are meant to cohere in their distinctness, remain of a bewildering variety, guided as they often are by the particular focus of individual lectures and by Schelling's delight in excursions into the history of philosophy classical and modern. Yet everything depends on this point. The most bitter disputes in readings of the late philosophy – whether, for example, it is to be thought of as a refined rational form of absolute idealism, or a post-idealist embrace of speculative theology – hinge on a different estimation of how the negative and the positive relate, and which if any has preponderance in the system.⁹²

To bring out clearly and persuasively what is at stake in the distinction of what will be called negative and positive philosophy, then, and so to grasp what the programmatic thrust of the late philosophy is, it is instructive to look at the way this idea of a doubling of the system of philosophy is first thematized in the 1827/28 lectures given in Munich under

⁹² Thus the two classic positions of Walter Schulze, who focuses on the negative philosophy, and Horst Fuhrmans, who champions the positive philosophy to the marginalization of the negative. See Schulze, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus* and Fuhrmans, *Schellings letzte Philosophie. Die negative und positive Philosophie im Einsatz des Spätidealismus*.

the title *System der Weltalter*. Despite the title, which suggests yet another attempt on Schelling's part to complete the project of the *Weltalter* with which he in great frustration been engaged since 1810 or so, it is here in the Munich lectures that Schelling first announces the turning point that marks a break with that project and will determine his late thought to the end. This, then, must be brought into sharp focus. The question to what extent this foundational idea and the philosophical program to which it gives rise are not only announced but genuinely and satisfyingly realized in the extant lectures from Munich and Berlin can only then be addressed.

It likewise will remain to be shown for now in what sense the late philosophy does indeed aim, as this study seeks to make plausible, to articulate the intrinsic belonging together of freedom and revelation. This task is all the more necessary and all the more complicated because in distinction to what we have seen in the *Freiheitsschrift* the late philosophy at least appears to speak very little about human freedom, and though it speaks a great deal about revelation, does so in at least two or three distinct ways which remain to be precisely disentangled. The caesura in Schelling's thought, occasioned by the idea that philosophy is at once split and whole, must be approached with care if the lectures are to yield the elements of the thesis that there is no freedom without revelation, no revelation without freedom.

This turn to a new philosophical beginning in the *System der Weltalter* is made, then,

by the distinction between the *logical* and the *historical*.⁹³ Such a distinction is of course not novel. As we briefly saw at the beginning of this study (see chapter 1 above), it is particularly in Lessing that we find a fundamental distinction between truths of reason, eternal and certain, and historical truths, which remain contingent; not only are the latter always vulnerable to skeptical doubt, they are of doubtful relevance to philosophical questions. Between these, Lessing argued, lies a horrid broad ditch which, try as he might, he could not vault across.⁹⁴

The focus of Lessing's discussion of the historical is the universal claims of revealed religion, and the extent to which they could ever be given a sufficient basis by particular historical facts. The claims of revealed religion might be said to depend upon the historical, or be historical, in two senses. The doctrines of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are built upon historical truths in that their source lies not in abstract thought but in wonders done and revelations given; as singular occurrences, they have no conceptual necessity. What the Old and the New Testament reveal is moreover historical in that it is both *announced* in history and *takes place* historically, in a particular time and place, while yet claiming universal significance for our salvation. And it is precisely this universal significance which Lessing casts in doubt; for, he argues bluntly, there is simply no occurrence in history, however much I may grant it did indeed occur, which could possibly force me to adopt a substantive idea about the true nature of the divine and the relationship

⁹³ Enlightening on this distinction is Hutter's *Geschichtliche Vernunft* 57-125, which speaks rightly of the turning point as the program of a historical philosophy. The relevant discussion in Schelling is contained in the first five lectures of the *System der Weltalter*.

⁹⁴ *Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*, 8:441-44.

in which we stand to it.

That the Christ, against whose resurrection I have no objections of any weight of a historical kind, claimed to be [*sich dafür ausgegeben*] the Son of God; that his acolytes therefore held him to be such: this I will happily believe. For these truths, as truths of one and the same kind, follow most naturally from one another. But to leap from there into a wholly different kind of truths, and to ask me to change the shape of all my metaphysical and moral concepts; to demand of me, on the grounds that I cannot produce credible evidence that disproves the resurrection of Christ, to change all my fundamental ideas of the nature of the Divinity: if that is not a *metabasis eis allo genos*, I do not know what else Aristotle might have meant by this expression.⁹⁵

In the distinction between the logical and the historical which Lessing thematizes and Schelling takes up in the *System der Weltalter*, then, the historical points not so much to the endless field of facts of which historians speak, the empirical contingent occurrences great and small which could be individually catalogued. Rather it is concerned, or so Lessing's work suggests, with the problem of how a historically manifesting comprehensive religious world view, which moreover justifies itself on the basis of supposed historical occurrences, is to be received before the universal tribunal of reason.

Now it is not Lessing's program to simply overturn what the religious imagination holds dear by declaring it rationally irrelevant. In his hermeneutic, the ideas proffered by the religious imagination are instead to be taken as a historical pedagogy through which mankind is aided to discover rational truth. History as he describes it becomes a progression through world views, from paganism through the Old Testament covenant between God and

⁹⁵ Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft, 8:443.

His people, to the universal redemption figured in Christ. But this progression of views is a means to an end. It renders in symbolic form truths that in and of themselves are neither dependent upon being historically revealed to mankind as God's laws and commandments, nor upon their occurring in, and thereby making, history. As the historical is only a contingent shell, and one that, once the time of reason has come, obscures the truth rather than making it fully accessible, these truths can be stripped of their symbolic form so that their rational and timeless core may be articulated as truths of reason. Indeed, if the goal of an education of mankind to full reason and morality is to be achieved, they *must* be so stripped. In this recasting they are liberated from their contingent nature and exposure to doubt. Despite the close attention to the historical which this program shows – and Lessing was, it must be remembered, *inter alia* a noted expert on the writings of the Church Fathers – it is ultimately inhospitable to the historical as a genuine source of truth. Although Lessing does not here employ the term, the program of transforming historical truths into truths of reason can be understood as allegoresis. We will have occasion to come back to this term in discussing Schelling's philosophy of mythology, which will strongly oppose it.

The Lessingian push to re-articulate as timeless truths of reason what religion offers in symbolic form is of constitutive importance for German Idealism. It allows for a philosophical understanding of religious thought that rises above the austere proofs of rational theology and the strictures of a moral religion, and accords a genuine anticipatory role to the religious imagination, in all its colorful facets, as a form of absolute spirit in its voyage of self-discovery. The religious imagination, that is to say, does not provide hints to what discursive reason can rationally expound about God's existence and His attributes, nor does it speak fables for our edificatory betterment, but it unveils in symbolic form something

of that which it is philosophy's task to grasp knowingly in an unrestricted sense – *what there is*, or the Absolute.

The interest which philosophy takes in systematically comprehending the symbols of the religious imagination according to Idealism is not, however, to be confused with a championing of historical truths over logical ones. This is easily illustrated in reference to Hegel's system. Here the symbols of the religious imagination are, properly understood, expressions of the Absolute, but this only in the specific medium of interior feeling. And just as the work of art represents the Idea in a sensuous form ultimately inadequate to its content, so too interior feeling, the "heart" in which the religious imagination is seated, is not able to live up to the task of representing the Idea as it is at home with itself, in the fully transparent medium of pure thought. While the philosophy of art and religion show the inherent if partial rationality of these domains of spirit, and while sensuous form and interior feeling admittedly remain indelible aspects of our way of inhabiting the world, they cannot for us moderns satisfy the highest need of spirit to rationally comprehend itself. Only speculative philosophy in the form of a science of logic can adequately articulate in pure thought the truths first announced as form and feeling.

In this sense, art and religion cannot be other than a thing of the past – "we no longer bend the knee", as Hegel drily has it.⁹⁶ If Christianity is to him *die offenbare Religion*, it is so not so much because it is *geoffenbart*, the product of revelation. It is rather that Christianity

⁹⁶ "Mögen wir die griechischen Götterbilder noch so vortrefflich finden und Gottvater, Christus, Maria noch so würdig und vollendet dargestellt sehen – es hilft nichts, unser Knie beugen wir doch nicht mehr" (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I. Werke* vol. 13, 142).

is the form of religion in which the secret of the divine – summarily, that mankind is not opposed to God but one with Him, or in Hegelese, that substance is subject – has come to full self-transparency and has hence become openly accessible to thought.

Nor is Schelling's own thinking inhospitable to the program of the transformation of historical truths into truths of reason. His earliest writings, as we saw, might already be said to exemplify it in a certain sense. The philosophical dissertation *De Malorum Origine* reads the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 as a disquisition on the philosophical origins of human freedom. The theological dissertation *De Marcione* seeks to exonerate the *bête noir* of the Church Fathers, Marcion, from the charge of having introduced two gods. Instead, Schelling argues, Marcion's two divinities must be seen as two aspects of the same God. Put together, these two statements anticipate much of what Schelling will embrace in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Likewise, his early work *Über Mythen* speaks of sagas as "an ever ongoing instruction for a childish people, that is not able to know the truth as universal, to whom truth has to be presented through a story [*durch Geschichte*] if it is to understand it".⁹⁷

These readings sit side by side with Schelling's declaration, following Lessing, that "for us, too, the orthodox concepts of God are nothing any longer" (see chapter 1, above). Philosophy is to reach beyond the idea of God as a personal being,⁹⁸ and take its departure from the idea of God as the unconditioned ground of all conditioned things. How to unify this thought with the idea of freedom – the alpha and omega of philosophy, as Schelling says in

⁹⁷ *Über Mythen, historische Sagen, und Philosopheme der ältesten Welt*, SW I/1, 63-64.

⁹⁸ 1795.02.04, Schelling to Hegel: "wir reichen *weiter* noch, als zu einem persönlichen Wesen" (HKA III.1, 22). On the anecdotal level, it is to be remembered that according to Gulyga (377), Schelling still affirmed his allegiance to Lessing's *hen kai pan* in 1854.

the same letter, and will repeat throughout his career – is in a sense the constitutive problem of his thinking.

We have also seen how the idea of a radical freedom beyond rational self-determination forced Schelling in the *Freiheitsschrift* to modify his position: precisely because our freedom for good and evil can only be explained on the basis of God's freedom, therefore by His free act of creation, God must be thought of not as a system, but as a life; God must have personality. And yet whatever break with the ideal of full rational autonomy is implied by the *Freiheitsschrift's* radical concept of freedom, it identifies with Lessing's project *expressis verbis* in its concluding pages.

[...] we are of the opinion that a clear, rational view must be possible precisely from the highest concepts in so far as only in this way can they really be our own, accepted in ourselves and eternally grounded. Indeed, we go even further and hold, with Lessing himself, that the development of revealed truths into truths of reason is simply necessary, if the human race is to be helped thereby.⁹⁹

This underwriting of Lessing's program is followed by the assertion that the "time of purely historical belief is past, if the possibility of immediate cognition is granted. We have an older revelation than any written one – nature".¹⁰⁰ What all this means in the all too compact and philosophically oversaturated pages of the *Freiheitsschrift* is however not easily brought to full clarity.

Yet what we can minimally conclude for the time being is that the distinction between

⁹⁹ *Freiheitsschrift*, 84 (= SW VII, 412).

¹⁰⁰ *Freiheitsschrift*, 87 (= SW VII, 415).

the logical and the historical in the *System der Weltalter* must mean a rupture with the program of transforming historical truths into rational ones. For if the logical and the historical are two halves of one and the same system of philosophy, then the historical is no longer in any straightforward sense of the term to be superseded by the rational. What is put in place of this program, however, is not immediately evident.

It is nevertheless surprising that in the second lecture of the *System der Weltalter* we find the blithe announcement that the name for the new system Schelling now professes is “Christian philosophy”.

The true is only the positive, and consists only in the overcoming of the negative [...]. When the artist has an idea before his mind's eye and has formed it in crude outlines, he has extricated himself from the negative, but not yet reached the idea – yet he seeks to reach it. After such a muster and prototype [*Muster und Urbild*] we must struggle in philosophy, too, and this is Christianity in its clarity and purity, according to which philosophy must orient itself [...]. The genuine, decisive name for my philosophy is *Christian philosophy*, and this decisive matter I have seized on in earnest. Christianity is thus the basis [*Grundlage*] for philosophy, but in this sense, that there has been Christianity from eternity, not according to the doctrine but according to the matter [*nicht der Lehre, sondern der Sache nach*]. With that I in no way wish to say Christianity is = reason. My philosophy gives Christianity a system as its foundation [*legt dem Christenthum ein System zu Grunde*], which will last from the beginning to the end. This is more sublime [*erhabener*] than what any philosophy has hitherto been able to perform. Christianity in its literalness and historicity [*Buchstäblichkeit und Geschichtlichkeit*] has to be the object [*Gegenstand*] of philosophy.¹⁰¹

These first sentences would seem to confirm all the fears – or hopes, as the case might be – of those who would read the relationship between the logical and the historical as one in

¹⁰¹ *System der Weltalter*, lecture 2, 8-9.

which philosophical reason exhausts itself and simply abdicates its role before an arbitrarily imposed historical faith, elaborated in a curious kind of speculative theology.

If this were the case, then whatever its merits may be as a mode of religious thought, the *Spätphilosophie* would hardly merit the name of philosophy. Schelling evidently hopes to quiet such objections. Christianity is not what determines philosophy, but the proper *object* of philosophy, and in turning to the Christian revelation, philosophy is by no means giving up its independence, but turning to an essential matter it needs to address in thought.¹⁰² If, however, Christianity were merely the object of philosophy, it on the other hand becomes unclear why its scriptural and doctrinal content – and what is the *Sache* of Christianity, if disconnected from *Lehre*? – is more than a cache of assorted ideas to be pillaged piecemeal by the philosopher, thereby once more reducing the historical to the logical. It remains for now to be seen whether these seemingly contradictory claims as to the Christian nature of the late philosophy can be made to cohere, or whether on the contrary the fear will substantiate itself that the very idea of Christian philosophy is, as Heidegger says, “ein hölzernes Eisen”.¹⁰³

Blunt though the adherence to Christianity may be that Schelling’s lectures profess in numerous passages, it would be a philological failing if one were not to read such claims against the background of the complex wrestling with the question of the religious that Schelling was engaged in throughout all of his writings, and that reaches its greatest heights

¹⁰² Cf. *System der Weltalter*, lecture 3, 13: “Dies sage ich hier nicht als ob die Offenbarung *allein* die Philosophie leiten und bestimmen sollte über die Art des Wissens – nein, die Philosophie behauptet ihre Selbstständigkeit, Offenbarung gehört selbst zum Gegenstande derselben [sic], das Christentum gehört selbst zu ihrem Inhalte”.

¹⁰³ “Phänomenologie und Theologie”, *Holzwege*, 66.

of intensity in the late philosophy. What is more, failing to read Schelling's adherence to the term Christian philosophy in its systematic role would also be an unphilosophical refusal to think through the question at hand in a critical dialogue with the late philosophy as it is systematically deployed. Only once a clear outline of the late philosophy in its unfolding is achieved will it be possible to say how the philosophical encounter between reason and revelation it occasions is to be properly understood. And the key to this unfolding is the division between the logical and the historical which Schelling in the *System der Weltalter* lectures puts at the heart of his conception of philosophy.

How then is the distinction between the logical and the historical drawn in the *System der Weltalter*? The terms are meant not as descriptions of individual statements, but as characterizations of philosophical systems. The logical and the historical are two modes of philosophizing with distinct approaches. The history of philosophy shows examples of both. If, for reasons we will see, Spinoza remains for Schelling the paradigmatic example of logical philosophy, Pascal and Hamann are suggested as representatives of the historical mode – though we must qualify this by saying that Schelling believes he is the first to consciously and methodologically approach the historical philosophically.

Both modes of philosophizing are moreover oriented towards the systematic comprehension of *what there is*. This is not to say, of course, that this orientation towards the whole forms part of the methodological self-understanding of every philosophy – it manifestly does not – but rather that, from the perspective that Schelling shares with Hegel, every philosophy must – *nolens volens*, explicitly or implicitly, sooner or later – confront the question of the ultimate ground of thought. To bring out this orientation towards the whole,

and to show how the historical development from one thinker to another presents the attempt of consciousness to find itself in and as this whole, is the systematic gambit of the history of philosophy as they mutually conceive it.

Now it is taken as a manifest fact by Schelling – though certainly one that remains to be adequately expressed and explained – that despite the great proliferation of philosophical systems which the modern era has seen, philosophy has not yet come to an end. Whatever task that it is that philosophy has set itself, and this is intentionally left for now in the vaguest of preliminary understandings, it has not been achieved; for none of the systems which the history of philosophy has produced have proven themselves enduringly incontestable. The suspicion is that all such systems share a faulty presupposition and thus are marked by a common error. This error inherent in modern philosophy from Descartes on – and Schelling here explicitly includes his own earlier systems – is that is that they remain merely logical, or that they are constituted by the mere logical connection of theses.¹⁰⁴

Posited in this starkly simplified form, this is no doubt a startling claim. There is, after all, hardly an obvious sense that can be given to the logical and the way its domain hangs together that remains remotely stable through the fundamental changes philosophy undergoes between the clear and distinct ideas of Descartes, the Kantian synthetic a priori, and the self-moving categories of thought of Hegelian dialectic. In order for the thesis of the merely logical nature of modern philosophy to hold, rather more will have to be said about

¹⁰⁴ “Hier ist vom gemeinschaftlichen Charakter aller Systeme die Rede. Dieser ist von Cartesius angefangen (Ältere hier nicht in Betracht gezogen) bis auf die Neueren, der blos logische, d.h. in ihnen herrscht blos logische Verknüpfung der Sätze [sic]” (*System der Weltalter*, lecture 3, 10).

what this logical nature is.

The first hint we are given is that in such logical systems, consequents are seen to follow conceptually, and thus directly, from their grounds. Schelling illustrates this way of proceeding by means of the geometrical example of a triangle. In a triangle, the widest angle necessarily lies opposite the longest side, and this is a fact that follows with necessity from the concept of the triangle itself. Whatever work in figuring out the relations of the parts of the triangle I may have to do to arrive at this truth, once I have grasped it, this becomes for me an indubitable and immediate, because conceptual, fact. Whether such a mathematical example is an apt model for philosophical knowledge, however, remains to be seen. For it is the goal of philosophy to know not this individual entity or that, but *what there is* in its most general and fundamental sense. If *what there is* must be conceived not as the sum total of individual conditioned things, as an all-swallowing, gigantic aggregate, but instead as the unconditioned – and as we will see, Schelling believes it is the greatness of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to have done just that – then solid arguments present themselves against the mathematical ideal of knowledge.

Spinoza, who for Schelling best exemplifies both the greatness and the ultimately calamitous nature of the tradition of modern philosophy, expresses an adherence to this mathematical ideal without reserve. For as we have seen (see chapter 1, above) the austere exterior of the *Ethics*, which models its build of definitions, axioms, propositions, and demonstrations on Euclid, is no mere form. The question *what there is* is answered in his system with the simple answer, God – but a God of necessity, the substance which we cannot coherently think as not existing. And it is from the nature of this God that all finite things flow

by with equal necessity, in the very same way that the sum of the three angles of a triangle equal that of two right angles.¹⁰⁵ This means that between God as substance and finite beings there is no connection other than a logical one. They follow eternally and necessarily from the idea of God.

The conflation of *causa* and *ratio* poignantly brings out that it is constitutive of such a logical system that it eliminates any meaningful conception of time. One might say, of course, that it is in reaching a perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* that the achievement of Spinoza's philosophy lies; the avoidance of the illusory entanglements of time is precisely its strength. Yet this perspective leads to what Schelling diagnoses as a crucial weakness in the system. For what Spinoza has not shown is *how* it is that the finite beings that make up the inventory of our world are to be derived from the infinite substance, how we are to understand that *semper eadem necessitate* the whole field of particular things follow *ab aeterno et in aeternum* from the single nature of God.

If it can be persuasively argued that this failure to articulate the relation between the finite and the infinite is not an accidental incompleteness of Spinoza's system, but a fundamental incapacity that stems from its logical character and the elimination of time that

¹⁰⁵ "Verum ego me satis clare ostendisse puto [...] a summa Dei potentia sive infinita natura infinita infinitis modis, hoc est omnia, necessario effluxisse vel semper eadem necessitate sequi, eodem modo ac ex natura trianguli ab aeterno et in aeternum sequitur ejus tres angulos aequari duobus rectis" (e1p17s).

So too the actions and affects of human beings, who in attributing to themselves freedom of the will think themselves an exception to the mathematical model of nature, an *imperium in imperio*, are to be treated of no differently than any other object: "De affectuum itaque natura et viribus ac mentis in eosdem potentia eadem methodo agam, qua in praecedentibus de Deo et mente egi, et humanas actiones atque appetitus considerabo perinde, ac si quaestio de lineis, planis aut de corporibus esset" (e3prae).

goes with it, then the possibility of an internal criticism of Spinoza's system, and with it every similarly logical system, would be given. For what philosophy as reasoned understanding of *what there is* demands is that beings become intelligible in their groundedness in the whole, and yet the logical mode – or so is the suspicion, which further argument will have to bring out – does not allow for such an understanding. A different mode of philosophizing would thus become an urgent desideratum.

To this model of a logical philosophy, the *System der Weltalter* opposes the historical. We have already seen how in Lessing "the historical" is not the jumble of quotidian empirical facts with which historians might be said to occupy themselves, but deals with the truths of religion. These are historical in the double sense that they are, first, founded upon *being given* in a certain moment of revelation – their appearance on the scene of the history of religious consciousness – and second, that they describe a relation between God and world that is itself historical in that it *takes place* in time and history.

Exemplary for the historical in this sense is for Schelling the thesis that God freely created the world.¹⁰⁶ Here the connection between God and the world, or between the finite and the infinite, is expressed not as a logical truth, but as a factual relationship. Yet in what way could this bald theistic statement form a philosophical response to the aporia of the logical? At any rate it could not be counted such a response if God's creation of the world were a mere article of faith, a sacrosanct doctrine one can only repeat verbally without having a reasoned and defensible comprehension of what the words might mean. How such an understanding would be achieved remains to be developed. What is to be held onto for

¹⁰⁶ *System der Weltalter*, lecture 3, 11.

now are three aspects inherent in the idea of the Creation which serves as a paradigm case of the historical. These are that God's relation to the world embraces time rather than excluding it, that it is a freely chosen act rather than an immediate conceptual necessity, and that as a free and temporal act it belongs to an agent who is, at least in some sense, personal. These three aspects have of course already appeared in the characterization of God in the *Freiheitsschrift*.

How then do the logical and the historical relate to each other? The leading assumption was that logical systems face a fundamental aporia in grasping what there is as the unity of finite beings and their infinite ground. They can posit this unity of beings and ground as a conceptual necessity but cannot explain it. Here logical systems run into their own limits. But that does not mean that within these limits such systems are false, merely that they cannot of their own resources fully achieve the task they set for themselves, the reasoned understanding of what there is. Marked by a lack their very constitution does not allow them to overcome, logical systems become false only where they obfuscate this lack and, to the exclusion of what lies beyond their reach, pretend to completeness. The lack inherent to logical systems is their inability to reach outside formal thought-determinations, and it is in this sense that they are purely rational and can also be termed negative. The historical, by contrast – in all the sparseness with which it has been described so far – is what lies beyond the realm of the merely conceptual. Exemplified by God's free act of creating the world, the historical takes place and has actuality; as such it is positive. If a philosophical account could be given in which the logical or negative mode of thought is unfolded fully to the point where its lack becomes apparent, and if this lack can then be supplemented by a no less philosophical understanding of the historical or positive, the original aspirations of

philosophy to present *what there is* under the form of a comprehensive system might be fulfilled.

This *in nuce* is the programmatic point of departure of the late philosophy. So far, however, we have reached only a preliminary understanding, and that in crude terms, of what the true nature of philosophy as systematic knowledge of *what there is* is meant to be, and of the way in which a merely logical philosophy is a necessary but in itself insufficient step on the way to such knowledge. It remains equally obscure how the failing of the logical opens up the space for a historical or positive philosophy, one that in some sense would reinstate revelation without thereby giving up on reason.

To understand this more fully, one needs to closely and critically follow the late philosophy as it elaborates the aims and ultimate falling short of negative philosophy. This it does, in a first step, through a detailed engagement with the history of modern philosophy. That there is a need for the systematic reflection on the history of philosophy, not as a collection of mistaken arguments and unresolved puzzles to sharpen one's wit, but as an actual development productive of the philosophical situation in which the philosopher is situated, is a conviction held equally by Schelling and Hegel. The late philosophy puts the history of philosophy to work by using it to show how an underlying assumption constitutes all modern attempts at system-building, and how this assumption makes any such system insufficient. Here, the *πρῶτον ψεῦδος* of philosophy is the idea that God can be grasped by a general concept which can be asserted with logical necessity. As we have seen, this would exclude what, for reasons not yet philosophically transparent, Schelling suggests is in fact needed – an understanding of God as free agent who manifests Himself in time, or whose free

act of creation can somehow be said to begin time.¹⁰⁷

The fullest elaboration of this critique of modern philosophy is given in the 1833/34 Munich lectures, announced under the title *Zur Geschichte der philosophischen Systeme von Cartesius bis auf die gegenwärtige Zeit als Übergang zum System der positiven Philosophie*.¹⁰⁸ Engagement with the history of philosophy is here explicitly a means to overcome the aporia in which philosophy in the modern world has become mired by allowing a new concept to emerge from it.

But the weight of all these reasons [to concern oneself with the history of philosophy] increases if it is not just a question of a new method or changed views in particular matters, but of a change in the concept of philosophy itself. In this case it will then be desirable if this concept, independently of the truth which it initially has or has in itself, appears at the same time as the natural historical result of earlier unsuccessful endeavors, no longer in this simple generality, but rather as a necessary result [*Ergebnis*] of precisely *this* time.¹⁰⁹

In this history of modern philosophy, two moments are particularly worthy of attention. The first is the highly original and challenging reading the late philosophy presents of the *ontological argument* (§1) as it appears in the systems of Descartes and Spinoza. For it is here that a form of negative philosophy which claims completeness – what before I have called, in

¹⁰⁷ *System der Weltalter*, lecture 17, 73.

¹⁰⁸ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 1f. For the title see Hutter, *Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 128. Compared may be the lectures 6-14 of the *System der Weltalter* (22-57) as well as lectures 11 and 12 of the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie, oder Darstellung der reinrationalen Philosophie* (SW II/1, 255-94), tentatively dated “between 1847 and 1852”, and the 8th lecture of the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung, oder Begründung der positiven Philosophie* (SW II/3, 147-75).

¹⁰⁹ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 3; tr. Bowie, 41.

shorthand, the project of the auto-constitution of reason as a self-sufficient and all-inclusive whole – is seen in its starkness, and can be taken apart. Second, Kant's doctrine of the transcendental *ideal of reason* (§2) comes into focus as a form of negative philosophy which does respect its limits, but precisely in these limits shows how reason demands more than it can on its own strength achieve. This demand for more on the part of reason, its *hunger for being* (§3),¹¹⁰ then opens the way for a positive philosophy.

§1 The Ontological Argument

Descartes figures in the Schelling's speculative history as the originator of modern philosophy because of his demand that all things be held doubtful until they are connected with a single, certain principle. With his methodical doubt he wipes away, as if with a sponge, the unordered mass of philosophical theses and religious doctrines which had ruled in scholasticism. This is no mean achievement, for "in this decision lay the most decisive breaking away [*Losreißung*] from all authority, the freedom of philosophy was achieved [*errungen*] thereby, which it could not lose from this moment on".¹¹¹ Schelling comments elsewhere this is of epochal significance because it frees the philosophical consciousness from the religious dogmas which held it in check during the Middle Ages.

This historical note makes clear that the direct imposition of Christianity upon

¹¹⁰ Strictly speaking, the phrase hunger for being attaches to the first potency and its "desire" to actualize itself. But Schelling clearly not only thinks of the primal will and its desire for coming into being as a hunger; the desire on the part of philosophy to grasp actuality is so, as well.

¹¹¹ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 8; tr. Bowie, 45.

thought, enforced where necessary by Church authority, is not the way that Schelling envisions the way reason and revelation – the term used here in the vaguest, non-terminological sense – are meant to interplay: “Free religion is *mediated* by Christianity, not immediately *posited* by it. Consciousness must become free from revelation in order to proceed towards it”.¹¹² Though Descartes as a good son of the Holy Mother Church does not, of course, oppose its dogmas in a straightforward sense, the separation he draws between the philosophical and the theological means that revelation in *this* sense – the authority of Christian dogma – becomes an irrelevance to philosophy. But, Schelling adds, the Cartesian revolution does not stop there. For his methodical doubt equally disrupts the certainty of the senses – that I sit here in this chair – as well as the objective validity of general truths – that two and three make five. “With this,” Schelling comments, “the whole artful weave of metaphysics was torn to pieces. This tearing merely completed the break, which had been made by the Reformation in the system of knowledge valid up to then”.¹¹³

Yet this freedom from the authority of the Church, of the senses, and of mathematics, so rightly demanded by philosophy, is paid for heavily in the Cartesian system. With it comes an immaturity, a second childhood, which ancient philosophy had already left behind. For with the *cogito* as its principle of certainty, the subject retreats into itself, and as a result all it could know about the world is reduced to a mere subjective certainty.

¹¹² The German is somewhat gnomic: “Aber auch nur *vermittelt* ist durch das Christentum die freie Religion, nicht unmittelbar durch dasselbe *gesetzt*. Das Bewußtsein muß ebenso wieder von der Offenbarung frei geworden sein, um zu jener fortzugehen. Auch die Offenbarung wird wieder eine Quelle zunächst unfreiwilliger Erkenntniß” (*Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 11, SW II/1, 258).

¹¹³ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 11, II/1, 264.

To achieve even such subjective certainty, however, the Cartesian subject must find a way to overcome the estrangement from the world into which it has gotten through its methodical doubt. As the subject cannot achieve this on its own strength, it is in need of an outward guarantor. This outward guarantor is God. The Cartesian system thereby maneuvers itself in the position of having to prove God's existence before any sense of knowledge can be established. Where the ontological argument for God's existence had, in Augustine and Anselm, been a worthy way of answering one – be it, perhaps, the highest – philosophical question, though not one generally embraced in the world of scholastic thought, it becomes with Descartes a pre-condition for the philosopher to relate to the world at all.¹¹⁴

Now it is questionable to Schelling that Descartes should have doubted the world so much and the subject so little. Yet he sees in the move to the ontological argument not, as it

¹¹⁴ SW I/10, 4–32; for the ontological argument see specifically 12–23. On Schelling's own use of the ontological argument, see Dieter Henrich, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis* (219–38), and (against Henrich's invalidation of Schelling's position) Hütter (126–87), Tilliette, “L'argument ontologique” in *L'Absolu et la philosophie* (162–81), Courtine, “La renversement de l'argument ontologique au seuil de la philosophie positive”, in *Extase de la raison. Essais sur Schelling* (291–311). On the voluminous literature on the ontological argument as such, see the useful collection of texts and analyses offered by Joachim Bromand and Guido Kreis in *Gottesbeweise von Anselm bis Gödel*.

It may well be objected to Schelling's reading that Descartes presents not one but two proofs of the existence of God in the *Meditations*: the proof from the idea of the infinite in the *Third Meditation*, and the ontological proof in the fifth. Schelling, while noting the first as empirical and subjective (“we find in ourselves...”), but then swiftly moves on to the second.

Given his systematic leading question it is not hard to see why: the proof from the idea of the infinite, depending as it does conceptually on the a posteriori experience of the subject, cannot be made to speak to a necessary being as such. It is precisely this that allows Jean-Luc Marion to characterize it as a non-metaphysical proof. See his “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological? The Argument according to Anselm and its Metaphysical Interpretation in Kant”.

may seem to some readers today, the desperate leap out of the subject's predicament by means of facile recourse to a higher power. Rather, Schelling sees in it proof that thought in the modern world is starting to reach its true independence. This does not mean he is quite convinced by the argument as it stands, however.

Descartes has become decisive for the whole of subsequent modern philosophy, far less so for what he said otherwise about the beginnings of philosophy than for the setting up of the ontological proof. One can say: philosophy is still now occupied with disentangling and explaining the misunderstandings to which this argument gave rise.¹¹⁵

Schelling is no friend of theologians who see the ontological proof as a hybristic philosophical encroaching on sacred mystery. Neither is he convinced by a philosophical criticism that merely declares it invalid. The argument, Schelling maintains, has an underlying truth to it – though as it turns out, not the truth Descartes thought to find. To see this, the common Kantian criticism of the ontological proof first needs to be dislodged. This can be done relatively easily if it can be shown that the Kantian criticism misconstrues the argument. This is precisely the step now taken.

In the Kantian reconstruction as Schelling presents it, the argument runs as follows: I find in myself the idea of a most perfect being (major premise); existence however is a perfection (minor premise); therefore, existence is included in the idea of a most perfect being (conclusion). This argument fails because its minor premise, that existence is a perfection, is false. Existence is not a perfection, but merely states that something *is*. In Kant's

¹¹⁵ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 14; tr. Bowie, 49.

own terms, though existence can be a *logical* predicate – anything at all can be a logical predicate – it cannot be a *real* predicate, for it does not in any way enlarge its concept or determine its object. Three hundred real *Thaler* are not a *Pfennig* more than three hundred potential ones. Existence is then not a *real* predicate, but simple *position*.¹¹⁶

But this, Schelling argues, is to misconstrue the Cartesian argument; for Descartes does not move from a perfect being to that being's existence, but rather to the *necessity* of such a being's existence. The difference between these two is perhaps not immediately obvious. The argument can be recast to say, “it would contradict the nature of the perfect being to exist just contingently (as e.g. my own existence is simply contingent, precarious and for this reason doubtful *in itself*), therefore the most perfect being can only exist necessarily”.¹¹⁷ The Cartesian argument is thus – contra Kant – not one where the logical predicate “necessary existence”, which only signifies position, is surreptitiously taken for a real predicate, and then of course *must* attach to the perfect being along with all other perfections. Rather, we are facing two opposed real predicates that are modally distinct: necessary existence and contingent existence. Here, it is clear that the real predicate “necessary existence” represents a greater perfection than the real predicate “contingent existence”, and therefore, if one could think up a perfect being, then one would have to attribute necessary existence to this being as well.

Having put to right Kant's misconstrual of Descartes' argument, however, Schelling observes that Descartes himself also draws a faulty conclusion from it. The argument should

¹¹⁶ *KrV*, B627.

¹¹⁷ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 15; tr. Bowie, 50.

run: The perfect being cannot exist contingently, but only necessarily (major premise); God is the perfect being (minor premise); therefore, God can only exist *necessarily* (conclusion). Yet Descartes instead concludes: therefore, God necessarily *exists*. This is invalid, for where the major premise had only spoken about the *manner* of existing which must be accorded a perfect being, the conclusion now speaks of its *actual* existing or not. To bring out Schelling's point more fully: the ontological argument establishes that God as the perfect being must exist necessarily – *if indeed He exists at all*. But *that* God exists is by no means given. He might very well not.

A certain awareness of this distinction, Schelling suggests, is even present in Descartes' *Fifth Meditation*. Here we read of the idea of God, "It is certain that in myself I find His idea, that is of a supremely perfect being, no less [*non minus*] than I find that of any figure or number; nor do I understand less clearly and distinctly that it pertains to his nature that he always exists [*ut semper existat*]"¹¹⁸ Schelling underlines that the claim here is not that God exists, but that He exists *always*. In other words, either God does not exist at all, or if He does exist, then he must always exist necessarily, rather than contingently.¹¹⁹

Why, one might wonder, all this ingenious and slightly tortured exegesis? The Cartesian argument does not prove the existence of God, but it *does* prove that were He to exist, His mode of being would be necessary. This may seem a trivial addition. It certainly does not give the Cartesian subject the escape from doubt it had hoped for. For even if it were

¹¹⁸ *Méditations métaphysiques*, AT VII:65.

¹¹⁹ This may of course seem a mere choice of words. It is interesting, nevertheless, that the first Latin edition read not "ut semper existat" but, tellingly, "ut actu existat". Is the correction to *semper* the belated and subtle admission of a problem?

somehow to be established that a necessary being does indeed exist, it need not be of such a kind as to stand in a moral relationship to the subject. An *ens necessarium*, a being which cannot be thought without also attributing existence to it, need not be an *ens perfectissimum*, an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being which would not allow the doubting Cartesian subject to remain mired in its doubt. The subject's need for a God as a guarantor of the possibility of knowledge of the world remains unfulfilled.

What then is the positive moment which the late philosophy attributes to the Cartesian position? It lies in the central role it accords to the concept of a necessary being, which has a determining role for the subsequent history of modern philosophy. The reason for this is that Descartes has unintentionally shown that at least one actual being can be – after a *certain* fashion – be shown to actually exist. This being is not God, but the bare, minimal idea of a necessary being as such.

In order to see this, we need to take a step back to the procedure of methodical doubt.¹²⁰ The method was chosen to find an indubitable point from which the subject could correctly conceive of the world. In the *Meditations* the procedure of doubting is described

¹²⁰ This reconstruction of Schelling's inherently complex and obscurely expressed move from the *cogito* and the ontological argument to the idea that there is a necessary being is crucially indebted to Hutter's discussion, who connects the "it thinks" with the concept of "that which cannot not be" (*Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 147-49). The depersonalization of the *cogito* to an "it thinks" is underlined by Gabriel, *Der Mensch im Mythos* 73-74, who further notes that unlike in Strawson's "no-ownership" view of Cartesian subjectivity (*Individuals*, 87-116), Schelling's critique here is ontologically founded. Also see Wolfgang Högbe's "Existenzgeneralisierung von *ich denke*" in *Prädikation und Genesis*, 51-58. Högbe further points out a significant parallel in the 44th of the *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturphilosophie* of 1806. Here Schelling remarks: "Das *Ich denke*, *Ich bin*, ist, seit Cartesius, der Grundirrtum in aller Erkenntnis; das Denken ist nicht mein Denken, und das Sein nicht mein Sein, denn alles ist nur Gottes oder des Alls" (SW VII, 148).

from a merely individual and empirical point of view: I, here in my chair, am at this moment perceiving, therefore doubting – but as doubting, I must exist.

The two weaknesses in this description are that it doubts the world too much, and the self not enough.

The *cogito* doubts the world too much, on the one hand, because even where I doubt the reality of things, there is something there for me to doubt, in one way or another. No evil spirit could convince me that there is a world outside of me if there weren't any evil spirit out there to feed me erroneous impressions. But that is to say, whatever it may be that what is out there looks like, there is a world. That puts the certainty I have of the world on the same level as the certainty I have of myself. I may doubt all I wish about myself, but in that doubting, I know I am.

The *cogito* does not doubt the self enough, on the other hand, because my thinking is only empirically the case in this moment, just as I might be walking or riding. My awareness of this thinking that goes on inside me, however, does not prove my ownership of it. It may well be, according to the terms with which Descartes sets up his argument, that the I who thinks and the I who is aware and reflects upon this thinking are not one and the same. If one wanted to be on the safe side – and that, presumably, is what methodical doubt aims for – it would be more correct to say, not that I think, but that “it thinks”, in the impersonal sense in which one says “it is raining”, or that “thinking is going on inside me”.¹²¹ This certainty, to be

¹²¹ This objection goes back at least to Lichtenberg, who wrote his *Sudelbücher*: “Wir werden uns gewisser Vorstellungen bewußt, die nicht von uns abhängen; andere glauben, wir wenigstens hingen von uns ab; wo ist die Grenze? Wir kennen nur allein die Existenz unserer Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Gedanken. Es denkt,

sure, is minimal – it is “blind and devoid of thought [*gedankenlos*]”,¹²² without any specificity.

There are two things which now can be said to be known. First, that thinking is going on – though I cannot know that it is me who is doing the thinking, strictly speaking. Second, in thinking, it is the world that is being thought about – though not necessarily correctly. *What there is*, put succinctly, is the world and thought about the world.

Again, this will seem a paltry result at best. Descartes washed away the world with his sponge of doubt in hopes of finding a *fundamentum inconcussum* on which he might erect true thoughts about its particular features. What has been achieved instead is the merest knowledge *that* there is a world, not what this world is like, and that thought attaches to it, though this thought need not be mine. And yet in passing through this zero point, it has been established that there is a being which cannot *not* be thought to exist. As this necessary thought *must* attach to something that is – though in its purest abstraction, as the mere thought of an actual being – this necessity of thought is also a necessity of being. There is something which cannot *not* exist.

Here at last we pass over, as was the hope of the ontological argument, from a mere

sollte man sagen, so wie man sagt: es blitzt. Zu sagen cogito, ist schon zu viel, so bald man es durch Ich denke übersetzt. Das Ich anzunehmen, zu postulieren, ist praktisches Bedürfnis” (Georg Wilhelm Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, 2:412). On Lichtenberg’s critique of the *cogito*, see Günther Zöllner, “Lichtenberg and Kant on the Subject of Thinking”.

¹²² Zur *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 12; tr Bowie, 48. Note that the perhaps somewhat infelicitously chosen translation devoid of thought (*gedankenlos*) here cannot baldly mean something like *ohne Gedanken, ohne zu denken*. The point is that the thought encapsulated in the *cogito* is blank, without determinacy, unguided. If the *cogito*’s subject were literally “devoid of thought”, there would of course not be a *cogito* at all.

concept to a being which necessarily exists. But, crucially, this does not mean that through pure thought the proof is given the actual existence of a being. It is rather that in reflecting upon its own conditions, thought finds that it always already is preceded by the existence of a being which first founds and enables thought; thought can only subsequently and belatedly take this being into account.¹²³

This concept of a necessarily existing being – *das notwendig existierende Wesen* – remains of course distinct from the God of all perfections which the Cartesian subject needed to save itself from doubt. This is already apparent from the conclusion of Cartesian ontological argument in its corrected Schellingian form: God exists necessarily, if he exists. For if the concept of God and of the merely necessarily existing being were *identical*, if God were nothing more than the merely necessarily existing being, then it would be evidently true that God exists.

The presentation of the concept of a merely necessary being is particularly arduous and terminologically confusing, yet it is also of central importance for the further understanding of the negative and positive philosophy. For Schelling here seeks to demonstrate that, in reflecting to the depth of abstraction upon its own conditions, thinking *a limine* makes the discovery that there is a necessary being which precedes it as its content.

¹²³ This subtle figure is rendered with admirable clarity by Hutter: “Für das Nichtnichtseinkönnende ist also der prekäre Übergang vom Begriff zur Existenz möglich. Das Denken setzt hier nämlich die zu beweisende Existenz nicht im Beweis aus sich heraus (was gerade unmöglich ist), sondern findet sie in der reinen Reflexion auf sich selbst bereit vor. Hier entspringt die Existenz nicht aus dem begrifflichen Denken, sondern das Denken wird inne, daß es selbst immer schon einem unvordenklichen Sein entsprungen ist, das ihm zu Grunde liegt” (*Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 148).

And this is the fundamental doctrine of the late thought – that in the unity of being and thought which makes up *what there is*, being has a constitutive primacy.

It would be prudent therefore to closely follow Schelling's words in coming to grips with what is to be understood by *das notwendig existierende Wesen*, even though it must be kept in mind that the analysis Schelling offers here is a preliminary one. From the perspective attained through the reading of Descartes, the concept of a being which precedes all thought, *das unvordenkliche Sein*, cannot yet be fully explained.

Schelling here distinguishes two ways in which we speak about being: first, there is that which is (*das was Ist*) and being (*Sein*). These terms, in and of themselves, are singularly unhelpful. What is meant by them becomes slightly clearer by saying that they relate to one another grammatically or logically as the subject (*das was Ist*) and predicate (*Sein*) of any predication. The term predicate is again somewhat confusing here, for what is meant is not any specific predicate, but the predicate as such, "what alone is really predicated in every predicate". That it could make sense to speak about a predicate *as such* here is because, at the level of abstraction the analysis moves at, in any predication we make of the subject – that Phädon, in Schelling's example, is healthy, or is a lover – it is first and foremost being that is being predicated.

The point of this distinction is to prize apart *das was Ist* and *das Sein*, which normally come together in the act of predication, so that they can be examined in their pre-predicative

simplicity.¹²⁴ To this Schelling now proceeds:

But I am free to think *what Is* [*das was Ist*] by itself or purely, *without* the being [*ohne das Sein*] that I would first have to predicate of it – if I have thought it in that way, then I have thought the **pure** concept [*den reinen Begriff*], that in which there is no trace of a proposition or a judgement, but precisely just the simple concept. [...] I cannot yet confer or attribute any being to *what Is*, I cannot say that it *has* a being, and yet it is not nothing, but certainly also Something, it is precisely being itself [*das Sein selbst*], αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν, *ipsum ens*, – being, for it is still just in the essence [*Wesen*] or just in the concept, it is the being of the concept itself, or it is the point where being and thinking are one.¹²⁵

Now if we think this pre-predicative *das was Ist* in its purity like this, we will in our thinking make the experience that we cannot hold onto it like a pure thought. In our very attempt to fix it in place as a mere thought, we find it turns around. As the precondition of all thinking, or what Schelling will call elsewhere *das unvordenkliche Sein*, it shows itself as that which cannot *not* be:

I must think it in this nakedness, at least for a moment. But I cannot keep it in this abstraction; for it is impossible that *what Is* [*das was Ist*] [...], the entitlement, the precondition, the beginning for all being, should also not be – this “be” taken in the sense of existence, i.e. of being also outside the *concept*. The concept now immediately turns itself around for us, into its opposite [...] – so it is as the immediate *consequence* of its concept – precisely by virtue of its concept of being being itself [*das Seiende selbst zu sein*] – it is immediately, before we know where we are, objective being [*das*

¹²⁴ The term pre-predicative stems from Wolfram Högerebe’s reading of Schelling’s *Potenzenlehre* as a theory of predication in his challenging and profound *Prädikation und Genesis. Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings “Die Weltalter”*.

¹²⁵ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10 17-18; tr. Bowie, 52.

objektiv, das gegenständlich Seiende].¹²⁶

The rhythmical pressing forward of dense, anacoluthic sentences with which these ideas are expressed conveys great urgency, but not necessarily great clarity, upon the matter. What is to be held onto is this. The wholly abstract thought of the “it thinks” that the *cogito* boils down to makes the attempt to think *what there is*. Now methodic doubt has left it without any determination or specificity for it to hold onto, and therefore it can only think it as the pure concept of being. And as it cannot know that there is an outside world for it to refer to, it cannot assume this pure concept of being is instantiated, but must hold onto it *as* pure concept.

In doing so, however, it makes at this zero point of thinking a remarkable experience. For its own precondition as thinking is that there exists something that thinks. This it can only think as the pure concept of being itself. But that is to say that the pure concept of being is that which cannot *not* be thought. And as it cannot not be thought, and as thinking takes place, therefore it has no choice but to accept that this pure concept of being which it finds within itself is its own pre-condition. This being, then, which thought finds as what has preceded and enabled it, is that which cannot *not* be, that is, the necessarily existing being.

This *conversio*, this turning around of the mere concept of necessary being into the necessarily existing being itself *in actu*, is where the *cogito* and the ontological argument have led. But what can we say about this necessarily existing being which it has left us with?

¹²⁶ Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie, SW I/10, 18-19; tr. Bowie, 52-53.

Not, it would seem, much. The *ens necessarium* is nothing like the *ens perfectissimum* which the Cartesian subject had hoped to find. All one can say about it is, that it cannot *not* be. But that is to say it exists blindly.¹²⁷ Existing blindly means its necessary existence has not been proceeded by any possibility, by the potential for ceasing to be or for changing. It is constitutively shackled to its own existence.

If we take seriously the idea that God must be thought of as free, then the *ens necessarium* has taken us as far away from God as we possibly could. For what exists blindly, what has no freedom in relation to its being, has no freedom *at all*, but is “rigid, immovable, absolutely unfree, incapable of any free action, progression or going out of himself”.¹²⁸ It becomes hard to see how such a being could be the omnipotent Creator Descartes was hoping to find.

The unbridgeable gap between the *ens necessarium* and the *ens perfectissimum* in the modern ontological argument leads to what Schelling here calls with Kant an antinomy: an inherent clash between what follows from reason of necessity, and what we really *want* if we want God.¹²⁹ For although it is laudable that with Descartes’ doubt, philosophy has liberated itself from religious thought (programmatically, “consciousness must become free of revelation to proceed

¹²⁷ As Hutter astutely remarks, the blindness of the necessarily existing being mirrors that of the “it thinks”. This blindness is moreover one tied to the inability of (meaningful) action. For action in the very least implies freedom. Just as the necessarily existing being cannot change its being, so too the blind subject is caught in the ideal and inner phenomenon of the “Befangenheit des Bewußtseins” (Hutter, 141).

¹²⁸ Zur Geschichte der neuen Philosophie, SW I/10, 19; tr. Bowie, 55.

¹²⁹ On the antinomy between “what follows from reason with necessity” and “what we genuinely [*eigentlich*] want when we want God – identified by Axel Hutter as the central antinomy of Schelling’s late thought – see *Zur Geschichte der neuen Philosophie*, SW I/10, 21-23; tr. Bowie, 55-56.

towards it”),¹³⁰ the concept of God as freely creating the world is not something consciousness can simply give up on, and this for the reason that its *own* freedom to act is wrapped up with it. That, at least, is what the *Freiheitsschrift* had amounted to saying, and what the phrase “what we really want when we want God” points towards.

The question remains how a philosophically satisfying answer to this can be given. For it will not do simply to deny that God is the necessarily existing being of the ontological argument. For such a move would mean performing a leap out of philosophy altogether, akin to Jacobi’s *salto mortale*, and abandoning “the real original concept [*Urbegriff*], which we absolutely may not renounce if our thinking is not everywhere to lack a firm point of departure”.¹³¹

As long as we do not renounce this original concept, however, we cannot help but think God, to the extent that we think him at all, as *what Is* in an absolute sense, and as we do this, we must concede He is also that which exists necessarily and blindly. Yet this cannot be the end of the story. A hint of how the antinomy of which Schelling speaks might be resolved lies in the suggestion that it must be assumed that the free God of which popular belief speaks, and upon whose existence our own human freedom depends – this God who we have conceded is the necessarily existing being of the ontological argument, is nevertheless *more* than merely this necessary being; as the living God, he must have the freedom to negate His own being (Schelling speaks of *Aufheben*), or transform His necessary being into contingent being, so that His necessary being is the ground of his effective and real being. How any of this is to be seen through, however, cannot come into view until all the possibilities of a

¹³⁰ Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie, lecture 11, SW II/1, 258.

¹³¹ Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie, SW I/10, 19; tr. Bowie, 55.

merely logical or negative philosophy are exhausted.

Spinoza, to whom we must now briefly turn, has a privileged place in this dynamic of logical philosophy for bringing out with great consequence and in great starkness what in Descartes becomes apparent only with much philosophical prodding. For where Descartes begins with the question what is first for me, and thus remains in the ambit of the individual empirical subject, Spinoza's system is founded immediately upon what is first as such, the thought of a necessary being. Consequently, the ontological proof stands at the very beginning of the *Ethics*.¹³² What is more, where Descartes is guided by a general pre-conception of what God is, only belatedly to arrive at the concept of a necessary being, Spinoza cuts off any such reference and begins the *Ethics* with the being to whose essence it belongs to exist, the being who cannot be thought not to exist. That this being, who first comes into view in the definitions of the *Ethics* as *causa sui*, then as *substantia*, and only then, third and almost as an afterthought, as *Deus*, signals most clearly how far "consciousness has become free from revelation". In the Cartesian system, *philosophia prima* speaks autonomously within its own domain even of God, but must allow for theology, as the way of knowing springing from revelation and acquired by grace, to have the last word. The genuine concept of revelation or of prophecy for Spinoza, by contrast, is that of *cognitio naturalis*;

¹³² Don Garrett has argued in "Spinoza's "Ontological" Argument" that the arguments that open the *Ethics* cannot be typified so readily and unambiguously; Spinoza offers "four interrelated arguments which resemble ontological arguments in being essentially a priori and relying on a definition of "God", but which resemble cosmological arguments in depending on a version of the principle of sufficient reason" (198).

This is correct, but then once one keeps in mind Spinoza's timeless concept of reason, it is unsurprising there should no longer be a distinction between "a cosmological argument which dispenses with the empirical premise" and "an ontological argument which relies on the principle of sufficient reason" (222-23).

there is nothing outside of philosophy that could give us truthful access to the divine.

God then is here nothing but the necessarily existing being. If He is a cause, He is so not because he is a free cause as the God who could create the world in a free act would be, but merely as *causa sui*. To understand this term, it must be remembered Spinoza equates the pairs of notions of ground (*ratio*) and consequent, on the one hand, and that of cause (*causa*) and effect on the other. Spinoza speaks regularly of *causa sive ratio*. And because grounds and reasons are the same thing, it no way disturbs Spinoza to say that God is *causa sui*, though God as cause cannot, of course, precede himself in time as effect.¹³³ To be *causa sui* then is to be, as the first definition tells us, to be “id, cujus essentia involvit existentiam, sive id, cujus natura non potest concipi nisi existens”. Schelling’s gloss is telling:

Spinoza calls God *causa sui*, but in the more narrow sense that He Is through the sheer necessity of His *essence*, that is to say he *only* Is, without being able to be held onto as being able to be (as *causa*); the cause has completely merged into the effect, and behaves only as *substance*, against which His thought can do nothing. For surprised, as it were, by blind being, as the unexpected, which no thought can anticipate (whence *this* being really is the *existentia fatalis*, the system itself is fatalism), overtaken, I say, by being, which blindly descends upon Him, which swallows its own beginning, He even loses consciousness, all power and all freedom of movement in relation to this being.¹³⁴

¹³³ The requirement that cause precede effect in time was, of course, precisely why Aquinas rejected the idea of *causa sui*; Descartes still equivocates on it uncomfortably in his correspondence with Arnaud. On the equation of ground and cause in early modern rationalism, see Vincent Carraud’s *Causa sive ratio. La raison de la cause, de Suarez à Leibniz*. On Jacobi’s criticism of this conflation of ground and cause, found in Appendix VII of the *Spinoza-Büchlein* and perhaps the heart of Jacobi’s philosophical thought, see Birgit Sandkaulen, *Grund und Ursache. Die Vernunftkritik Jacobis*.

¹³⁴ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 35; tr. Bowie, 65-66 (lightly corrected).

Reason throwing off the yoke of revelation, which it must be emphasized Schelling never questions as a necessary and salutary event, has led to the complete immobility of an infinite, eternal, necessary being in which everything is contained. Thus the dialectic of freedom has ended in “the imprisonment of thought [*die Gefangenschaft des Denkens*] from which thought has sought to emancipate itself by the succeeding systems without yet being able to do so”.¹³⁵ The connection between the ground that is the infinite substance and the finite modes which follow from its essence is asserted, but remains not so much obscure as, given the conditions of explanation that this system has to offer, unthinkable. The attributes which Spinoza interposes between the substance and its modes cannot be of any help here, because the way in which they are generated by the substance is equally unfathomable: “the substance itself does not unlock itself in them [*schließt sich in ihnen nicht auf*], but remains in its closedness [*Verschlossenheit*] as mere ground of their existence, without emerging as the being [*das Seiende*] that they have in common, the living bond of the two”.¹³⁶ The failure of Spinoza to derive the attributes from substance is underlined by his admission that thought and extension are the only attributes *recognizable by us* – that is to say, he surreptitiously takes them up as he finds them in experience rather than establishing them through reason.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 34; tr. Bowie, 65.

¹³⁶ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 40; tr. Bowie, 70.

¹³⁷ In fact, propositions 8 through 11 of the first part of the *Ethics* clearly state there are not just two but an *infinity* of infinite attributes in the substance. The letter Schelling refers to here (SW I/10, 41) seems to be Spinoza’s exchange with Schuller (letters 63 through 66) on the question why it is only the attributes of thought and extension we can *know*. But that very question implies there are also attributes we *cannot* know. In this respect, at least, Schelling misses his target. The reduction of the infinite number of attributes to thought and extension is everywhere in the German reception of Spinoza of the period, however, and has defenders among contemporary Spinoza scholars as well: thus Jonathan Bennett, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics”. Against this view see

Critical as this reading of Spinoza is, however, it will not do to simply avoid the stalemate of Spinoza's blind and ever-resting necessary being. Indeterminate charges from outside against his system – that there is no distinction between God and world, or that God is denied personality – remain powerless until can be shown that a philosophical understanding of these matters can be achieved.

Spinoza's error – if we have to concede to him *this*, that the only positive thing from which he begins is this mere existent being [*jenes bloß Existierende*] – lies in this, that that he straight away posits this being = God, without having shown, as true philosophy must, how one can get from the merely existent being als *prius* to God as a *posterius* [...]. Spinoza had to this extent come to the most profound fundament of all positive philosophy, but his mistake is that he did not know how to proceed beyond it.¹³⁸

How, then, does one proceed? And what does it mean to move from *prius* to *posterius*?

§2 The Ideal of Reason

In a revealing footnote in the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie oder Darstellung der reinrationellen Philosophie*, Schelling recalls a saying of Goethe's to the effect that “no-one in the world of science – the philologist, perhaps, excepted – has been able to step away from [*sich entziehen*] the movement Kant originated without thereby coming to harm”.¹³⁹ Indeed, Schelling adds, in the realm of philosophy no-one has been able to find serious recognition without standing in “genetic continuity” with the development that takes

Yitzhak Melamed's forthcoming paper “A Substance Consisting of an Infinity of Attributes”: Spinoza on the Infinity of Attributes” and his *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 156-161.

¹³⁸ *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, SW II/3, lecture 4, 57; tr. Matthews (modified), 199-200.

¹³⁹ Schelling quotes Goethe freely from *Winckelmann*, WA 46:55.

its origin in Kant's thought. And the main point in this development is, to his mind, the doctrine of the transcendental ideal of reason.¹⁴⁰

This gives the ideal of reason the singular importance of being a double key to Schelling's late philosophy. On the hand, the ideal of reason stands as Kant's profoundest engagement with the onto-theological question.¹⁴¹ It brings out poignantly to what extent he is not merely the *Alleszermalmer* Mendelssohn held him to be, who brought rigorous constraints to reason's self-determination and so cut off any attempt at rational theology before it could get off the ground. Despite the avowed opposition Kant shows in his critical project to rational proofs of God's existence, the doctrine of the transcendental ideal of pure reason makes clear he is not merely an external opponent, but has deeply imbibed the aspirations, if not the outcomes, of the attempt to found God's existence on the unavoidable

¹⁴⁰ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, SW II/1, 283n.

¹⁴¹ I use the term here in both the narrow Kantian and wider Heideggerian sense. The two *loci classici* for the term onto-theology are Kant's definition of onto-theology as of a form of transcendental theology that "glaubt durch bloße Begriffe, ohne Beihülfe der mindesten Erfahrung, [das Dasein des Urwesens] zu erkennen" (KrV, B660), and Heidegger's *Identität und Differenz*, where a wide field of questions that has occupied Heidegger in various forms since at least the 30s is now thematized as "die onto-theologische Verfassung der Metaphysik". These questions are centered, one might say, on the entanglement of the question of being in general, or onto-theology, and the question of the highest being, or theo-logy – and as such tied up in Heidegger's project of thinking beyond a metaphysics of presence. Heidegger's most serious discussion of Schelling in the light of these questions is to be found in his work on the *Freiheitsschrift* (GA 42, 84-99).

Schelling's relationship to either of these concepts of onto-theology is, however, rather too complex to be boiled down to an adherence or opposition to them – never mind the question whether adherence or opposition to onto-theology would be philosophically salutary. A useful if in its brevity insufficient attempt to un muddy the waters in this regard is provided by Jean-François Courtine in "La critique de l'ontologie I. Aristote-Hegel" and "La critique de l'ontologie II. Le renversement de l'argument ontologique au seuil de la philosophie positive", in *Extase de la Raison. Essais sur Schelling*. See also Tyler Tritten, *Beyond Presence. The Late F.W.J. Schelling's Critique of Metaphysics*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

necessity to think a perfect being. In this sense, then, Schelling rightly sees Kant as the natural outcome of the history of philosophy in its merely logical or negative mode that began with Descartes' ontological argument.

At the same time, the doctrine of the transcendental ideal of reason is for Schelling no mere matter, however instructive, of the philosophical past, nor even just the point from which the flowering of post-Kantian thought takes its beginning. It is through his critical dialogue with Kant's ideal of reason, most clearly elaborated in the twelfth lecture of the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, that Schelling develops the philosophical means to complete his own purely rational philosophy and, having reached this limit, achieve a transition into positive philosophy. Despite Schelling's insistence that Kant himself has not fully mined the philosophical richness contained in the ideal of reason, the late philosophy is faithful to Kant's insight that what Schelling calls purely rational thought is inadequate to the full understanding of *what there is*. In this, the late philosophy turns against both Schelling's own earlier system of identity and Hegel's *Logic*, the latter of which he sees as a slightly refined version of the former. The *specificum* of the late Schelling – the insistence that the aspirations of philosophy can only be fulfilled if the aims of logical reason are taken over and completed by means of historical reason – is in this sense aptly characterized as a “continuation of Kant's critique of reason”.¹⁴²

Kant's relationship to rational proofs of God is a troubled and involved one. The ideal of pure reason as it appears in the Dialectic of the First *Critique* has strong antecedents in Kant's pre-critical wrestling with the rational theology of the eighteenth-century

¹⁴² As the title of Axel Hutter's study programmatically reflects.

metaphysicians. In his pre-critical *Beweisgrund*-essay, Kant had already given refutations of the three classical proofs of the existence of God, and developed a rival conception of how the existence of a necessary being might be demonstrated: by means of a proof from possibility. The necessary being proved in this way can then further be shown to be endowed with will and intellect, and thus to be God.¹⁴³ The complex argument in its pre-critical form, the central claim of which is that the very possibility of anything at all presupposes absolutely that a necessary being exists, we cannot here investigate.¹⁴⁴ In the First *Critique*, this proof from possibility re-appears under the name of the ideal of pure reason – though now in the modified form of a necessary but subjective condition of thought,

¹⁴³ It is in proposition VII of the *Nova Dilucidatio* that we find Kant first developing the “proof from possibility”. Returning to this proof some years later, Kant in *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Dasein Gottes* then argues that the proof from possibility is the only way to achieve rational a priori knowledge of the divinity.

In the introduction to their recent edition of the *Beweisgrund*-essay Kreimendahl and Oberhausen speak aptly of the ideal of pure reason as a “depotenzierte Ontotheologie” (xix). On the proof from possibility in the *Nova Dilucidatio*, see Tillmann Pinder, *Kants Gedanke vom Grund aller Möglichkeit - Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte der "transzendentalen Theologie"*, as well as the aforementioned in-depth introductory essay by Kreimendahl and Oberhausen’s (xiii-xix). What possibly distinguishes between the proof from possibility as offered in the *Nova Dilucidatio* and the *Beweisgrund*-essay is that only the latter distinguishes clearly between a sum-total of things and the *ground* of that sum-total.

¹⁴⁴ *Beweisgrund*, 2:77-92; cf. reconstructions by Förster (*Die 25 Jahre*, 92-94) and Boehm (*Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, 20-35). Boehm goes on to argue why this argument commits Kant to Spinozism. Both Förster and Boehm reconstruct only the second and third *Betrachtung* of this part of the essay, which are concerned with inner possibility and on the as such necessary being. In the fourth *Betrachtung*, however, Kant argues that the necessary being must – unlike Spinoza’s substance, it would seem – be endowed with intellect and will, and so be a person or spirit. As other commentators have noted, however, Kant’s arguments in this section seem unconvincing and presented with a certain half-heartedness. Were we to take them seriously, though, they may still – and in Boehm’s reconstruction, can really only – be seen not as determinations of God, but consequences in other things of which He is the ground (cf. *Beweisgrund* 2:89). This, of course, is precisely Spinoza’s position. See Boehm, 42-43.

one that we cannot dispense with yet is, crucially, *not* to be taken as constitutive of an actual necessarily existing being.

The doctrine of the transcendental ideal of pure reason appears so promising to Schelling because it shows that even as a severe critic of the possibility of knowledge from reason alone as Kant found himself forced to acknowledge that reason has an orientation towards and inherent hankering after the whole of *what there is*, as a whole. This brings out explicitly what was implicit in the Cartesian and Spinozist systems. Descartes set out, in all the simplicity of his empirical self, to find a method for his thoughts to connect to the world truthfully, and only as a result and accidentally stumbles upon the necessary being; in reaching this being through the *cogito*, he fails to discern himself what is nevertheless lurking just beneath the surface his thought – that the necessary being is not an extramundane individual he chooses to think about, but the universal being thought as such is oriented towards.

Spinoza knows to begin with the necessary being, and knows it as the ground of all possible beings, the whole that first makes possible its parts and is its ground. But as he thinks this whole strictly on the basis of logical necessity, it sinks into an immobile stupor in which the relationship between the ground and its consequents becomes inexplicable. Kant, for his part, offers something far more subtle: an account of how in our knowledge of finite beings we are committed to thinking the infinite ground of being as such, and to think it as an individual entity, even though reason cannot assure itself of the existence of such an entity other than by deceiving itself. The desire on the part of reason to reach the unconditioned *can* turn pathological, yet it need not – and without such a desire we could not have rational

cognition at all. Why should this be the case?

From closer up, this is Kant's train of thought as Schelling sees it. Of the three faculties, reason is productive of the ideas. Now the ideas, though they themselves do not yield knowledge, serve to bring the matter of sensible intuition under the highest unity of thought and to give to the understanding the highest rule for experience; they are principles inherent in and necessary to our striving for any kind of knowledge. It seems then that reason here plays a supporting and instrumental role. Yet in a deeper sense, the ideas – and in particular the idea of God, with which we are concerned here – turn out to be the bridge by means of which philosophy can escape the limitations of a merely instrumental reason, and become free, positing out of itself and following only itself. How is it that reason comes to slip the chains of servitude?

For this we need to follow the argument of the transcendental ideal closely to see how the idea of a necessary being plays out in it. This happens in three steps.¹⁴⁵ First, from the principle of thorough determination we arrive, in order to ensure the material possibility of such determination, at the concept of a sum total of possibilities. Second, if from this concept of a sum total of all possibilities we eliminate the merely negative predicates, we are left with the concept of a transcendental substrate to all determination, the complete storehouse (*der*

¹⁴⁵ In reading Kant's exposition in the ideal of pure reason (B599-611) as a three-step regress argument, I am following Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 398-405. Kant's own presentation seems not to prescribe with full clarity to a three-step model, though it is best so reconstructed. Schelling's presentation of the Kantian argument (*Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, *SW* II/1, 282-88; cf. *Abhandlung über die Quelle der ewigen Wahrheiten*, *SW* II/1, 585-86) is as nonchalant as Kant himself in distinguishing between the terms *Inbegriff*, *omnitudo realitatis*, and *Ideal der reinen Vernunft* and the argumentative links between them.

ganze Vorrat des Stoffes) to all material possibility, or an *omnitude realitatis*. Third, if we think of this *omnitude realitatis* not just as a storehouse, but as itself a thoroughly determinate individual entity, we end up with the thought of the ideal of reason.

How does this argument proceed in detail? As with Kant's pre-critical proof for the existence of God, it is by an investigation of what possibility is, and what is required for there to be such a thing as possibility at all, that the argument proceeds. The first step introduces the distinction between formal and material possibility. For a thing to be called possible, Kant begins his argument, it must pass the test of non-contradiction; its concept cannot contain any predicates that logically exclude each other. This, however, is mere formal possibility. A thing must also be materially possible in that it is thoroughly determined (*durchgängig bestimmt*), that is to say, it has to be determined through all possible predicates. One might say that any thing takes up a certain position in ontological space,¹⁴⁶ where of all possible pairs of mutually excluding predicates it will be assigned one. Being thoroughly determined in this sense is what makes it an individual. The concept of thorough determination is thus the idea of complete knowledge of an individual thing. But if it makes sense for all entities is to be thoroughly determined in this way, then the thought presents itself naturally what a being would be like who has *all* predicates assigned to it. Now Kant argues that for any individual thing to be determined at all, this sum total is not something we merely dream up. For every determination of an individual thing must take its possibilities from the *Inbegriff* of all possibilities, which therefore has priority over individual determinations and is their necessary presupposition. It is through this that reason gives understanding the rule –

¹⁴⁶ The term, which has become common in the literature, is Allen Wood's; see *Kant's Rational Theology*, 33.

though that does not of course turn the raw material of possibility it is into something that could be conceived of as a thing, let alone an existing one. This is how we arrive, from the principle of thorough determination, to the sum total of predicates.

The next step occurs when we realize that the full jumble of this sum total of predicates is in large part redundant. For what is needed from the storehouse of material possibility is only the positive predicates. Negative predicates, in Kant's discussion, are ontologically dependent on their positive counterparts, and so such a being would receive the positive predicates from *all* opposed pairs of possible determinations. What this leaves us with is an *omnitude realitatis*,¹⁴⁷ the transcendental substrate which contains the whole supply of positive material possibilities. This way we get from a mere sum total to an ordered whole.

Third, if we acknowledge the *omnitude realitatis* contains all possible predicates, this means it must itself be thought of as making up not merely an idea of reason, as a concrete rule by which reason imposes its higher order on the understanding, but as the idea *in concreto et in individuo*. In order to do this, one would have to eliminate from the infinitely many possible predicates those which overlap and are therefore redundant, and also eliminate predicates which exclude each other materially. Thus uncluttered, the ontological space as a whole could be thoroughly determined as an individual object – the ideal of pure reason.

¹⁴⁷ *Realitas* here being understood, importantly, not as existence or actuality but the positive nature, the *quidditas* or *essentia* of a thing. See Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 399 and *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, lemmata "realitas" and "Realität/Idealität".

The progress from idea to ideal is a natural one, yet does not achieve objectivity, and when it comes to the existence of the ideal, reason leaves us quite in the dark. Nevertheless, Kant goes on to suggest what the ideal of reason might amount to, were we somehow justified in assuming it as a hypothesis. As the ground of all finite beings, it would be the originary being (*Urwesen*), and would relate as originary image (*Urbild, prototypen*) to all derivative beings as secondary images or depictions (*Abbilder, ectypa*), which take the matter of their possibility from it.¹⁴⁸ Schelling praises Kant “because he had the courage and the probity to state, that God is wanted as an *individual object* [*einzelner Gegenstand*], not as the mere idea but as the *ideal* of reason”.¹⁴⁹ For what reason needs above all is to anchor itself not in an abstraction but in a both necessary and *actually existing* being.

The arduous and highly abstract way in which Kant arrives at the ideal of pure reason does not appear to sit naturally with the genuinely critical thrust of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, one commentator branding it “quite the most archaic piece of rationalistic argument in the entire *Critique*”.¹⁵⁰ The significance Schelling attributes it for philosophy since Kant would mostly seem to bolster the suspicion of many readers – certainly in the Anglo-American world – that German Idealism represents at base a lapse into pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics unburdened by epistemological modesty, rather than an advance beyond critical philosophy. Whatever one may say about such a claim in the context of the irreducibly diverse systems that Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel at different stages of their philosophical development produced, it is important to realize here that Schelling’s late philosophy holds

¹⁴⁸ *KrV*, B606.

¹⁴⁹ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, *SW II/1*, 283.

¹⁵⁰ Kemp Smith, *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 522.

onto the Kantian doctrine in this crucial regard: reason in its efforts to grasp the world fundamentally *needs* the thought of the transcendental ideal of pure reason, but is unable on its own strength to *achieve* it. At the limit of what can be thought lies the presupposition of a being which thought is unable to show in fact exists.

The freedom of reason which the ideal represents is thus a cold comfort. Although it is free in this aspect, that it generates on its own its highest thought, unbound either by extra-philosophical tradition or by the input of the senses. But this thought remains a mere thought. As with the ontological argument in its Cartesian shape, it can at best show that the highest being, if it exists, must exist necessarily rather than contingently. Reason can neither satisfy its need to demonstrate this existent being nor learn to be content with its own incapacity. This comes to a head in what is perhaps the most striking passage in the first *Critique*:

The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things [*des Trägers aller Dinge*], is for human reason the true abyss [*Abgrund*]. Even eternity – however awful the sublimity with which a Haller might portray it – does not make such a dizzying impression on the mind; for eternity only **measures** the duration of things, but it does not **sustain** that duration. One cannot resist the thought of it [*man kann sich des Gedanken nicht verwehren*], but one also cannot bear it [*man kann ihn aber auch nicht ertragen*], that a being that we represent to ourselves as the highest among possible beings might, as it were, say to itself: "I am from eternity to eternity, outside me is nothing except what is something merely through my will; **but whence** then am I?" Here everything gives way beneath us, and the greatest perfection as well as the smallest, hovers without support before speculative reason, for which it would cost nothing to let the one as much as the other disappear without the least obstacle.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ B641.

Kant is not commonly thought of as the thinker of the abyss of human reason. And indeed much of the first *Critique* sounds the note that transcendental idealism is the cure for this despair of the spirit. It is the nature of reason to seek the unconditioned, and therefore reason is constitutionally prone to mistake this need to search for the unconditioned for the assertible, scrutinizable reality of the unconditioned as a given. The transcendental illusion that gives rise to this mistake cannot be eradicated, but in becoming aware of it we can make it harmless, and realize that our knowledge of the world rests secure as long as we have the subjective, heuristic, and merely regulative idea as *focus imaginarius* to organize and lead our acquisition of knowledge.

Yet this passage unmistakably strikes a less optimistic tone. It is not, as some commentators have argued, that Kant here underplays the destructive nature to all rational theology of the critical enterprise, whether out of a misplaced attachment to Wolffian metaphysics, his respect for common piety, or political caution. It is precisely the destruction of rational theology that generates the despair.¹⁵²

¹⁵² In the *Beweisgrund*-essay, Kant had put similar Scriptural-sounding language in the mouth of the infinite. The contrast is instructive: "I am from eternity to eternity, outside me is nothing, except insofar as it is something through me" (*Beweisgrund*, AA 2:151). They are perhaps a conflation of sorts of two passages: God's various claims in Isaiah 45 to be the sole originator of all things under heaven, and Revelations 1:8, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty". In the *Beweisgrund*-essay they are the expression of God's absolute self-sufficiency (*Allgenugsamkeit*).

The God of our passage from the First *Critique*, by contrast, has his origins shrouded in mystery. Mere conceptual determination does nothing to shore up his actual existence. And though it would be a hermeneutical *faux pas* to over-read the mere mention of God's will, it is fascinating nevertheless that the

The question is rather whether critical philosophy is able, not just programmatically but genuinely and enduringly, to rest content with the thought of the unconditioned as beyond our reach. Although nothing seems to force us to assume that the ideal of reason exists, we *are* so bound in the case of the *Ding an sich*, without which transcendental idealism would collapse. Yet Kant's confident assertion in the first *Critique* that the noumenal realm, though it can be thought, can never be an object of knowledge, is not as stable as it appeared to him at first. The second *Critique* not only allows but requires that we have knowledge of our noumenal selves as free; what is more, this is a *Faktum der Vernunft*. The famous §76 and §77 of the third *Critique* suggest that the supersensible substrate, which we must think as the place in which spirit and nature, necessity and freedom come together, might not be altogether unknowable to us if only we had a form of non-discursive reason at our disposal. But if the question of the *an sich* as supersensible substrate keeps imposing itself upon Kant's thought in this way, then it is plausible to suggest that the groundlessness of the ideal of pure reason, as a thought we can neither push away nor be content with, expresses an enduring bafflement at the heart of critical philosophy which is to be overcome, if only the means to do so would offer themselves. Schelling reads it precisely in this way, commenting in a different lecture that these words "express Kant's deep feeling for the sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] of this being that precedes all thought [*dieses allem Denken zuvorkommenden Seins*]"¹⁵³

critical Kant should have God speak the language of will, act, and personality – those characteristics, in other words, that will not be reduced to a merely logical picture, are directly tied to the idea of freedom, and which will be of central importance to Schelling.

¹⁵³ *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 8, *SW* II/3, 163.

No less than Kant, then, Schelling holds on to the insight of critical philosophy that the unconditioned ground of being which reason needs cannot be shown by reason itself to exist. Where he exceeds Kant is in the idea that there is in the unity of being and thought a constitutive primacy of being, such that thought finds itself always already beholden to the unprethinkable (*unvordenkliche*) being it cannot in its own categories grasp. It is in this sense that Schelling elsewhere speaks of philosophy hitherto as promising bread and delivering a stone, or “a preface to which the book is still missing – an ever-rattling mill which however is unable to bring forth the bread of life”.¹⁵⁴ Where is the bread to be found?

§3 The Hunger for Being

What emerged through the dialectic of freedom that modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant represents is that thought demands a foundation in the form of an absolute ground to assure itself of its grasp of the world, yet its efforts to secure itself such a ground lead only to the mere thought of a necessary being – or more precisely *the* necessarily existing being – the existence of which it remains powerless to actualize. Kant’s reflections on the ideal of reason brought out once particularly significant aspect of this lack of satisfaction: that the abstract thought of thinking latching onto being can be understood, concretely, as the question of how such a thing as determination (*Bestimmung*) first becomes possible. Determination is to be understood here in a double sense. First, as the *logical* question of what must be the case for a subject to be meaningfully connected to a predicate, and thus for

¹⁵⁴ *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 1, 3.

predication to become possible. For a concept to be possible at all, Kant argued, an *omnitudo realitatis* that guarantees the availability to thought of predicates is required. This means that the question of God is legible as the question of why the world should show up as determinable through reason, as the (possible) site of meaning. This question Schelling puts poignantly elsewhere:

The whole world lies, so to speak, in the nets of the understanding or reason, but the question is *how* exactly it got into those nets, since there is obviously something other and something more than mere reason in the world, indeed there is something which strives beyond these barriers.¹⁵⁵

Second, the question of determination is an *ontological* question in that it asks how it is possible that finite being manifests itself at all, or what the “ultimate sustainer of all things” that undergirds their existence is. This, it must be remembered, is for Schelling not merely a theoretical question of ontology, but one that asks after the origins and ends of things and as such is an existential question as well:

Far from it, that man and his endeavors make the world intelligible; he himself is the most unintelligible, and drives me inevitably to the opinion of the wretchedness of all being, a belief that makes itself known in so many bitter pronouncements from both ancient and recent times. It is precisely man that drives me to the final desperate question: why is there anything at all? Why is there not rather nothing?¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, SW I/10, 143; tr Bowie, 147. Cf. *Grundlegung der positiven Philosophie*, 222.

¹⁵⁶ *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 1, SW II/3, 7. Schelling asks this question throughout his career, though the means of answering it, and the substance of the answer, are strongly at odds between

Yet Schelling's project for a negative philosophy is not exhausted by the bare result that necessity must ultimately give way to an inscrutable contingency. The strategy is rather to ask what can still be said in purely rational terms about what lies at the origin of the logico-ontological field of determinacy that is the world. In immediate connection with his reading of Kant's transcendental ideal of pure reason, which as we saw is to be seen as the condition of all individual acts of predication, he attempts to develop a theory of what makes for the possibility that there be a realm of determination or predication in general. The result of this attempt is the notoriously dark doctrine of the potencies, or *Potenzenlehre*.

Here we must indulge in a methodological excursus. The extraordinary difficulty which the doctrine of the potencies has presented for scholarship is part philological, part philosophical. Developed most extensively in the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie* and the *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, the two major lecture courses presented by Schelling's son in the *Sämmtliche Werke*, the doctrine of the potencies is made forbiddingly hard to grasp by the way in which it is unfolded: in a wide-ranging and criss-crossing dialogue with the history of philosophy. The *Philosophische Einleitung* comes, as we have seen in this chapter, to the question of what lies before all determinacy through a reading of the history of modern philosophy that finds its high point in the ideal of pure reason. Yet having touched upon this point in the twelfth lecture, the line of exposition then swerves abruptly into a lengthy and original but by no means straightforwardly enlightening

different periods of his thought. In the context of the late philosophy, cf. e.g. *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 12, *SW* II/3, 242.

discussion of Aristotle's ontology and Plato's concept of dialectic, in order to win from this archeological exercise a richer means to approach the question afresh.

The reconstruction of either of these two readings would require a lengthy treatment in its own right.¹⁵⁷ In the grand style which is common to the engagement with the history of philosophy that both Schelling and Hegel display, the two cardinal figures of Greek thought are here made relevant to the determining problems of Schelling's late philosophy in ways they themselves would by no means have been able to anticipate. Admittedly, the treatment Plato and Aristotle receive in the *Philosophische Einleitung*, as in the frequent recourse Schelling has to them throughout the other lectures, proceeds through painstaking attention to the details of the Greek texts, and in this Schelling is animated by a hermeneutic spirit not seen since the classical and medieval commentators. That said, the readings are inevitably such that they would make scholars of Plato and Aristotle today blink. Not only are they oriented as a whole in a grand arc towards a problematic foreign to the questions of Antiquity, but on the individual level the reading of Aristotle is undoubtedly Platonizing, whereas Plato is read in a strongly Kantianizing key. Explaining the doctrine of the potencies through this exegetical labyrinth gives them historical depth and allows them to appear, if successful, as the natural culmination of the fundamental questions of a *philosophia perennis*.

¹⁵⁷ See Thomas Leinkauf, *Schelling als Interpret der philosophischen Tradition: zur Rezeption und Transformation von Platon, Plotin, Aristotels und Kant*, as well as Gabriel, *Der Mensch im Mythos* (146-195) and – with useful precise analyses of Schelling's translations of specific passages – Franz, *Philosophische Religion* (105-186). Franz speaks pointedly of Schelling's "metabolic" reading of Plato and Aristotle, which he understands "als Umformung, als Überformung"; for "weder können wir Schellings Versuch als ganzen, sozusagen in Bausch und Bogen, als nicht sachgerecht verwerfen und ihm somit ein "falsches" Platonverständnis vorhalten, noch halt allerdings Schellings Wiedergabe einem kritischen Vergleich wirklich stand" (138-39).

What it does *not* do in any straightforward sense is to allow a clear conceptual understanding to emerge.

What is more, the fundamental concepts of the doctrine of the potencies developed in this virtuoso way are not altogether stable between the different texts that make up the corpus of the late philosophy; throughout, different accents are chosen, and terms are developed, utilized, then often partially or wholly abandoned for others more poignant in different contexts. This fact is made little better by the terminological lexicon in which the potencies are explained or which enter into their explanation, as these largely consists of variations on the verbal and participial forms of “being” – *ein Seiendes, das Seiende, das Seiende selbst, das seiend-Seiende, das Sein, das Sein selbst, das Wesen, das Wesende, and das, was Ist* – qualified at times by an emphasis lent by italicization or the addition of *bloß* or *nur*. These are moreover meant to reflect, and at the same time allow for a creative transformation of, the wide and amorphous field of terms of Greek ontology – εἶναι, τὸ ὄν, τὸ ὄντως ὄν, αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν, οὐσία, τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι – they seek to think through. Heidegger’s variations on being acquire an admirable lucidity in comparison.

The philosophical obscurity of the doctrine of the potencies is equally considerable. For what Schelling seeks to achieve by them is to provide principles that are *at the same time* the elementary particles that make predication possible, but themselves are pre-predicative, and the elementary constituents of any possible being, without themselves existing – existing, at least, in any straightforward sense of the term. To ask what could lie before predication and before being is to invite the suspicion one is asking questions purposively posed to inspire mock profundity; to merge these two questions into one does little to allay

such a suspicion.

But a yet larger question of a systematic nature looms here. The potencies are the principles of Schelling's late thought; at least once he refers to them in a letter as his "metaphysics".¹⁵⁸ Significantly that makes them the one set of concepts which, developed in the negative philosophy, remains in force in the positive philosophy and structures it. But this raises the genuine question of what it would mean to think the distinction between the two halves of the system of the late philosophy, i.e. between a negative philosophy modeled on the concept of logical reason and a positive philosophy which embraces historical reason, if both are to be thought on the basis of the same logico-ontological principles.

Anticipating our discussion of the positive philosophy, we might ask what might be the specific proper nature of historical reason if the approach taken to the historical is that of a dialectic between the potencies that logical thought has already supplied. For if the historical is somehow to be derived from the potencies, or if at least the potencies hold sway over the unrolling of the historical, one might well wonder on what grounds Schelling means to criticize the supposed pan-logicism of his great rival Hegel. He, one would be tempted to say, at least had the probity to admit that wherever he looked in the history of art and religion he saw his own logical concepts looking back at him.

If for Schelling by contrast myth and revelation – revelation here in one of Schelling's terminological senses as the Christian revelation – are meant to be the key to questions which a purely logical philosophy cannot solve, which push forward into the realm of

¹⁵⁸ Plitt III.241.

actuality, then reinstating a logic of potencies at their heart would seem to ruin this attempt before it gets off the ground, and collapse what he will call his tautegorical mode of reading of the religious past back into a form of allegoresis. The historical would be no more than a masquerade of principles that once understood as principles can be grasped purely logically.¹⁵⁹

This objection becomes yet more grave if we anticipate one more aspect of our discussion of the philosophy of mythology and revelation. This aspect is the structurally incomplete nature of the positive philosophy, the very feature that allows it to be an eschatology. If the potencies are the logico-ontological principles that organize the process which drives the historical – here understood as the history of religious consciousness made up by mythology and revelation – then it would seem that once the principles are given, the process can only take on the form of a teleological progress towards a determinate and pre-known end. Now, Schelling recurrently describes the positive philosophy as a proof of the existence of God that structurally always remains incomplete and ongoing.¹⁶⁰ Is this to say that the result of the process, though perfectly predictable, lies somewhat further ahead, as the fully knowable and known idea that history seeks to realize by asymptotically approaching it? Such a system, though not closed in fact, would be closed nevertheless

¹⁵⁹ Hutter in his *Geschichtliche Vernunft* (118f) speaks of Schelling's "ontologizing inconsequence" of the doctrine of the potencies. Hutter's reconstruction of the "beating heart" of the late philosophy – the taking place of freedom – is of the highest interest because it manages to give a coherent and philologically as well as philosophically defensible picture of Schelling's system that manages to as good as eliminate any reference to the potencies.

¹⁶⁰ See for example the concluding passage of the important twenty-fourth (and last) lecture of the *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, SW II/1, 572.

conceptually.¹⁶¹ The result would bear an uncanny resemblance to a merely structurally deferred Hegelianism, however conceived in detail. This would not bode well for any attempt to think a *groundless* freedom and *unbound* revelation together.

With these caveats in place we now turn to a sparse reconstruction of the doctrine of the potencies in the *Philosophische Einleitung*, picking up the thread where we let it rest – the ideal of pure reason.

Kant himself had suggested as hypothesis – though not as a hypothesis one would be justified to assume – that the ideal of reason might relate to the world as its *Urbild* or prototype, the ground from which the full realm of determinate beings would follow as consequent. For all its promise, this is the crudest and most underdeveloped of thoughts. From the blank thought of an all-containing prototype alone we can hardly derive the world familiar to us from experience. Even if we were to move our attention away from the thought of an abstract logical space of possibilities and focus instead on the articulated whole of different kinds of things that we are familiar with – e.g. such classifications as plants and animals, organic and inorganic matter, etc. – we would not yet know that these categories are necessary and exhaustive of all possibility.

Yet Schelling's true question here is not how to provide a derivation of all that is, but why it should be that there is predication and that there are beings, why there is meaning and world at all. Without clearly marking the shift in the argument, he leaves behind merely experiential classifications in hope for more solid ground, and comes to the following rather

¹⁶¹ In Derridian terms, one might say it has a *futur* but no *à-venir*.

gnomic question, “Who could say, for example, that the mere pure *subject* of being [*das bloße reine Subjekt des Seins*] is **not** being [*das Seiende*], and would not much rather have to admit that precisely this is the first that is possible for being [*das erste dem Seienden Mögliche*], to be a subject?”.¹⁶² What might this question mean?

The thread of the argument, following Kant, was that predication (logically speaking) and determination (ontologically speaking) require a “store room” of material possibilities that is found as a necessary idea of reason, and further specifies itself as the singular and itself thoroughly determined ideal of reason. Schelling concurs with critical philosophy that this ideal cannot be assumed to exist. Yet he also believes more can be won from the being of this conceptually all-containing, all-sustaining, yet in and of itself phantom-like entity. The ideal of reason makes possible all predication, and with it determinate being, but unlike its predecessor in the *Beweisgrund*-essay, it itself cannot be said to be an *actual* necessary existent; what then is it that lies before and makes possible the source of possibility? Evidently, that which goes into the act of predication. And so a theory of predication is what Schelling now begins to develop, though one aimed at saying something about the singular case of the ideal of pure reason.¹⁶³

As we are looking for what explains the availability of the logico-ontological space, no

¹⁶² *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, *SW II/1*, 268.

¹⁶³ That the doctrine of the potencies is – *inter alia* – a theory of predication is first shown in Wolfram Högbe’s celebrated study *Prädikation und Genesis. Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings “Die Weltalter”*. Högbe’s reconstruction, which I largely follow here, enters specifically into the Kantian problem of the ideal of reason and its transformation in Schelling (see in particular 59-78). Strong textual support of a reading of the doctrine of the potencies as a theory of predication is given by the description of the potencies as *Ursubjekt*, *Urprädicat*, and *Ursynthesis*” (*SW II/1*, 352n).

recourse can be had to what is first made possible by this space. That however means that propositions, which *per* Kant's principle of thorough determination are only available in and through this space, cannot be of any help here. Schelling has to go back before what with Kant is the basic unit of truth and falsehood, the judgment.

He does this by splitting the logical proposition into its pre-logical components.¹⁶⁴ The first of these, as we saw, is the "mere pure *subject* of being", the pure, pre-logical subject before it enters into the realm of predication. It is that which is indeterminate yet determinable ($-A$). The second pre-propositional element is what Schelling here first, in a to us outdated logical idiom, calls the object, and we would be sooner inclined to call the predicate. Where the first pre-propositional element was the merely determinable, here on the other hand we are dealing with pure determination, ($+A$). Third, these two pre-propositional elements stand in relation to one another: on the one hand, they exclude one another; on the other, they are somehow to be brought together. The result of the relation of the two others, which as the result alone does not contain the them, but rather remains distinct from and as such opposed to them as their "excluded middle", is the subject-object ($\pm A$). It is these three pre-propositional elements that are the potencies. To underline their logical role, they are elsewhere labeled original subject, original predicate, and original

¹⁶⁴ In Hogrebe's enlightening metaphor: "Wenn die elementare Prädikation tatsächlich der Nucleus unserer epistemischen Kompetenz ist, dann beruht dieses Gedankenexperiment wesentlich auf eine Nuklearspaltung, d. h. in der Zertrümmerung des prädikativen Atoms". The use of such rare terms is, needless to say, not without its philosophical dangers: "Die Strahlung, die hierbei – um im Bild zu bleiben – freigesetzt wird, ist nun allerdings für jeden Diskurs tödlich: es kommt zu einer unkontrollierten Dissipation von Unsinn" (*Prädikation und Genesis*, 69-70).

synthesis (*Ursubjekt, Urprädicat, and Ursynthesis*).¹⁶⁵

Little seems to have been achieved so far by this operation, other than saddling us with three forbiddingly abstract terms that are isolated in the realm of the pre-propositional. The three potencies, as the elements that would go into the constitution of the logico-ontological space in which determination becomes possible, cannot themselves even be said to *be* – though they are not, therefore, merely nothing.¹⁶⁶ Our understanding of the coming to be of the logico-ontological space is not advanced by taking all three of the potencies together, because as principles that exclude one another they cannot be directly dialectically mediated.¹⁶⁷ Taken together as raw elements, all one can say about them is that they are “being as such as a blueprint [*das Seiende im Entwurf*], the mere figure or idea of being [*Figur oder Idee des Seins*], not it itself”.¹⁶⁸

Yet a dynamic is nevertheless suggested in this bare sketch of the potencies. The first potency, the mere pre-propositional element of the subject, was characterized as purely

¹⁶⁵ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 15, SW II/1, 352n. In the positive philosophy, it is the ontological rather than the logical character of the potencies that is emphasized, and thus they appear as that which is capable of being, that which has to be, and that which should be (*das Seinkönnende, das Seinmüssende, das Seinsollende*) – thus already in *System der Weltalter*, lecture 31, 139. See also *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 13, SW II/3, 267 and the significant passage from the *Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 6, SW II/2, 113f.

¹⁶⁶ Schelling repeatedly calls the potencies, in reference to Plutarch, not οὐκ ὄντα (that which is simply nothing) but μη ὄντα (that which is in the mode, we might say, of being not); he also speaks of στέρησις or privation. Privation of being is, of course, close to the notion of a lack.

¹⁶⁷ There is undoubtedly great proximity in the terms subject, object, and subject-object to the terminology of Schelling’s earlier thought as well as that of Hegel, but this proximity is sooner to be understood as a (somewhat opaque) form of internal criticism.

¹⁶⁸ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, SW II/1, 291.

indeterminate yet determinable. Now the potencies are ontological as well as logical principles,¹⁶⁹ and therefore the first potency can be referred to in a more clearly ontological register as the mere ability to be, *reines Seinkönnen* or *reines Können*. It is this notion of *being able to be* that provides the occasion for Schelling to suggest that a “force of attraction” exists between the first and second potency:

In bare not *being* [*im bloßen nicht Sein*], in the pure being able to be [*im reinen Können*, i.e. in the first potency], there is no more negation than one could say that a will is limited by negation if it does not want, and therefore is as if it were not. It is much rather infinite power, and precisely therefore that which for man [*für den Menschen*] is to be guarded as sacred, the treasure which must not be squandered, while by comparison the will which does elevates itself into being by wanting is necessarily an affected and limited one. The pure being able to be [*das reine Können*] does not contradict pure being [*dem lautern Sein*, i.e. the second potency], on the contrary, the purer the one, the greater its force of attraction on the other. It is precisely because of this force of attraction that it is the beginning.¹⁷⁰

The first and second potency thus both repulse and attract one another – neither can be what it is on its own when together, and thus resists the inherent draw that as each other’s compliments they exercise upon one another. The third potency relates likewise to the first and the second.

Such a model, the seeds of which are present in the *Freiheitsschrift*’s distinction between ground and existence, is seen more fully at work in the unfinished project of the *Weltalter*. In the late philosophy, the dynamic resulting from the three potencies forms the

¹⁶⁹ Schelling will in lecture 13 make explicit that in discussing the potencies we are in a domain where “die Gesetze des Denkens die Gesetzte des Seins sind” (SW II/1, 303).

¹⁷⁰ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, SW II/1, 293-94.

heart of Schelling's full program of a negative philosophy, which is to perform what Descartes had not yet understood as the true desideratum of his thought, Spinoza posited but failed to show, and Kant desired but was held back from by his epistemological bashfulness: to derive from the infinite substance all the finite beings, or to show how the ideal of reason as the all-including archetype is the ground from which the multitude of ectypa that make up our world spring as consequents. And this full program starts with the bare realization that it is the dynamic of the potencies, which in their elemental state lack being and yet yearn for it, that moves all:

Every beginning lies in lack [*Mangel*], the deepest potency to which everything is fastened [*an die alles geheftet*] is not-being [*das Nichtseiende*], and this is the hunger for being [*der Hunger nach Sein*].¹⁷¹

It need hardly be stated that this is a dazzling gambit, and the scope of its ambition is perhaps rivaled only by Hegel's system. It will likewise be obvious that such a program, were one to indulge in the attempt to make it work, is beset by tremendous methodological difficulties of a principle nature as well as countless detailed problems of execution. Negative philosophy, not in the different forms we have already seen it in in the history of modern philosophy, but in the full form Schelling himself now gives it, is in this program to derive from the dynamic interplay of the potencies space and time, all quantitative and qualitative distinctions at work

¹⁷¹ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 12, *SW* II/1, 294. As Schelling himself mentions, the image of a hunger for being has been present in his thought for many years – at least since the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* of 1810 (see e.g. *SW* I/7, 466). Cf. the idea of an “infinite lack” that gives its title to Manfred Frank's influential study of Schelling, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein. Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik*.

within it, determinate material objects, as well as the various categories of the inorganic and the organic.

Reconstructing this program, which the *Philosophische Einleitung* only sketches in sparse strokes, in the required detail would be an extensive task, let alone speaking to its viability and validity. This cannot be undertaken here. What must be remembered, however, is that our discussion has still not left the realm of the logical or negative. Our leading question, meanwhile, was not how in the late philosophy the constellation of the potencies allows us to construct, from the ground of the *Urwesen* up, the world as we know it. It was rather to understand what the intrinsic limits of negative philosophy – now in its ambitiously recast Schellingian form – exactly are, how we are to understand the need for a historical or positive philosophy at its side, and how finally a transition between the one and the other is to be envisaged and pushed through.

One result, in any event, we have been so far fruitlessly pursuing. In order to anchor the reality of being in the necessity of thought, negative philosophy seeks to found itself upon the idea of a necessary being. This idea it does indeed find, but not in the hoped-for way: the necessary being is that being which exists, if it exists, in a necessary rather than contingent fashion. Schelling's reading of the transcendental ideal and the doctrine of the potencies developed from it have done nothing to change this result. Philosophical thought that goes out in a purely rational fashion to grasp *what there is* finds that it encounters at its own limits the undifferentiated, pre-determinate, unprethinkable being. This *unvordenkliche Sein* thought can subsequently be unfolded by thinking how it gives way to the dynamic of the potencies: this begins with the *primum cogitabile* that is the first potency, the pre-

propositional elementary subject that in its pure capacity to be is fundamentally a lack, a hunger for being; only when it comes together with the pure determination of the second potency or object in the unity that is the pure subject-object does the logico-ontological realm of determinate things establish itself.

If this model is accurate, then negative philosophy can describe *how* this development would take place and how it gives rise to the world in all its determinations as we know it. What it cannot do is show *why* the potencies should indeed come together, or *that* they do. From the point of view of strictly a priori negative philosophy this can only be accepted as a groundless metaphysical fact that predates its operations; the potencies as the ground of all being cannot themselves be further grounded. *That* the dynamic of the potencies should be set in motion is in other words radically contingent, and the rational construction of the world that follows from it is no more than contingently necessary. The task of a positive philosophy will therefore be to display how, if indeed there is a world, this brute metaphysical fact can be understood as God's free act of creation.

Yet this conclusion is still no more than schematic, and only gives a glimpse of the formal nature and task of positive philosophy. It remains unclear why the content of positive philosophy should be historical in the double sense sketched in the opening of this chapter: why, to state the matter somewhat plainly, it should concern itself with such earnest intent with books that have merely come down to us in history, or with the stories of the Gods and of God they recount.

Nor are we, after the slow and torturous examination to which we have put the God of the philosophers, and after briefly witnessing the speculative flashes the doctrine of the

potencies gave off, much wiser when it comes to the way such a positive philosophy proceeds. Why should there be anything left for philosophy to do than to admit that despite our successes in grasping *what there is*, there remains a being which our thought needs but cannot demonstrate the actual necessary existence of? Were we to accept that the doctrine of the potencies does indeed allow us to see how the infinite ground opens up to produce the field of finite being that we know, should it be so hard to accept the unexplained and inexplicable contingency of being that Schelling's negative philosophy argues underlies it all?

To come to understand this, one particular aspect of Schelling's negative philosophy that has gone unmentioned so far has to be brought out finally. For hitherto we have witnessed nothing but a certain experience of thought – not my experience or yours, but the arduous yet rarified attempt of thought itself thinking *what there is*. But what of the human being and its place and role within this whole? The birth hour of negative philosophy had, it will be remembered, been when Descartes demanded unshakable certainty for thought, and in pursuing it while sitting by the fire quite lost touch with where and who he was. That it was, in a sense, an historical achievement for reason to become free like this of the impositions of outer authority has already been argued. But reason's freedom swiftly became reason's prison. Even in the artful form of Schelling's negative philosophy, where thought not merely discovered an unprethinkable being it could only accept, but came back from this experience with the a priori principles from which the world of finite beings might be constituted, we have not yet encountered – ourselves.

For this, we first need to turn back to what is at the heart of the dynamic of the potencies. For it is here that a trace became visible of a certain concept of the will at work,

and it is the will which will provide the argumentative thread the negative philosophy will follow at its end to overcome the obsessive attention to the being of beings that has held it and move back to the being that lives this obsession – the being that, with Heidegger, is in its being concerned with being, the being that we are. If the negative philosophy is the logico-ontological enterprise that presents the “mediated self-mediation” of thought,¹⁷² that is, if thought determines itself in the experience of encountering being as its other, then the anthropologico-ontological question must arise what this means for the being that forms the joint of this movement.

The concept of the will emerged in the first discussion of the doctrine of the potencies in the twelfth lecture of the *Philosophische Einleitung*. Its purpose there is, as we saw, to explain what it might mean that the first potency in its isolation from the other two is merely subject, nothing but the purely indeterminate but determinable bearer of predication. This *reines Können*, this pure ability is like a willing that is in a state of indifference, does not go out of itself, does not strive. But if the potencies are taken dynamically, it appears on the other hand as that which lacks being, and hungers for it. In the seventeenth lecture this thought is elaborated as follows:

As the potency relates to its own being as being able to [*reines Können*], and as all

¹⁷² The notion that Schelling’s late philosophy presents the figure of a “vermittelte Selbstvermittlung” is the thesis of Walter Schulz’s classic study *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*. The Achilles’ heel of Schulz’s interpretation is that it blends out the positive philosophy; the thesis is perfectly defensible on the basis of the negative philosophy alone, which then indeed becomes something like an modified Hegelianism, which even in acknowledging an outside to reason lets reason recognize itself in this encounter with its other and thereby accomplish itself. If this were the point, then the positive philosophy would indeed be redundant.

being able [*Können*] is nothing but a *willing that is at rest* [*ein ruhendes Wollen*], it will therefore be a *willing* in which the potency elevates itself [*sich erhebt*], and the transition [*Übergang*] will be none other than the one each of us perceives in ourselves when making the transition from not-willing to willing. The old dictum here has its place: “Original being is willing” [*das Ursein ist wollen*], willing is not merely the beginning but also the content of the *first* being in its coming to be [*des ersten, entstehenden Seins*].¹⁷³

The thesis that at base being is nothing other than the will Schelling has, as we have seen, explicitly defended since the *Freiheitsschrift*. There too there was an innate relation, be it one of harmony or strife, between the divine and the human will.

The late philosophy incorporates these ideas within its systematic purposes. Next to the three potencies, God is described as “that which stands above every potency, which to being [*dem Seienden*] is the cause of being [*Ursache des Seins*] and which itself is pure actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]” and is given the symbol A⁰.¹⁷⁴ To be sure, this phrase requires careful handling if we want to avoid the suggestion that at this point the late philosophy has begun to slowly shed its outward philosophical trappings and reveal its dogmatic theological core. God is here merely invoked as the contingent and inscrutable event that sets the dynamic of the three potencies into motion. It follows, now as before, from Schelling’s allegiance to the insight of Kant’s critical philosophy that nothing can be said rationally as to the actuality of God. Negative philosophy as the a priori investigation of principles cannot know God other than as this event, even as it cannot reduce God to it either; having instigated the movement,

¹⁷³ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 17, SW II/1, 388.

¹⁷⁴ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 17, SW II/1, 391.

His role in the negative philosophy is effectively played out.

That of the human being is only beginning, however. The finite soul Schelling labels *a*⁰.¹⁷⁵ This is a first step towards a theory of how the divine will, which negative philosophy knows only as the logically inscrutable event which must precede the movement of the potencies, or as the contingency at the root of there being a logico-ontological space at all, is to be related to the freedom of the human will. For of course in the most straightforward sense, the only force of the will we are acquainted with is that which is manifest in our own desires and actions. If we are “made in God’s likeness”, that is because the way in which our actions are not caused by the world around us, but *can* at least spring from our own spontaneity, and this is the only *analogon* we can avail ourselves of to understand the evenemental moment in which a world of meaning is opened up.¹⁷⁶

Yet the account of this analogy is subtle and differentiated in steps; for the moment, we are not yet confronted with fully-fledged human subjectivity in a world. For what is needed first is an account of how such subjectivity could arise. And in this account, we are

¹⁷⁵ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 18, *SW II/1*, 417.

¹⁷⁶ In fact, the relationship between God and soul is introduced not through the question of freedom, but by the way they each relate to what they inhabit: just as God fully *is* the original being in the idea (though at the same time is more), so too the immaterial human soul fully enters into the material world by being embodied, and in this sense the human soul is not a mere *Abbild* or defective copy, but the *Gleich- und Ebenbild* of God (*SW II/1*, 417).

This Schelling also expresses this by saying with Aristotle that God is the first τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, just as the soul is the second. On τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι as the fourth (final) cause that sets in motion the potencies, themselves corresponding to the material, formal, and effective cause, see the seventeenth lecture (*SW II/1*, 386f). It remains opaque what it would mean to say, as Schelling does, that the soul relates to finite beings as God relates to original beings. What must go into this question is the transitive use here made of “to be” (*SW II/1*, 418-19).

still dealing not with anything resembling an actually existing finite world, but with a world of ideas that comes about through the unfolding of the potencies; in other words, we are dealing here with the Neoplatonic question of why there should be anything but a world of ideas at all, and how by contradistinction the material world with which we are familiar might be said to arise.

In ways we have not traced here in detail, the potencies do not simply snap into place and open up into the world as we know it, but through many mediating steps traced in the *Philosophische Einleitung* specify a world of nature out of the idea. This, Schelling's last *Naturphilosophie*, slowly then approaches the question of how from the lower forms of nature a process of anthropogenesis takes place. This is answered through a philosophical analysis which, though it does not *expressis verbis* mention it, is inspired by the Biblical account of the Fall – a story that has preoccupied Schelling since his dissertation on freedom and evil in Genesis 3.¹⁷⁷

The finite soul, then, is not to be mistaken for the sort of being that we are. It is the natural union of the material and the immaterial, and calmly remains a reflection of the divine will. It is only when the soul breaks with this union and asserts itself against the order of nature that soul becomes spirit, no longer a simple outflow of the divine but an independent will that is, precisely in its independence from the natural process resulting from the potencies, “like God”. Spirit is this discontinuity, this break in nature, that takes

¹⁷⁷ It must be emphasized that unlike in the positive philosophy, we are not dealing here with a philosophical reading of a Biblical account, but with an a priori philosophical theory which subtly alludes to it; this distinction, whether ultimately stable or not, is of importance to the methodological self-understanding of the late philosophy.

place when the will chooses to embrace itself as nothing but its own *act*, as a miniature *causa sui* or Fichtean *Tathandlung*. If it spurns its origin in God, however, that does not mean spirit is *ipso facto* unjust. It is only in this self-assertion against a universal natural order that one the one hand finite spirit becomes possible, and that on the other we arrive at a world “outside God”, that we can speak of a material world outside of the idea.

Only now, then, when the negative philosophy has developed an account of the conceptual distinctions necessary for there to be something like spirit, and shown the way that through its act of self-determination it has asserted its previously diffuse identity as independent, does something like finite human subjectivity come into view in the twentieth lecture of the *Philosophische Einleitung*. The thread of this development has been spun by the will, and it is the will which now manifests itself as spirit:

Originally spirit [*Geist*] even in its widest sense is nothing theoretical [...] originally it is rather willing, that is to say, merely willing [*das nur Wollen*] is for the sake of willing, which does not will something, but wills only itself (though that which wills and that which is willed are the same, these are nevertheless to be distinguished).¹⁷⁸

The distinction between willer and willed is of importance here, because it is not as the will that only craves itself and rests motionless in this craving, but in actual spirit (*wirklicher Geist*) that we finally now see something resembling the human subject; what is constitutive of the spirit in this form is not that it *asserts* itself in craving, but that it asserts *itself*, the spirit “which *has* itself, the conscious spirit, which has its being *only* in knowing itself, in the I am

¹⁷⁸ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 20, SW II/1, 461.

[...]”.¹⁷⁹

Spirit began in will; it now turns to knowledge. Why should this shift take place? Before turning away from the divine and towards itself, the soul as the seamless individual outgrowth of nature was in harmony with and touched by the highest idea. In asserting its independence as spirit, it has lost all but the faintest trace of this idea, and the material world as we know it, now outside of God and outside of the idea, appears to it as a barrier between the original idea as object of desire and spirit itself. Only through knowing can it attempt to restore this lost connection.

As we have sketched here merely in outline, a purely rational thought, such as Schelling’s negative philosophy understands itself to be, seeks to grasp *what there is* as the idea of a necessary being, but it finds at its limit the idea of being that precedes all thought because it can only be described as a contingent event, a pure act. This pure act – about which negative philosophy cannot as much as know *that* it took place, and is therefore forced to treat as unavoidable yet hypothetical, its ungrounded ground – sets in motion the hunger for being at the root of the potencies. What began as the abstract desire to know, as thought as such grasping being as such, becomes critically inflected as a metaphysics of the will when,

¹⁷⁹ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 20, *SW* II/1, 462. The desire of spirit to have itself as its own act of self-positing – not yet, at this level, a practical act, but the *Tathandlung* that first institutes spirit – Schelling compares to Prometheus’ defiance of Zeus (II/1, 481-483). Like the spirit in its act of self-assertion, Prometheus is on the one hand divine and brings to mankind all science – read, without Fichtean self-positing no true philosophy is possible – and yet Prometheus sides with mankind in opposing the divine and asserting mankind’s independence from its Gods. Blumenberg provides a (distinctly hostile) reading of this passage in *Arbeit am Mythos* (625-632). On Blumenberg’s theory of myth see Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth*, which unfortunately only briefly discusses Schelling (53-56).

drawing the idea of a pure act into its understanding of the unfolding of being, it recognizes that original being is nothing but the will. This is where Schelling's own negative philosophy makes its decisive advance over his predecessors Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant – even where, methodologically, it itself remains a purely conceptual first philosophy. The will, however, is now manifest in finite spirit, which posits itself in independence, but in so positing itself loses its rootedness in the original will, and finds its own being which it seeks to assert as inexplicable, as merely contingent, and cut off from its ground of being. The desire to know which now comes to animate it, the will to assert itself by having itself in the knowledge of the *I am*, is when seen in the light of this unfolding of the will a substitute.

Such knowledge is not yet philosophical knowledge as we know it and have seen formulated in the Cartesian *cogito*, however. Spirit's desire to have itself by knowing itself first articulates itself as the practical striving to assert itself in the world. For spirit's theoretical approach to having itself, having cut itself off from the original idea, cannot recognize itself in and through the mere material world around it – in comparison with the steady givenness of that world it can only appear to itself as merely accidental.¹⁸⁰ Spirit, one might say, has not yet come to the Kantian insight of an ideal of reason which structures the world and is the rational presupposition for that finite world to be even thought.

But spirit's desire to have itself, and have itself as a *causa sui*, as nothing but its own

¹⁸⁰ Unlike the Spinozist idea of the necessary being, the *causa sui* that is spirit can “only be said to be, not to be said to be necessarily; in this sense it is originally accidental [*urzufällig*], the original accident itself [*der Urzufall selbst*], where a great distinction is to be drawn between what is accidental through something else, and what is accidental through itself, which has no cause outside itself and from which first all other accidental things are derived” (*Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 20, SW II/1, 464).

deed, can be practically inflected. And in this sphere it indeed appears to itself as pure self-determination. This desire for self-determination first articulates itself as the project of constructing from nothing but its own resources a commonwealth of spirits brought together in a state. Schelling's analysis of this political striving occupies the twenty-second and -third lectures, and would require extensive discussion. Its result, however, is straightforward and unequivocal. The state is necessary, for only in and through it does spirit become a *person*, no longer the mere idea of a self-causing independent entity, but a social being that lives under the law. But the law of the state, necessary though it is, remains a Procrustes bed for all personality, a violent imposition that cannot take its individuality as individual into account.¹⁸¹

Turning away from the state, however, does not solve the fundamental unhappiness of the I, which from soul and spirit now has become person. What makes it a person is that the state, while imposing the general law, leaves it free to cultivate its personal virtues that go beyond what the state demands.¹⁸² When the person understands the state as a mere precondition of its freedom and seeks to determine itself beyond what is outwardly

¹⁸¹ The state is the precondition and basis of freedom (*Vorbedingung* and *Grundlage*, SWII/1, 250) of the person, but precisely as such not the actualization of freedom – for freedom, as Schelling has argued since the *Freiheitsschrift*, lies not in rational self-determination through the establishing of an order in reality, but in the re-establishment of the connection between the personal will and the original will from which it stems.

Here, in contradistinction to the Hegelian concept of the state as God on earth (see e.g. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, §270), Schelling remains true to the idea of the *Älteste Systemprogramm*, whose author he may or may not have been: the state is something mechanical, and can only treat free people as cogs in its machinery (Hegel, *Werke* 1:234). Needless to say, Hegel's much-maligned theory of the state would require extensive discussion and cannot be disqualified on the basis of this phrase as *corpus delicti*.

¹⁸² This distinction not accidentally reflects Kant's distinction in the *Metaphysics of Morals* between a theory of law, a *Rechtslehre*, and a theory of virtue, a *Tugendlehre*.

demanded by the law of the state, it finds in its own virtues as a higher law within itself. This saves it from being determined merely by the state, which crushes individual freedom, but now brings it under the rule of an even fiercer despot, the moral law. For where the state demands only conformity and outward obedience, the moral law demands being followed for its own sake; where one might run from the state, none can run from the law carved into the heart. It is at this point that Schelling mobilizes the force of the Paulinian critique of the law for negative philosophy:

Here now it comes fully to light, what the I got itself into when it withdrew itself from God. Separated from God, it is caught under the law, as a force distinguished from God; it cannot get out from under it, for it is fully bent under its weight, nor can it fight it off, for the law is, so to say, woven into and stuck into its will. Nor can the I rejoice in itself under the law. Displeasure and revulsion at the law [*Unlust und Widerwillen gegen das Gesetz*] are its first and natural sensation, one all the more natural the harder and more inhumane the law appears. For as general and impersonal it can do little else than be hard, – as a power of reason which knows so little of personality that it will not leave an iota undone for the sake of the person, and even when its demands are *fully* complied with, does not give any thanks (even when everything is done, the servants are still useless). Even *being commanded* would not be so unpleasant, if only it came from a person, but to be thrown under the feet of an impersonal power is something the I cannot bear. The one who wants to be *himself* sees himself subject to the universal.¹⁸³

Schelling rigorously opposes Kant's understanding of the moral law as both my own rational self-determination and yet the will of God; for on the one hand, the I has in the act of self-positing declared its independence from God, and precisely that which make its self its *own*, that which makes up its personhood, is not generalizable under the law. Bent under this

¹⁸³ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 554.

curse, the I comes to see its whole existence as worthless.

Yet the humiliation the I suffers at the hands of the law of reason it has itself imposed is salvific. For fleeing the world of action in which it can do nothing but wrong, conscience itself makes it retreat into contemplation, and it is through contemplation that it begins to find a way back to the God it had abandoned when asserting itself as *causa sui*. This abnegation of the I Schelling describes as spirit retreating into itself so that soul may once more emerge to touch God:

With this step out of active [*aus dem tätigen*] into contemplative life, it *at the same time moves over to God's side*: without knowing of God, it seeks a godly [*göttliches*] life in this ungodly [*ungöttliche*] world, and as this seeking happens in giving up selfhood, through which it had separated itself from God, it manages once more to come in touch the divine itself [*mit dem Göttlichen selbst sich wieder zu berühren*]. For spirit, which contracts into itself, makes room for soul, and the soul is by its nature that which can touch God. It is the actual [*eigentliche*] θεῖον in its nature, which here comes to the fore. This happens not in the species [*in der Gattung*], but *only in the individual*.

To which Schelling adds in a telling footnote:

“The species or the race [*die Gattung oder das Geschlecht*] has only an indirect relationship to God, namely in the *law*, in which God is only potentially for him, that is, in which God is enclosed [*eingeschlossen*], only the individual has a direct relationship to God, can *seek* him and, when he reveals himself, receive him.¹⁸⁴

The way back to touching God now appears in three stages, which although they seem to deserve lengthy treatment each are only given the merest of mention, without any

¹⁸⁴ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 556.

development. The first stage is that of piety – the inward motion to turn the I and the world to nothing. The second is art, where spirit gives way not to create out of itself, but to let the image of the divine emerge out of the impersonal and unconscious depths of the soul. The third and highest is philosophical contemplation, where like in Aristotelian θεωρία the I finds again the God it had lost in its practical endeavors, and rejoices in its calm perfection.

This might seem like a peaceful triumph. In truth, however, it is a double defeat. First of all, the contemplative life cannot provide the remedy, because the retreat from active life into contemplation cannot be sustained:

In this merely ideal God, the I might in a way find its rest, if contemplative life could be the end of the matter [*wenn es beim beschaulichen Leben bleiben könnte*]. But this is what is impossible. Giving up on action is not something that can be sustained; one *has* to act [*es muß gehandelt werden*]. As soon as the active life sets in again, and reality renews its claim [*die Wirklichkeit ihr Recht wieder geltend macht*], the ideal (passive) God no longer suffices, and the previous despair [*Verzweiflung*] comes back. For the conflict [*Zwiespalt*] has not been resolved [*aufgehoben*].¹⁸⁵

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the very idea of the beatific vision of a highest being is where the serpent of negative philosophy bites its tail. For the God of contemplation that philosophy reaches is, as the history of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant showed, merely God as idea – it cannot know God's actuality, let alone entertain a relation to Him, and we have merely arrived once more at the historical result of negative philosophy. This was the destructive conclusion that pure, a priori reason cannot know anything about God, other than presuppose Him as the groundless ground whose pure act sets the unfolding

¹⁸⁵ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 560.

of an otherwise Godless world in motion. In this sense, negative philosophy remains “the destruction of the idea [*die Zerstörung der Idee*]”.¹⁸⁶ What we have gained is an understanding of why it is that philosophy – or much rather philosophers – seek an answer to this question to begin with. A philosophy of pure reason is, without a doubt, the authentic expression of the human need to find its place in the world and in so doing overcome the time-bound and contingent nature of our existence. It is neither to be dismissed as logically incoherent nor to be snubbed. But it is of no use; out of this stone, no bread can be made.

Conclusion

Negative philosophy began as thought seeking being and ends, it would seem, in the resigned admission of ignorance. Pure reason leaves us with the realization that *what there is* as a whole and as such cannot be the object of our knowledge, as an unfathomable yet inescapable contingency lies at its base.

Yet this is not the last word. What Schelling’s negative philosophy has argued is not merely that God remains an inscrutable event that precedes and eludes the grasp of pure reason. It has also attempted to show that, like its divine counterpart, so too the human being cannot be understood, cannot come to understand itself, other than as grounded in an ontology of the will. Neither the certainty of theoretical reason nor the lawfulness of practical reason are adequate to what, according to this ontology of the will, we are – not an isolated “I am” contemplating God, not a vessel for thought thinking itself, not a soul in a given

¹⁸⁶ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 566.

harmony with nature, not an act of self-legislative self-sufficiency, but a *person*. And it is as a person that we nevertheless now have a way forward.

Already the meaning of the contemplative life was no other than to penetrate through the universal and to the personal. For person seeks person. By means of contemplation however the I could at best find the idea again, and therefore also only the God enclosed in the idea, in reason, in which he cannot move; but it could not find the God who is outside and above reason, for whom is possible what was impossible for reason, namely to free the I from the law, that is, from reason. This God the I now wants; though the I cannot give itself the vocation [*sich den Beruf zuschreiben*] to win him, God must with his help *come to our aid* [*mit seiner Hülfe entgegenkommen*], but it can want him, and hope through him to be granted blessedness [*Seligkeit*], a blessedness which none have deserved, as neither ethical action nor contemplative life was able to span the chasm, therefore not a proportional blessedness, as Kant would have it, but an undeserved, therefore incalculable and exuberant one.¹⁸⁷

The fervent crescendo to which Schelling's rhetoric rises here might well make one think that beyond the "destruction of the idea" which negative philosophy performs lies, at best, something like the exercise of faith, hope, and charity – but little in the way of *Wissenschaft*, no grounds for the attempt of understanding *what there is* systematically. And yet, this was meant precisely to be the promise of a *philosophia duplex* armed with both logical reason and its historical counterpart. Where is the historical reason of which the *System der Weltalter* had made so much?

In fact, it has already been announced. Negative philosophy, as the first and presuppositionless science, may not have achieved complete knowledge of the all, but it *has* produced a last desired object – the God who eludes the chains of necessity, whose radical

¹⁸⁷ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 566-67.

freedom must be understood as evenemental, who may in the final account be said to be nothing other than the event itself. If God is, per Schelling's insistence, a person, then it is this evenemental character which earns him that title. But if personhood is understood by personhood, by person actually relating to person, then the history of religious consciousness is the place where such a relation might be found and comprehended: "For person seeks person".¹⁸⁸

A positive philosophy, then, scrutinizes this history of religious consciousness as a linked series of manifestations of a relationship between the human and the divine, between our freedom and its ungrounded ground, that is not conceptual but real – real here not, needless to say, as opposed by unreal; a real relationship to the divine is one that is anchored deeper than reason, and not one that can be simply qualified as true or false. That an understanding of the history of such relations is a genuine philosophical need, rather than an exercise in antiquarianism, can be understood only on the basis of negative philosophy. That it is possible remains to be seen. It is Schelling's heuristic gamble that the same principles that structured the negative philosophy, the potencies, should form a key to understanding this history of religious consciousness as the self-manifestation of the divine

¹⁸⁸ As we have seen, person seeking person cannot be a contemplative exercise; neither can it be, in any straightforward sense, a practical one – to the extent, that is, that the practical means for Schelling, in its good Kantian sense, life under the moral law, which inherently crushes the individual.

Nevertheless, Schelling does say that what would be needed is a *conversion* based on a *practical impetus*: "Rational philosophy [*Vernunftwissenschaft*, i.e., negative philosophy] does therefore in fact lead beyond itself and drives one to a conversion [*treibt zur Umkehr*]; but this of course cannot proceed from thinking. For this, instead a practical impetus [*praktischer Antrieb*] is needed [...]" ; this practical impetus is then linked explicitly to the will (*Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 565).

as well. To what extent the worries articulated above, that the scheme of the potencies can only make such a history a pre-determined teleological pursuit – and one likely to end in Golgotha, at that – rather than a genuinely open-ended, structurally incomplete movement of freedom, will likewise remain to be seen.¹⁸⁹

Having exhausted the logical, let us now turn to the revealed.

¹⁸⁹ It can be noted for now, though, that Schelling explicitly understands the potencies not as a logical progress: “Aber zwischen den beiden Endpunkten der ursprünglichen und der wiederhergestellten Einheit liegt, entsprechend den verschiedenen möglichen Stellungen der Ursachen [i.e. the potencies] gegeneinander, eine unerschöpfliche Möglichkeit von Gestaltungen des reinen Seienden, von denen wir doch nicht sagen können, ob sie wirklich sein werden, aber die wir doch unserer Aufgabe gemäß als Möglichkeiten unterscheiden müssen” (*Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 17, *SW II/1*, 386).

Chapter Four: Being Revealed, Twice

Introduction

Schelling's contention, we have seen, is that a purely rational philosophy consequently pursued will be driven to a fundamental aporia it cannot overcome, a central antinomy between what follows from reason itself by necessity on the one hand, and what consciousness craves and demands on the other. As we have also seen, this antinomy first comes fully to the fore through a purely rational negative philosophy. While negative philosophy can *conceptually* grasp whatever might be found in the world, it is incapable of making any claims regarding existence, for these depend by their very nature on experience. Most importantly, it cannot show, though by its own lights it must, that the highest object which it strives to comprehend as much as exists. This object is God.

Now it may seem odd to think, as Schelling manifestly does, that the inherent object of philosophy is God. Yet the claim is based on the notion that a philosophical account of *what there is*, in its most universal sense, is necessarily concerned with *the whole* of what makes up the world. Though the thorny question of his relationship to ancient philosophy is one we have purposefully avoided here, Schelling believes that it is a good solid idea of Plato's that only in the light of such a whole of being, individual claims of discursive knowledge can be grounded.¹⁹⁰ This whole, precisely because it lies before any discursive determination, is itself not discursively accessible; it discloses itself only to the intuition or *nous*.

The history of modern philosophy as Schelling understands it is the attempt to make good on this Platonic desire of reason to grasp the whole of being as such and in so doing provide a foundation for all knowledge. This whole of being is the abstract, universal, and eternal God of the philosophers. In other words, it is Schelling's leading assumption that all philosophy is hitherto, in the term coined by Kant and of great consequence to Heidegger, either furtively or openly, onto-theological: it seeks to understand the totality of what there is, all of being, as itself in turn a being – but a being which springs from pure reason alone.

It is as Spinoza's one substance, the *deus sive natura* which has obsessed Schelling philosophically since his earliest work, that this God of the philosophers takes on perhaps its sharpest contours. For it is Spinoza who explicitly claims that all things are in God, the unconditioned whole from which all entities take their being. And as God and all things are one, so too is he submitted to the universal principle of individual entities – that nothing is

¹⁹⁰ On the Platonic doctrine of the παντελῶς ὄν and the way it serves as the point of departure for Schelling's reading of the history of modern philosophy, see Gabriel, *Der Mensch im Mythos*, 54-103.

without a cause. To Spinoza's consequent rationalism God must thus be *causa sui*. If this is the case, then God cannot be thought not to exist; his existence is contained in his essence.

Here however a fundamental problem in the onto-theological program of philosophy announced itself. For what philosophy strives for was by Schelling's lights to found the autonomy of reason, that is, to bring consciousness to complete self-transparency and in doing so release it from subjection to the dark forces beyond our understanding which hold sway over the mythic world. But Spinoza's God, who as the unity of being and thought seems to be the embodiment of such a consciousness, is not in any substantive way free himself. He is nothing than his own existence, to which he is blindly shackled. What most seems to guarantee his existence – that in the purity of his concept he cannot but exist – in fact becomes a testament to his impotence, for he cannot help but be. This unfree God of reason, who was meant to liberate us from prejudice and ignorance, leaves us equally paralyzed.

Matters become worse yet for the necessary being which philosophy seeks once one takes in Kant's critique of the ontological argument. Kant's thirty *Thaler*, it will be remembered, are neither more nor less, whether they are real or merely imaginary; existence is not a real predicate, and so even a being to whom all perfections must be attributed need not exist. Thus what philosophy sought in a most perfect and necessary being – the sure knowledge that *what there is* is fundamentally and fully accessible to reason and at its disposal – is doubly frustrated: such a being not only could not be thought of as free, it cannot even on the strength of a priori reason alone be understood to exist. Even his own ideal of pure reason, necessary as it may be for reason to think if we are to have any cognitive grasp of the world at all, is swallowed up by what Kant calls the true abyss of reason.

The philosophical search for the unity of being through nothing but a priori reason fails, because it can at best produce a *concept* of God as the necessary being, the reality or actual existence of which negative philosophy can never itself substantiate. It is correspondingly helpless in the face of the question, why is there anything at all?

The negative philosophy, however, also ended in the programmatic statement that “person seeks person”. We are still significantly in the dark as to what this phrase purports to mean. The twists and turns of the anthropology with which the last lectures of the *Philosophische Einleitung* were concerned – the gradual a priori account unfolding how, through the stages of soul, spirit, and person, something like human consciousness could come to manifest itself in the world – ended with the *échec* that consciousness can be satisfied neither in the universalism of the moral law, which crushes its individuality, nor in the pure contemplative science of a first philosophy, which gives it God only in the idea. What instead was needed, Schelling expressed in unhelpfully vague terms: spirit contracting itself to make room for soul to once more to touch God; that is, to seek him and, should he reveal himself, receive him. This was not to be seen either as practical (practical reason, as the moral law, is the death of the individual) nor theoretically (a God in the idea is, in the final reckoning, no God at all), but rather as a *conversion* for which a practical impetus (*praktischer Antrieb*) was required – the *will*, that is, to have God, and to have him in freedom and in actuality. For if the dictum *Ursein is Wollen* holds, then it is through the radical freedom of our own will – however that is to be understood – that our way to the divine lies.

But if this were where the matter ended, then indeed the end of negative philosophy would be the end of the idea of systematicity in philosophy, and Schelling would, to put matters in somewhat blunt terms, be Kierkegaard; for it is hard not to conclude that every

move of Schelling's short-time, reluctant student seems perfectly pre-figured in the deeply Pauline religious-existential strain of the twenty-fourth lecture of the *Philosophische Einleitung*. Such an existential reading would have the advantage, perhaps, of acquitting the late philosophy from the accusation of being either a hubristically enthusiastic onto-theology or an exercise in dogmatic speculative theology, but it would not do much for the concept of a positive philosophy.

How then *is* the late philosophy meant to hang together? Though Schelling is at times equivocal about the matter, the fundamental position is that positive philosophy could not get off the ground without first having received its object from negative philosophy – the actually existing God whose act freely creates the world – or as one might say in a less religiously colored register the late philosophy does not avail itself of, the event. What the late philosophy requires is that this event be now thought in two senses. On the one hand it first opens up the logico-ontological space in which reason can operate, and which negative philosophy claims to have fully mapped out. But we must go further than this. What the event also does is, *sit venia verbo*, disclose a world. What this means to say is that an understanding of God that exceeds the boundaries of the logical, that investigates God as he appears in the historical, living relationship he has to human beings, is one in which the world appears as a plenitude of meaning within which human beings always already move; and this plenitude of meaning, as the background against which something like the logical can become possible, can on principle not itself be fully spelled out in propositional form; instead it is, in one sense or another, a symbolic rather than a semantic whole.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ On this distinction, see the opening of the fourth lecture of Manfred Frank's *Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie*, 107f.

There are admittedly grave dangers in applying too eagerly an Heideggerianizing vocabulary to Schelling's late philosophy, of which the master of Messkirch was not known to be an unqualified admirer. What is suggested here in the use of the term *world* will therefore have to be vindicated by a fuller reading of the positive philosophy. If we grant that negative philosophy has given positive philosophy its object – the God it could not grasp, God in actuality and freedom – the question becomes what its means of access to this object is. These means were indicated with the term the historical, or (as Schelling, unlike Nietzsche, is a logophile as well as a philologist) historical reason. What historical reason consists in, we will now see, is the investigation of God as he appears not in the constructions of the philosophers, but in the documents of religious tradition.

This can only prompt the immediate question why such documents should in any sense be the place to look for the truth about God which eluded pure reason. To return to the terms of our investigation, why is it that, *first*, such documents should be seen not as collections of colorful imaginings, the deceptions of a priestly class, a form of moral instruction, or the mask of the ideas of reason – and no doubt most religious traditions have, at one time or another, in one way or another, been some of these things – but as *revelation* of a highest truth? What is more, we must *secondly* ask, were we to grant that the documents of religious tradition – which for now we must intentionally leave in this vagueness – are indeed somehow forms or instances of revelation, what is it about such revelation that makes them both open to being unlocked by a positive philosophy, and in need of being so unlocked? Why, in other words, does religious practice and religious belief not simply suffice in and of itself as a response to “what we really want when we want God”, and why should it be that a positive philosophy through the exercise of historical reason should be to the

religious the required supplement, transformation, or *Aufhebung*? And *third*, should the answers the late philosophy has to provide to the above questions be satisfactory from the religious point of view, where does this leave the claims of philosophy itself? Is philosophical reason even in its historical mode not somehow bound to lay claim to a significance that goes beyond the particularity, even philosophically understood, of historically attested practices and beliefs? Is it not bound, at the risk of collapsing into an exploration of mere essayistic value, to attach itself to the universal even while taking the particular as revelation?

Over the course of the development of his positive philosophy, Schelling will give answers to these questions that deserve close scrutiny. Only in understanding these answers will it be possible to say in what way and to what extent the late philosophy gives credence to what this study designates as its fundamental, if as such never directly articulated, thesis – that there is an intrinsic connection between freedom and revelation, such that there is no freedom without revelation, no revelation without freedom. What has already been suggested by our exploration so far is that neither freedom nor revelation can be thought either on the basis of theoretical reason or practical reason, or at least by what Schelling understands by those in a broadly Kantian sense. It remains to be seen whether here, after all, such a thing as “religious reason”, or at least, a philosophical religion such as Schelling envisions as the final and lasting achievement of his philosophy, might be a feasible undertaking.

To approach these questions and see how an answer to them may be formulated by means of the resources of the late philosophy, we will here go through the three stages which are laid out for it: the philosophy of mythology (§1), the philosophy of revelation (§2), and a philosophical religion (§3). Throughout we will have to be wary of Schelling’s various uses

of the term revelation. In *one* sense, at least, it may be claimed against Schelling's clearly expressed judgment that both mythology on the one hand and revelation proper on the other – that is, Christianity – have at their base a more general notion of revelation as the event; in this sense, it will be argued, the positive philosophy shows God being revealed twice.

We will have to accept along the way, as before, that Schelling employs a vocabulary which invites misunderstanding as at times philosophically dogmatic, at times religiously dogmatic, at times both, and that he himself may even at times have fallen prey, in greater or lesser ways, to such misunderstandings himself. Whether such misunderstandings can be avoided, can be mended, or simply mar the project in the end, remains to be seen.

§1 Mythology

There are good reasons, both philosophical and political, to be wary of the topic of myth in general and perhaps of Schelling's philosophical treatment of this topic in particular. According to a long-established philosophical scheme, after all, to practice philosophy is precisely to refrain from telling stories (μῦθον διηγέσθαι), as Plato has Socrates put it in the *Sophist*.¹⁹² Though Plato, as the divine genius he is, may have excepted himself from this stricture, it would seem there is every reason *for us* at least to remember Kant's warning that philosophy is an affair of reason and is to be grounded in clear, solid concepts on the one hand, and the sobering light of experience on the other. Ignore this warning and we risk

¹⁹² 242c.

opening the gates to the *Schwärmerei* of metaphysics or, worse yet, to the blind forces of unreason.¹⁹³

One does not have to subscribe to Kantian epistemological strictness to take this warning seriously either. Walter Benjamin famously speaks of the task of the critic as taking *die geschliffene Axt der Vernunft* to the jungle of delusion and myth,¹⁹⁴ and even Heidegger inscribes his philosophy of being in a program to avoid “telling stories”, that is for him, transgressing the ontological difference between being and beings.¹⁹⁵ Whatever the role myth has to play in our historical, sociological, or anthropological understanding, there is according to this philosophical scheme no room for myth in philosophy, no genuine possibility of a philosophy of mythology.

Nor is this apparent epistemological insufficiency of myth – its arbitrary nature, its methodological unfoundedness, its resistance to raising the very question of true or false – the only philosophical reason one might have to shun its taint. The sphere of practical thought would seem at least from the point of view of modernity to be no less incompatible with the idea of myth. For it is a constitutive aspect of modernity as commonly conceived that human beings are not only *in principle* free, but have their highest calling in the *realization* of this freedom, and as such they cannot be held to be bound by any normative claim, any bearer of meaning that is merely given by history or imposed by society. This conception of freedom finds its strongest expression in the Kantian idea of autonomy – that

¹⁹³ *KrV* B128, B421.

¹⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V.570; see also I.162, II.165. On the question of Benjamin and myth, further see Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 164; 190.

¹⁹⁵ *Sein und Zeit*, 6. Derrida provides an interesting discussion of the avoidance of “telling stories” and Heidegger’s double quotation of the Sophist in *Heidegger: la question de l’Être et de l’Histoire*, 61f.

nothing can have the binding force of law for me unless I be able see it as a law I give myself. This idea of freedom as autonomy stands in direct and flagrant contradiction to the very notion of myth; for myth, as an opaque amalgam of stories about the origins and deeds of gods and men, represents by its nature a shared ground of meaning that, precisely as such a ground of all possible justification, cannot itself be questioned any longer. Myth, in other words, is not only epistemologically insufficient, it is normatively pernicious; for it cuts off my freedom as individual reasoner and imposes on me a collective ground of meaning that is not only unjustified but unjustifiable.

Schelling and his generation were well aware of such objections. That the last years of the eighteenth century should nevertheless develop a hankering for myth easily confused by the untrained eye for outright mythomania is not because they did not go to school in Kant's critical philosophy – quite the contrary. When the 1796/97 *Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* calls for a new mythology, a call echoed widely and taken up explicitly both by Schelling and Schlegel, it is precisely in the conviction that the project of Kant's transcendental philosophy could only be thought through to the end by unifying theoretical and practical reason in the form of an aesthetics – and the resultant mythology of reason, in service of the ideas, would not only solve the problems of philosophy, but bring about a new social harmony as well. The *Älteste Systemprogramm* thus speaks with boundless optimism of an all-encompassing aesthetic whole that is on the verge of being born: mythology will become philosophical, so that the people may become enlightened by reason; philosophy will become mythological so that the philosophers may become sensual;

and eternal unity rule as a result.¹⁹⁶ Similarly Friedrich Schlegel in his 1800 *Gespräch über die Poesie* sees in a new mythology the culmination of the great phenomenon of his age, idealism, from which steady point a revolution will go out to envelop all the arts and sciences.¹⁹⁷

Schelling himself in his 1800 *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* had spoken of mythology as the connection between *Wissenschaft* – that is, philosophy – and poetry, a connection that had existed in Antiquity and now, he hoped, might be restored. But if such a mythology were to be not a mere invention of an individual poet, but to speak for the whole age, it is not clear how, precisely, it could come about.¹⁹⁸

Kant, it might be said, had with the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* himself set up the desideratum of a new mythology. For though for Kant we cannot *know* substantively that there is a place for my normative freedom to be realized in a phenomenal world otherwise inhospitable to spontaneous causation, the experience of the beautiful nevertheless *hints* or *indicates* that there is in the very least a *potential* harmony between the causally determined world we find ourselves in and the spontaneity of the self-legislating I. A new mythology

¹⁹⁶ See Hegel, *Werke*, 1:234-35. Of the voluminous nature on this peculiar document, the sixth lecture (153f) of Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott* is particularly relevant to our discussion. Also see the collection of materials in Christoph Jamme and Helmut Schneider, *Mythologie der Vernunft. Hegels "ältestes Systemprogramm" des deutschen Idealismus*, which include the critical edition and inter alia extensive documentation of the scholarly controversy concerning the authorship and keys to its interpretation.

¹⁹⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 2:284-290. On the theme of a new mythology in Schlegel and the young Schelling, see Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott*, 181f.

¹⁹⁸ "But how a new mythology is itself to arise, which shall be the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race, personifying, as it were, one single poet – that is a problem whose solution can be looked for only in the future destinies of the world, and in the course of history to come" (*System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, SW I/3, 629; tr. Heath, 232-33).

then, if it were to carry to completion this Kantian insight, would in this sense be a mythology in the service of reason and fully saturated with it. Its task would be to employ the medium of aesthetic ideas not only to represent but *present* – that is, to actually bring about – the union of nature and spirit which Kant had only dared suggest we adopt as a rational hope.

This idea of a mythology of reason continues to pursue Schelling for many years. It leads him to threaten, at times, that he might cast his philosophical system in the form of a didactic poem in the vein of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, or a cosmological epic along the lines of Dante's *Commedia*.¹⁹⁹ A fundamental break in Schelling's thought occurs, however, when it dawned on him that the rational autonomy which both Kant's critical philosophy and his own transcendental idealism takes as the only principle of moral philosophy, finds itself unable to account for one fundamental phenomenon of moral life. This phenomenon, as we saw is that of *evil*.

Evil resist being understood in the categories of idealist practical philosophy, at least in its Kantian and Fichtean guise, because it makes freedom and the moral law reciprocally entail one another: to be free is to impose upon one's self the moral law, and to practice the moral law is to be free. If this is the case, then one cannot account for a deed that is both free and yet is not an exercise in rational autonomy. Now if there is such a thing as a freely undertaken act of evil, and if it is to be intelligible to us, then the freedom of the will cannot be directly and unambiguously coupled with the moral law. But that would be to accept the

¹⁹⁹ On Schelling's hopes of writing a great, all-encompassing philosophical poem, see Högrefe, *Prädikation und Genesis*.

idea that freedom can equally manifest itself in a rebellious gesture to defy the moral order, in a titanic act of self-assertion.

This, as we have seen, has startling consequences for the whole of Schelling's thought. For if one is committed to the idea of the unity of nature and spirit, then both must in some sense be characterized by freedom. If freedom is not in its essence rational, however, this means that not only human beings stand under the temptation of the diabolical, but that nature itself must somehow carry within it a blind will to self-assertion. The picture of the natural world of Schelling's earlier philosophy had been one where forces form into matter, matter into organisms, and organisms ultimately into the bearers of self-consciousness, according to a harmonious, steadily unrolling scheme. Now nature – not nature as we find it in the world, but nature in its supersensible sense – becomes a pulsating force unbound from order. Where it had been the task of the new mythology to present in the form of aesthetic ideas the reconciliation of our knowledge of the world and our duty to create a normative order in it, now myth points not forward to a reconciliation, but back to the hidden being of nature in its resistance to reason. Rather than calling for a new mythology, Schelling now seems to celebrate an archaic one, one so far removed from reason that it seems altogether the embodiment of chaotic madness. Thus a passage from the 1815 version of the *Weltalter*, too striking not to quote at length, reads:

The ancients did not speak in vain of a divine and holy madness. [...] Panthers or tigers do not pull the chariot [*der Wagen*] of Dionysus in vain. For this wild frenzy of inspiration [*Taumel der Begeisterung*] in which nature was put by the sight of the being [*vom Anblick des Wesens*] was celebrated in the nature worship of prescient ancient peoples by the drunken festivals of Bacchic orgies. Furthermore, that inner self-laceration [*Selbstzerreißung*] of nature, that wheel of initial birth spinning about itself as if mad, and the terrible forces of the annular drive operating within this

wheel, are depicted in other frightful splendors of the primeval customs of polytheistic worship by acts of self-flaying rage. One such act was auto-castration (which was done in order to express either the unbearable quality of the oppressive force or its cessation as a procreative potency). There was also the carrying about of the dismembered parts of a lacerated God, or the insensate, raving dances, or the shocking procession of the mother of all gods on the chariot with iron wheels, accompanied by the din of a coarse music that is partly deafening and partly lacerating. For nothing is more similar to that inner madness than music, which, through the incessant eccentric relinquishing of and re-attracting of tones, most clearly imitates that primordial movement. Music itself is a turning wheel that, going out from a single point, always, through all excesses, spins back again to the beginning.

The greatest attestation of this description is that this self-lacerating madness is still now what is innermost in all things, and only when it is governed and, so to speak, verified [*zugutgesprochen*] through the light of a higher intellect, is it the real force [*eigentliche Kraft*] of nature and of all its products.²⁰⁰

This stark image of the heart of the Dionysus myth reads as a speculative philosophy of nature and a transcendental justification of madness at once. Read with an eye towards the future, it appears as a programmatic statement of much of the philosophy of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. And with that, the worries articulated above – that a philosophical turning towards myth is both epistemologically unwarranted and normatively nefarious –, which seemed momentarily allayed by the idea of a mythology of reason, are back in force. If human consciousness is only ever at best a partial and temporary excrescence of the blind will of nature to manifest itself, a little paper boat on the sea of infinite, eternal becoming, then it would seem we might as well give up on the concept of reason altogether.

²⁰⁰ *Die Weltalter*, SW I/8, 337-38; tr. Wirth, 102-103 (modified).

This, however, is by no means Schelling's intention. With Goethe's Mephistopheles,²⁰¹ he thinks no good is to be had from the abandonment of reason, and holds on to the necessity of its systematic form. If myth has in *some* sense a revelatory power for us, this revelatory power can only be unfolded and understood in a philosophical elaboration that although it is *concerned with* myth is not itself *mythical*. This is the task of Schelling's philosophy of mythology. We will have to see how Schelling fares in heading off the charge of irrationalism there. What is more, we will have to see how Schelling, whose rallying cry from the very beginning of his thought is that freedom is the alpha and omega of philosophy (as in the famous 1795 letter to Hegel), can precisely in turning to the chaotic, swirling world of myth, in which we are captive to forces beyond our ken, claim to be pursuing freedom in its deepest sense.

The *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* is Schelling's attempt to do justice to the *fact* of mythology. What could this mean? On the face of it, something altogether pedestrian. The fact of mythology is that the ancient world, for as far back as the philological and archeological record allows us to observe, told itself stories about the gods that go back before the dawn of human history. Critically, then, the term mythology is not a discourse on myths, but points to these myths themselves; it is not concerned with their poetic elaboration, however much it may be typical of the Greeks that their myths were present to them not merely as the background to their cultic practice, but

²⁰¹ Schelling often underlines his commitment to reason by alluding to Mephistopheles' famous "Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft" speech (*Faust*, v.1851f), which to my knowledge he first explicitly comments in his *Philosophie der Kunst* (SW I/5, 732).

also, and perhaps most vividly, in poetry.²⁰² These stories form, moreover, a *whole*; the colorful multitude of individual myths together make up a mythology, a tale of the world of the gods. This world is, of course, not a coherently singular world – the tales of the gods allow for endless variations and variants, escape dogmatic codification, and never comes to an end. This shifting nature, which makes it at the same time appear ancient and ever-new, is part of what makes it what it is. But precisely as such a world in flux, ever generating, ever adding, ever changing, it is the whole that it is. It is this primordial material with which the philosophy of mythology is concerned:

Meanwhile, it will belong to the preliminary understanding to note that mythology is being thought as a whole and that what is sought is the nature of this whole (thus, at first, not the individual representations). And, for this reason, only the *prima materia* comes into consideration in all cases. [...]"

This *Urstoff* then

"consists of occurrences and events that belong to an entirely different order of things (not only than the historical, but also the human one), the heroes of which are gods, an apparently indeterminate lot of religiously venerated personalities who form amongst themselves a particular world—one standing, to be sure, in multiple relation with the common order of things and of human existence, yet essentially split off from it and proper to itself: *the world of the gods*. To the extent that it is then seen that there are many of these religiously venerated beings, mythology is polytheism, and we will name this moment that initially offers itself for contemplation the *polytheistic* moment. By virtue of this, mythology is in general the *system of the gods*".²⁰³

²⁰² That mythology is not by nature poetic, Schelling finds confirmed by the "uncanny, excessive, in part even monstrous" nature of Indian and Egyptian mythology, which does not have the poetic form of Greek myth – but precisely thereby expresses the original truth of mythology more fully. See *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 1, SW II/1, 91; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 65.

²⁰³ *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 1, SW II/1, 6-7; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 9.

This fact of mythology – that the ancient world was smitten with the tales of the gods – must be qualified further. For is not incidental that the world of the gods should appear under the form of a tale; the gods are not abstract powers which are then clothed in personalities that in one way or another come to engage each other, but they appear precisely in and through being narrated. If mythology is a doctrine of the gods, it is one in the form of a *history* of the gods, the tale of their rising, their begetting of offspring, their struggles, and the ways in which one god wrests supreme power from his predecessor and casts him down. So Ouranos begets Kronos and is unmanned by him, only in turn to suffer defeat at the hands of his son Zeus and be shackled in Tartaros. The history of the gods is a theogony. Such a theogony is on the one hand *natural* – it pictures the gods as caught up in a cycle of life; on the other hand, it is *unfree*, for it is ruled by an inscrutable law of fate to which even the highest god is subject. If mythology is polytheistic, it is by Schelling's lights not so much because it recounts the story of many gods; there is after all only ever one god who rules supreme, and who in his might can tolerate his weaker brethren. The essence of polytheism is precisely the ever-turning wheel of *succession* of claimants to the tyranny of heaven.

This world of the gods, caught in a fated cycle of birth, begetting, and being cast down, is not merely a wondrous scene for the contemplation and delight of mankind. For the gods are inherently drawn to mortals, now looming threateningly, now guiding benignly, and hold sway over them. Feared or loved, they are the objects not only of awe but of veneration, if at times only to shield the worshiper from the wrath of the divine. Mythology is thus the form of polytheistic religious consciousness.

Nothing much has been decided in all of this as to where mythology comes from, what its true significance is, and in what way, if any, it might be said to have a relation to truth. That the ancient world is marked by such a religious consciousness is a claim few perhaps would challenge. The question for Schelling is how we explain this state of affairs; and it is his strong thesis that the only possible explanation is through a philosophy of mythology. In order to clear the way for a philosophical illumination of the ancient world's religious consciousness, he sets out to show how other explanations of myth fail to adequately address the depth of the matter.

The first such explanation would be to claim that mythology does not have a relationship to truth at all. It does not claim or assert anything, but is the fruit of the human fictional impulse; *Dichtung* rather than *Wahrheit*. This explanation can rely on the authority of Herodotus, who famously has it in the *Histories*:

But whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all had always been, and how they appeared in form, they [the Greeks] did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak; for I suppose Hesiod and Homer flourished not more than four hundred years earlier than I; and these are the ones who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods [θεογονίη] and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms.²⁰⁴

Such an explanation, however, is powerless to show how mythology as religious consciousness could ever take root. A true work of poetry is not a mere play of words but is grounded in a deeper concern; the fictional shaping of the history of the gods by Homer and Hesiod, through which the Greeks perhaps were in a first and eminent sense familiar with the divine, presupposes that there was already a religious consciousness to be so shaped, a

²⁰⁴ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* II.53; tr. Godley.

prior being-related to the gods, even if this may have been only in the form of a dark, inarticulate intimation. The poets may have *taught* the Greeks about the history of the gods, but they themselves can only have done so in drawing on an older religious awareness. Poetry is not myth, but its reception and transformation; that the gods are to *Homer* – if not to the characters inhabiting his epic – fictional beings shows that a measure of freedom has been achieved in the poetic form to distance one's self from the preceding subservience to the gods, a partial overcoming of their power. But this original power of the gods over human self-consciousness, in all the terror with which it strikes it, must have a principle more real than the thirst for spinning tales.

A second attempt at shedding light on the murky realm of myth is to admit there is truth to the tales of the history of the gods, merely not of the sort they appear to have; myth is *allegorical*, in that it says something else from what it seems, *allo agoreuein*.

The allegorical nature of myth can be taken to mean, with the ancient commentator Euhemeros, that the stories of the gods are transpositions into the divine realm of the events of human history; myths are at bottom embellished stories about famous men and women. Even if this were true of this mythic tale or that, however, it presumes that such a thing as the world of gods is already known; it stands powerless to explain how human consciousness came to be possessed by a mythic whole as such. This fundamental objection equally frustrates the allegorical reading of myth as the personification of moral virtues, as the hidden description of the physical world, or – as in Neoplatonism – as lightly disguised metaphysical principles.

All these allegorical readings of myth share with the poetic reading that they see myth as essentially an invention. But just as poetry is not the source of myth, but a liberating

distancing from it, so too allegory is a secondary development of mythic material. Despite what Herodotus seemed at first to suggest, Homer and Hesiod cannot be the beginning of Greek mythology, but the beginning of its end, one dissolving myth into poetry, the other into an ordered progression of principles which as a form of thinking paves the way for the natural philosophy of the Ionian school.

Refusing any and all attempts at an allegorical account of the truth of myth, as Schelling does here, goes well beyond the question of how one is to understand a few antiquated fables. For what it amounts to is ultimately a refusal of the idea that what human consciousness experiences and brings forth – in history, in art, or in religion – can be recuperated fully by philosophical reason. In this sense, Hegel's philosophy stands as perhaps the grandest attempt at *allegoresis* in the history of thought, one in which spirit finds in each and every thing it encounters only hidden versions of itself, cryptically distorted forms of its own rationality. Against such allegories of myth, Schelling insists that myth is to be understood strictly on its own terms, as an indelible unity of meaning and form, not as a rational core waiting to be exposed with a philosophical peeler knife.

Because consciousness chooses or invents neither the ideas themselves nor their expression, mythology emerges immediately *as such* and in no other sense than in which it articulates itself. In consequence of the necessity with which the *content* of the ideas generates itself, mythology has from the beginning a *real* and thus also *doctrinal* meaning. In consequence of the necessity with which also the *form* emerges, mythology is thoroughly actual [*eigentlich*]*—that is, everything in it is thus to be understood as mythology expresses it, not as if something else were thought, something else said. Mythology is not allegorical; it is tautegorical. To mythology the gods are actually existing essences, gods that are not something else, do not mean something else, but rather mean only what they are.*²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 8, SW II/1, 195-96; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 136.

To understand myth as tautology, in its origins rather than the state of being dissolved it shows itself in in Homer and Hesiod, we must take seriously the claim that myth expresses itself in a *religious* form of consciousness. Myth to religious consciousness is not a theory of what there is, nor is it its conscious artistic creation; consciousness finds itself already caught up in it, enveloped in all the reaches of its existence by it not only as storytelling, but moreover in the real forms of outward existence: in practices of cult, ritual, and sacrifice. Indeed, so bound to its gods is the religious consciousness that it is willing to perform for it the bloody sacrifice of its own life or that of others; it is clear

that an imperative authority was needed just as much to demand those sacrifices as to perform them; for example, to burn alive one's most beloved children for some god! [...] Only a *supernatural fact*, whose impression incessantly maintained itself in all the confusion, was able to impose silence on the natural feeling that was opposed to such unnatural demands.²⁰⁶

Being bound to such a world of myth cannot be explained on the grounds of a merely *ideal* relationship between a human being and the realm of the gods, that is, as if it were a particular object given to consciousness.²⁰⁷ The relationship between consciousness and the gods is a *real* one, and it is in this that the truth of mythology resides. Schelling therefore

²⁰⁶ *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 4, SW II/1, 83; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 61. Schelling comes to speak more concretely about child sacrifice in Canaanite practice – the *topheth* – in the 29th lecture of the *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in reference to Jeremiah 7. At stake in this discussion is how the ancient Israelites related to their polytheistic neighbors, and what to make in this light of the sacrifice of Isaac Abraham is commanded to perform in Genesis 22. See SW II/4, 128f.

²⁰⁷ “[M]ythology is not explicable from a merely ideal relationship in which consciousness stands to some object [*Gegenstand*]” (*Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 4, SW II/1, 77; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 58).

considers calling this awareness of the divine, which always already inhabits the religious consciousness rather than being the product of its own powers of invention, a *divine revelation*, a divine revelation being understood as a real relationship of God to human self-consciousness.²⁰⁸ The *fact* of mythology, which seemed the rather anodyne admission that people of yore took their mythology profoundly seriously, in any event turns out for Schelling to mean that to religious consciousness the gods of myth are a primal fact.

Clearly Schelling has taken great strides into the speculative here with only the most meagre of argumentation. For granted that the world of myth cannot be explained as the product of human poetic or philosophical ingenuity, granted even that myth is not an object of knowledge but can be explained only in its original relation to a religious consciousness, there is still a leap – which Schelling is not altogether willing to make – that therefore the religious consciousness that lives in awareness of myth must have acquired this awareness by divine revelation. From the mere fact that, historically, the men and women of the dimmer recesses of antiquity found themselves caught up in involuntary mythological imaginings to which they felt their lives so bound that they were willing to spill blood for it, it would sooner seem to follow that such religious consciousness is simply and hopelessly stuck in a fundamental error of deadly proportions. The phantom image of these gods of myth that

²⁰⁸ Even in mythology we are dealing with “a religious doctrine that would have been in mankind *independent* of human invention: such a doctrine could only be one *divinely* revealed. Thus, an entirely new domain of explanation as such would have been entered, for a divine revelation is a real relation of God to human consciousness. The *actus* of the revelation itself is a real event” (*Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 4, SW II/1, 83).

thirst for the blood of human sacrifice may have preoccupied barbarous times, but surely, one would be inclined to say, they cannot be real.

To this Schelling has a twofold answer. First, the force of myth over religious consciousness is real rather than ideal in the sense that it is constitutive of it and cannot be simply shaken off by an individual act of the will; it is not a thought being entertained, not even a necessary and all-encompassing one, but the background against which any conscious thoughts first become evaluable. Secondly, it is not clear that human consciousness could ever escape the religious constitutedness that characterizes it. In order to demonstrate such a possibility, it would have to be shown that a real relationship to the divine could be transformed without remainder into an ideal one, in other words, that the fullness of meaning that consciousness finds itself amidst could be fully and rationally spelled out. It is of course in the traits of such an attempt that one recognizes Hegel's philosophical project of absolute self-mediation.

It is not the task of the *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung* to refute the premises of such project – this, Schelling believes to have done in the negative philosophy, such as most fully contained in the *Philosophische Einleitung* we have looked at closely in the last chapter. Here, instead, he offers a counter-thesis. This thesis, developed in the eighth and ninth lectures, is that human consciousness as such is by its very nature *God-positing*,²⁰⁹ or in other words, we do not so much *have* consciousness of God – we *are* this consciousness. The concept of

²⁰⁹ The human being is “*natura sua* that which posits God” (*Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, eight lecture, *SW* II/1, 185; tr. Richey and Zisselsberger, 129). I abstract here from the questions, already in play in the eight lecture, of what *original* consciousness was like and in which way, according to Schelling, it must be thought as devoted to an *Urmonotheismus* which Schelling postulates before the polytheistic world.

positing here is not to be understood, it will be clear by now, as consciousness imagining or projecting or rationally asserting the existence of the divine, but as the fact that consciousness is what it is in virtue of a constitutive relationship to the divine, and its images of the gods are inscribed, so to say, on the inside of consciousness itself. To bring us back to the terms of philosophy: consciousness is first and foremost not *autonomous*; it is *theonomous*,²¹⁰ constituted by and receiving its law from the divine over and against which it finds itself. And just as the whirring dynamic of myth does not rest in itself in a stable way, but presents itself, driven by obscure fate, as the natural process of the rise and fall of gods, so too its consciousness is not a static given. The philosophy of mythology is in this sense a history of the religious consciousness in its successive transformations.

²¹⁰ This term I take from Gabriel's *Der Mensch im Mythos*. Gabriel operates with a constellation of three terms: autonomy, theonomy, and ontonomy. It is to be regretted that he nowhere systematically articulates this constellation, or explicitly ties it back to their history. Autonomy in Gabriel's use is not to be understood in the merely practical sense we find in Kant, of the rational agent determining himself through the self-given law of reason alone. It includes, at least, the theoretical aspect that thought as such determines itself fully. In *this* sense, a fully autonomous self-consciousness is prepared by Kant's Copernican turn, but only reached in Hegel's assertion that being is ultimately to be understood as the concept, therefore as nothing but thought. Against such a position, to say human consciousness is *theonomous* is to suggest that the religious dimension of consciousness cannot in this way be taken back into the concept, but remains as its unassimilable other. This unassimilable other that manifests itself to religious consciousness as the actual, free God is by Schelling's lights (in Gabriel's term) *ontonomous* in that the history of religious consciousness is at base the manifestation of the fundamental metaphysical fact that thought cannot restlessly assimilate being into itself, but remains bound to a horizon in which *what there is* is given.

The concept of theonomy such as Gabriel uses it is not without further ado to be assimilated to the role it plays in post-Kantian Protestant theology, where it is meant – whether it succeeds or not – to show that Kant's moral law, though it is self-given (autonomous) is nevertheless, and *in a higher sense, also* to be seen as God-given (theonomous). It is this sense of theonomy which Paul Tillich will inherit, in whose thought it will come to signify something close to Heideggerian authenticity. See Marc Boss, *Au commencement la liberté. La religion de Kant réinventée par Fichte, Schelling et Tillich* (401-484) and *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, lemma Theonomie.

With that Schelling concludes his attempt to do justice to the fact of mythology. To briefly recapitulate the line of his argument, Schelling proceeds from the historical givenness of myth as a force over human consciousness. This given cannot be explained away by reading myth as either art or allegory, for both presume a consciousness that is free in respect to its object, and can dispose of it as it pleases; but the nature of myth is precisely that it presents a world in which consciousness finds itself under the domination of something greater than itself that envelops its existence in a whole saturated with meaning. Myth is tautegorical in that it means only itself – or, that *what there is* is to be understood as the world of the gods, and as wrapped up in their dynamic process. This whole can thus only be explained if we assume that human consciousness as such inherently stands in relation to the divine. Thus the historical givenness of myth, understood anthropologically as human consciousness being given over to it and in its thrall, leads to the proposition that human consciousness can only be conceived if we assume it is first and foremost, with Schelling's term, God-positing.

But this does not do anything yet to provide a philosophical foundation for the idea of such a consciousness, or demonstrate why it is not a mere historical aberration, an error that would best be swiftly overcome, if possible, through the power of reason, or lamented as a curse if it could not. In other words, if consciousness is first and foremost theonomous, is it not all the more urgent to escape this foreign order of ideas by establishing ourselves in the autonomy of reason?

Such a conclusion is, of course, already cut off by the result of negative philosophy. An enduring philosophical attachment to myth is justified because reason is in fact *not able* by its own strength to overcome consciousness's captivity to the gods it posits, not able, that is,

to seize by itself the plenitude of sense which myth opens up and to which consciousness is always referred back.

If this were the end of the matter, Schelling's philosophy would fail at its ambition of providing a thinking articulation of freedom. Religious consciousness is given over to the reality of the gods; negative philosophy ends in a sterile stalemate. Neither promises that in its relation to the world we could be free.

And yet this would be to underestimate the resources of both philosophy and mythology. For the world of myth is not a static given. It recounts the rise and fall of the gods, but it does not do so as if this succession were a wheel turning inexorably, coming round to the same beginning again and again. If mythology is a fact, it is because it is historical. But its historicity lies not only in the fact that its world of the gods is a concretely lived fact of Antiquity. Its *Götterwelt* is a *Göttergeschichte*, a theogony that itself is a dynamic; for what makes polytheism by Schelling's lights is not so much in that there are several gods at a time, but that there is a succession of them. There is an ongoing change from the rule of this god to that; and with this development that the gods go through, the religious consciousness that is its substrate undergoes an *experience*. It is in its relation to the gods in their changing nature that consciousness is constituted. In this sense, Schelling's late philosophy once again takes up the task of his earlier work of providing a history of self-consciousness.²¹¹

²¹¹ In this sense, Vladimir Jankélévitch can speak rightly in his dissertation of the late philosophy as an "Odyssey of conscience", though his heavily Bergsonian reading otherwise leaves much to be desired (*L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*). Schelling famously uses the phrase *Odyssee des Geistes* in the concluding sections of the 1800 *System der Transzendentalphilosophie* (SW I/3, 628), otherwise only in an isolated footnote to the dialogue *Über den Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geisterwelt* (SW I/9, 34). For an extending reading of the motif of a history of self-consciousness in the late philosophy, see chapter 3 of Gabriel's *Der Mensch im Mythos*.

To show what is achieved in this experience of the mythological process – the succession of Ouranos by Kronos, by Kronos being supplanted by Zeus, and so on – is the task of the philosophy of mythology to represent. As positive philosophy it depends not on its own resources but on something that is historically given to it; if, that is, by history we can understand such a thing as the speculative dynamic that Schelling reads in the whole of mythological narrative. Unlike the purely conceptual, a priori mode of philosophy that led to Spinoza's God who has to be, such a positive philosophy depends on the experience that the religious consciousness makes, and understands this as consciousness achieving ever greater insight into its own constitution.

The finer steps of this mythological process cannot be represented here, as Schelling develops them through a perplexing mass of philological, etymological, and historical detail which may have been at the cutting edge of knowledge in Schelling's time, but have now as often as not been superseded. But the main line of myth to Schelling is that with every passing generation of the gods, they come closer to man, until the final figure of Dionysus is reached. For Dionysus as god of the vine is not only the comforter of man; he is also a god who dies and is reborn, and he is a god to whose nature it belongs that he is a god in coming; not incidentally Euripides' *Bacchae* opens with the line "*I have come, the Son of Zeus, to this land of Thebes / Dionysos*" [Ἦκω Διὸς παῖς τήνδε Θηβαίαν χθόνα / Διόνυσος].²¹² What is crucial about Dionysus as friend of man who dies and is reborn is that he opens the way for an understanding of the divine as not baldly opposed to humankind, but as suffering with

²¹² Euripides, *Bacchae* l. 1-2; ed. & tr. David Kovacs (modified). On the reception of the idea of Dionysos as "the coming God", see Frank, *Der kommende Gott* (esp. the ninth lecture, 245-284) and recently Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Das Erscheinen des Dionysos. Antike Mythos und moderne Metapher* (esp. 113-119).

and through it, as dying to the old and being born to the new, and as essentially, in his coming, open to the future. For in this sense Dionysus – like the Christ who for Schelling and for Hölderlin essentially pre-figures Christ – is not only subject to history, but is taken in his essential openness towards it.²¹³ Thus Schelling can say *cum emphasi*: *So ist alles Dionysos*.²¹⁴

If the world of myth starts begins for religious consciousness as that which imposes on it an immediate rule of the gods, even the figure of Dionysus, the dying and rising God in coming does not establish consciousness in autonomy. What he does do, however, is show that consciousness, though it remains situated over a world of being, a plenitude of sense that it neither creates nor destroys but is essentially given, is not irredeemably caught up in it. This is a truth, though, which as its final truth is contained in myth; it is not yet explicitly thematized by it, has not and cannot come to full conscience.

What we must take from this discussion of the philosophy of mythology is the following. First, it is that human consciousness is *sua natura* God-positing, that is to say, that human consciousness is first and foremost religious consciousness and finds itself always already standing in relation to the divine as a plenitude of sense that cannot be exhaustively described in discursive terms. Second, that this plenitude of sense manifests itself first and foremost symbolically as the domineering power over mythological consciousness of an ever-changing series of gods, a situation in which consciousness experiences itself unfree to the extent that it is bound to the gods and the necessity that rules even over them. Third, that

²¹³ That the idea that Dionysus pre-figures Christ is not a mere Romantic fancy, but one that has been elaborately drawn on by the Patristic tradition itself, is shown by Francesco Massa in *Tra la vigna e la croce: Dioniso nei discorsi letterari e figurativi cristiani (II-IV secolo)*.

²¹⁴ *Paulus*, lecture 22, 237.

through this history of the mythological world, consciousness nevertheless undergoes an *experience*: what begins as simple and pure unfreedom in the face of a cold, uncaring god transforms itself into a relationship that is characterized by, on the one hand, a mutuality between god and man, and on the other, is temporally inflected: Dionysus as the coming god is himself not simply present in the now but refers to the future. This theme, announced here quietly, will become of great importance in the philosophy of revelation; because if what negative philosophy could not explain, time, is present in the idea of a history of the gods with a succession of divine rulers, it is not yet itself brought to conscious presence. The figure of Dionysus, however, is not accidentally one that is caught up in such a history, but one constituted inherently in his coming, and precisely *as* a coming god he is the bringer of freedom.

This allows us to give a partial answer to some of the questions raised above. That consciousness is not *primarily* discursive in nature, but always already finds itself against a larger background it cannot fully spell out, is not surrender to the religious but, as we might say, good phenomenology. That consciousness lives this fact in the form of a mythology, or rather, that there is a certain stage of development at which it did, seems a banal historical and anthropological fact. The principle that consciousness is *sua natura* God-positing and the original mythological situatedness of consciousness have been justified. Nor need we assert, as Schelling seems to want, that what he sees as the *specificum* of Greek mythology is the exclusive property of the Greeks: that mythology as a historical development of religious consciousness draws a trajectory from bondage to a blind and violent divine force to a liberatory moment. And this moment undergoes a radicalization with the appearance of

what Schelling understands as revelation in the precise and restricted sense of his *Philosophie der Offenbarung* – monotheism.

§ 2 – Revelation

In order to understand Schelling's philosophy of revelation, more must first be said about the way in which the distinction between mythology and revelation illuminates both. We would do well, in order to do this, to admit that the loose and exploratory nature of our discussion of the philosophy of mythology so far has put significant distance between the programmatic commitments and general form of Schelling's positive philosophy, which we have been following, and what the lectures in fact provide in detail. For these details demonstrate a regrettable abundance of what has been termed the "ontologizing inconsequence" of the late philosophy:²¹⁵ they apply the doctrine of the potencies as

²¹⁵ Axel Hutter, *Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 118f. Hutter pointedly describes this inconsequence as the "Umschlag der Kritik des Logischen zurück ins Logische", which leads Schelling to desire to derive all there is from the principles that make up his doctrine of the potencies. This, however, he by his own admission cannot do, for derivation is precisely the character of a logical and necessary, not a historical and free development. Hutter's exemplary study, that throughout engages in detail with the fundamental texts and concepts of the late philosophy, therefore does not even seriously *discuss* the doctrine of the potencies in either the negative or the positive philosophy.

That within the frame of his own interpretation Hutter can do so relies on his choice to found his discussion not on the fully developed late philosophy of the Berlin years but rather on the systematic impulse of the distinction between the logical and the historical developed in the opening lectures of the 1827/28 *System der Weltalter*. From *this* point of view, admittedly, it makes sense to see the three forms of the potencies elaborated there, *das Seinkönnende*, *das Seinmüssende*, and *das Seinsollende*, as forming an immanent critique of logical thought. For such thought has only contingency (that which *can* be) and necessity (that which *must* be) available as categories, and thus passes over that which *should* be:

"Dieser Umschlag der Kritik des Logischen zurück ins Logische kommt sehr deutlich an den drei Existenzweisen des Seinkönnenden, Seinmüssenden, und Seinsollenden heraus. Ursprünglich hatten sie einen

Schelling developed it in the thought-determinations of the negative philosophy to the historical material with which the positive philosophy deals. This is no less true of the philosophy of revelation. Now the properly historical discussions of both parts of positive philosophy sprawl, with what seems an endless hunger for antiquarian detail and erudition, over the course of hundreds and hundreds of pages, crammed with references from Indian, Babylonian, and Egyptian sources, from Greek and Latin literature, from the Old Testament and New, and from a wealth of Patristic sources. Scholars have roughly agreed that it is impossible not to lose one's way in this boundless jungle of material. Nor unfortunately will it do to trace through the confusion the line of Schelling's philosophical argument. For its guiding principle, in whose service the historical material is often forcefully pressed, is that of the three-stage dialectic of the potencies. Though there are nuggets of individual

sehr bestimmten Sinn: sie wurden in der immanenten Kritik des logischen Wissens entwickelt, das sich in der zu engen Alternative von Zufall und Notwendigkeit bewegte. Demgegenüber ist das Seinsollende als die Existenzweise praktischer Wirklichkeit herausgestellt worden, die sich der Thematisierung durch die reine Vernunft entzieht und damit die Geschlossenheit eines "reinen" Denken aufbricht. Jetzt werden die drei Existenzweisen zu Seinspotenzen ontologisiert".

Hutter's in this sense bold rational reconstruction, which sees the project of the late philosophy as the exploration of a "Geschichtliche Vernunft" that is practically oriented, is certainly admirable, but cannot do justice to the fundamental ambition of Schelling's philosophy to be, first and foremost, an all-comprising ontology in the full-blown sense that has a systematic answer to give to the question *what there is*. This cannot be jettisoned without severely disfiguring the late philosophy's self-understanding and marginalize the relevance of Schelling's simultaneous critique and continuation by other means of the project of onto-theology. It also does not adequately reflect that Schelling in the negative philosophy follows his critique of pure theoretical reason (as the main motif of the first half of the *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*) with a critique of pure practical reason (that emerges in the anthropological strain of the second half, and becomes the dominant theme of the last three). The systematic unity of these two questions – which lies in the insight that a radical concept of the will underlies both the theoretical and the practical domain and cannot be reduced to either – therefore largely disappears from Hutter's view.

observations on the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient world and of Christianity to be had – the Dionysiac passage we quoted above from the *Weltalter*, though earlier, is a good example –, the general tenor of Schelling's reading of this material is sadly one that is not sufficiently aimed at giving a sense of what the shapes of consciousness that inhabited these beliefs and practices were *like*, in a religious-anthropological sense, than they woodenly insist on the steady unrolling, come what may, of the potencies.

But this recourse to the potencies, in which the substance of the discussion is meant to lie, is precisely what is most problematic about the positive philosophy. In the negative philosophy we have, though not without reservations, accepted the doctrine of the potencies as a philosophical method to generate from the concept of the necessary being, through the idea of a hunger of being, a fullness of thought-determinations – one might say that it does is to allow Schelling fulfill the task of deriving from a common root what in Kant had lain simply stacked up as so many blocks: space and time, the nature of matter and of mind, etc. This culminated in a philosophical anthropology that showed first, where the human need to think the necessary being comes from, and second, why neither that theoretical desire nor the life of practical reason under the law could satisfy it.

The balance sheet of negative philosophy was therefore that we can neither understand God nor human consciousness in their freedom based on logical reason. What is called for in order for philosophy to systematically proceed with its task of knowing *what there is* is now to deploy historical reason to show the actuality of the God which negative philosophy could only have as a thought-necessity. But in fact, Schelling seems to proceed in a different matter: he re-injects the doctrine of the potencies into the concept of history as well and so turns it into a speculative logic. But to so submit historical reason – which was

meant to supplement logical reason through an understanding of the event – to a series of thought-determinations is to make of the historical no more than the mask of the logical. This is precisely, and perhaps not without a measure of justification, what Schelling reproaches Hegel for doing, and what the notion of the tautegorical nature of myth was meant to avoid.

Schelling's use of the doctrine of the potencies in the positive philosophy can therefore have *at best* a heuristic value, if we are to keep the distinction between the logical and the historical in place and thereby remain true to the fundamental structuring principle of the late philosophy. This means we must allow ourselves to take the extensive attempt to read the potencies into the concrete development of mythology (of which the table at *SW* II/3, XVI gives a synoptic and somewhat forbidding impression) as well as into the most excruciating details of Christology *cum grano salis*.²¹⁶

There is, of course, a price to be paid for such hermeneutic nonchalance, for Schelling's insistence on the doctrine of the potencies in the positive philosophy has a structural purpose: to show that the God that consciousness demands, but could not find in the negative philosophy, is none other than the God which gradually manifests himself in the historical development of religious consciousness – and not, so to say, a random imposter. But *that* this is the case is on Schelling's own principles not something which could be guaranteed beforehand methodologically. For though the late philosophy is not

²¹⁶ On the mythology, Xavier Tilliette's *La mythologie comprise. Schelling et l'interprétation du paganisme* is brief and lucid, and does well in bringing out the religious-anthropological flavor of Schelling's reading of mythology as an ecstatic, enclosed form of consciousness, struck into a daze by the impact of the divine. He also notes its impact on the scholarship of myth in e.g. Cassirer and Rudolf Otto. It does not, however, ask fundamental questions of the justification of Schelling's project. On Schelling's Christology, Tilliette's *La Christologie Idéaliste* gives interesting *geistesgeschichtliche* sketches of Schelling and his contemporaries. More systematic is Danz, *Die philosophische Christologie F.W.J. Schellings*.

terminologically univocal in this matter, there is at least conceptually a distinction at work in it between what we might call the logical method of *proof by demonstration* that characterizes negative philosophy, and the historical method of *attestation by exemplification* by which the positive philosophy operates – a distinction Schelling sometimes brings out by contrasting the terms *Beweis* and *Erweis*.²¹⁷ The latter method is by its very nature non-conclusive and open-ended:

Especially, though, the object of positive philosophy is the object of a proof which in its earlier stages is already adequate [*zulänglich*], but not therefore concluded; – it could always still be that at a subsequent stage a contradiction to what came before appears. Even the present is not a boundary [*Grenze*], but here precisely a glimpse into the future becomes available, which will also not be anything other than the ongoing proof of the existence of that which has power over being [*der fortgehende Beweis der Existenz der über dem Sein waltenden Macht*], of that which is no longer merely the being [*das Seiende*], with which negative philosophy was concerned, but that which is beyond being [*das Überseiende* – i.e. the God in freedom and actuality that is the goal of the positive philosophy].²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Hutter rightly connects this methodological distinction with the need for philosophy to think time precisely as discontinuity, that is, as evenemental: “Das Ziel der “positiven” Philosophie Schellings ist deshalb kein logischer “Beweis”, sondern – wenn man will: bescheidener – ein die Freiheit der Zustimmung bewahrender “Erweis” der geschichtlichen Grundsachverhalte. Die konstitutive *Unabgeschlossenheit* eines solchen “Erweises” korrespondiert dabei präzise dem Verzicht auf das methodische Vorbild der reinen Logik, die zu einem “Ende” gelangen kann, weil in ihrem reinen Immanenzzusammenhang die konkrete Zeit virtualisiert wird. Schellings geschichtliche Philosophie stellt hierzu ganz bewußt eine Alternative auf: in ihr wird die Zeit der Geschichte nicht zum Verschwinden gebracht, sondern tatsächlich “realisiert”, d. h. die wesentliche diskontinuierliche, von Zäsuren geprägte Geschichtszeit dient der Struktur des philosophischen Gedankengangs zum Vorbild” (*Geschichtliche Vernunft*, 341).

²¹⁸ *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 7, *SW* II/3, 131-32. Were Schelling strictly terminologically consistent, he would have to speak here, as he does in other places, of *Erweis* rather than *Beweis*. If he does not do so, it is to bring out the parallel between the “proof of the existence of God” which negative philosophy attempts and the “proof” that his positive philosophy means to perform, which is such that this “proof” is never complete but opens up to the ongoing open horizon of freedom.

The same caution of holding onto the larger argumentative arc of the late philosophy and the principles of the logical versus the historical on which it is based, while assigning a merely heuristic value to the doctrine of the potencies, we will now have to observe in turning to the second part of the positive philosophy – the philosophy of revelation *sensu stricto*, or the history of Biblical monotheism. For the straightforward representation we have given above of the relationship between the polytheism of mythology and the monotheism of revelation is complicated by the curious concept: that of an original monotheism or *Urmonotheismus*.²¹⁹ This idea might be briefly stated as follows.

In his attempt to find an anthropological, rather than purely philosophical, approach to the question of historical religion, Schelling comes to speak about David Hume's 1757 *Natural History of Religion*. Now Hume, whom Schelling quotes extensively in a French translation, asserts that polytheism was the primary religion of men, meaning that it was both historically first and universally found among cultures. It was an evident fact for Hume's empirical mind that "the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature" – for

We may as reasonably imagine, that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs.²²⁰

²¹⁹ *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 4, SW II/1, 67f; tr. Richey & Zisselberger, 51f.

²²⁰ *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, 135-36.

This not implausible explanation of an original and universal polytheism, however, is one which Schelling stridently opposes. It is perhaps true that the historical documents we have from the ancient world seem to point to the universal practice of polytheism; but such practice cannot explain how it is that human being came to venerate the divine at all, that is, how religious consciousness came about to begin with. To assume, as Hume does, that it was natural fears and desires that made earlier cultures *think up* the gods assumes that there is first a world of simple facts that subsequently gets adorned with divine beings. There is a parallel here, Schelling suggests, with Hume's views of causality: first, there is a world in which things merely happen, and secondly, we merely assume causality from constant conjunction, though we can neither observe nor prove it. Against such a view, Schelling insists on the Kantian rejoinder that we could not *have* the world of experience we have if it was not already transcendently constituted by causality. Likewise, the world could not appear to us as the plenitude of sense, every corner of which is penetrated by the divine, if consciousness was not always already in the grips of the divine and given over to it.

That polytheism, with its "unnatural" demand for the blood sacrifice of self and progeny, should be the first form this orientation towards the divine takes, Schelling is however not willing to accept. Instead he follows the contemporary mythographer Friedrich Creuzer, who in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* had suggested that there is a common element in the religious relics of Antiquity, and that this common element can only be explained by a universal parent religion from which these disparate religious beliefs and practices descended. This parent religion must, what is more, have been monotheistic in

nature; for the irreconcilable differences between the various mythologies means that what preceded them cannot lie in their specific tales of the gods.

Schelling thinks not only that this is a reasonable explanation, but moreover holds that the one way to do justice to such an original religion – which he considers not only philosophically satisfactory but a necessary historical hypothesis to explain the attested existence of polytheism – is that of a pre-historical, original monotheism universally practiced by all of mankind, which lived in unity and harmony under it. That is to say, it was not only monotheistic *qua* form, but in actual touch with the one true God. Only an original spiritual crisis stemming from within human consciousness itself can have disturbed this unity, and caused humanity to split off into different peoples, each with their own gods and their own languages. The Biblical account of the Tower of Babel Schelling reads as a distant echo of this original traumatic event.²²¹

What this curious arabesque allows Schelling to maintain is that the world of mythology, which lies between these two ages, becomes in this light the confusion and faulty image of monotheism that religious consciousness only by and by manages to work its way out of again. Mythology, unlike monotheism, has no reality outside of consciousness.²²²

It would be easy to point out that, after the first waves of enthusiasm for comparative mythology of the nineteenth century such as Creuzer represents died down, such a thesis would no longer have found easy acceptance among scholars. But the positivist counterargument – that we have no direct evidence whatsoever to assume such an original

²²¹ See the fifth lecture of the *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, SW II/1, 94f; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 69f.

²²² *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 6, SW II/1, 124; tr. Richey & Zisselsberger, 89.

monotheism – is here without force; for Schelling himself does not mean to provide an historical attestation, but rather to supply a required hypothesis that makes the historical world of polytheism in its diversity yet with its apparent common root intelligible.²²³

Whatever we think of this argument – and it seems less than ironclad – Schelling's true motivation does not lie on the level of antiquarianism, but is guided by his systematic philosophical interests. For it is only an original monotheism as he argues for which would dovetail perfectly with what was left as the outstanding *desideratum* of philosophy after the completion of the project of negative philosophy – the one necessarily existing being. This, however, seems an eminently questionable philosophical conclusion. Why after all should it be that the postulated original monotheism, and the historical monotheism that is present in the Old and the New Testament, should be the manifestation of a genuine relation between religious consciousness and the divine, whereas the world of mythology is trapped inside its own distorted image, and has therefore lost this connection? Are we not faced here with the obviously inconsistent thesis that all historical truth is equal, but some historical truth more equal than others?

One way of sparing Schelling from this conclusion is to suggest that the passage from original monotheism to polytheism is not merely an error, let alone an avoidable one, but in fact a required stage in the history of consciousness and as such an historical achievement

²²³ Schelling is nothing if not strident about this claim: "One could object to us that the relative monotheism from which we have all mythology proceed is also, up to now, a fact not yet understood. But the difference is that the hypothesis of revelation presents itself as a final one, which cuts off any further regress, while we in no way mean to conclude with that fact, but rather now take this fact that is historically established, and from this perspective—as we may assume—secured against every attack and consider it now straight away as a point of departure for a new development" (*Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, Lecture 8, *SW II/1*, 180-81; tr. Richey and Zisselsberger, 127).

of sorts. This is in fact what Schelling does. For the original universal human religion, as he will also go on to describe at greater length in the lectures on *Der Monotheismus*, can be described as monotheistic only in an impoverished sense. It is the religious counter-image of the single, undifferentiated substance of negative philosophy that Schelling termed unprethinkable being – timeless, static, and unfree. In this sense it can in no way live up to what was required of the actual, personal God – and is on this ground he rejects Creuzer's suggestion that a primordial revelation or *Uroffenbarung* is its source. Only with the successive polytheism of the world of mythology does movement become possible. The original monotheism is no more than a bland universal theism, which as such is barely to be distinguished from pantheism and atheism.²²⁴

On what grounds does Schelling then draw a categorical distinction between mythology and revelation?

The principles of mythology are necessarily also the principles of revealed religion, already by the fact that both are – religions. Yet the big distinction is that the representations of mythology are the products [*Erzeugnisse*] of a necessary process, or of a natural consciousness left to its own devices, to which no free cause exercised an influence; revelation, on the other hand, is thought as something that presupposes [*voraussetzt*] an act outside of consciousness, and a relation in which the freest of all causes, God, has given himself to mankind [*zum Menschen*] of his own will.²²⁵

²²⁴ This thought is developed at length over the course of the first four lectures of *Der Monotheismus* (SW II/2, 3-79). The static unity of original monotheism Gabriel in a pointed phrase calls the *Eleatismus des Urbewußtseins*. He also notes Jacobi's distinction between *der Gott*, the true actual living God, and *das Gott*, a mere ontological oneness. See *Der Mensch im Mythos*, 266f.

²²⁵ *Paulus*, lecture 23, 250.

This passage lends itself to a reading in which mythology is severely depreciated in favor of revelation. Such a reading would go as follows. Where the mythological process of the rise and fall of the gods happens merely *in* consciousness – read: as etched into consciousness, not an imaginary play or an accidental error, but nevertheless a whole of representations that do not *refer* to an outside reality; say, the constitutive phantasmagoric ravings of a consciousness closed in upon itself – it is the Christian revelation that connects how matters truly stand, outside what consciousness holds.

Though Schelling repeatedly makes remarks that invite this reading, it is philosophically weak. If positive philosophy understands itself as a history of religious consciousness, then it is precisely in the relationship between the divine and consciousness that all of it unrolls. Facile reference to an outside – as if the divine were an object one could approach without reference to the way it appears in and through consciousness – is forbidden by the rules of the game. Is there a dogmatic inconsequence here, one that stands in service of an apologetics for the Christian revelation?

Schelling's answer to this might be that mythology is only a temporary stage of confusion in which consciousness gets shut in upon itself, between on the one hand the spiritual crisis of the collapse of the original monotheism and the coming to light of true Biblical monotheism. But here the question remains: how do we know that this is the case? How do we have access to this supposed fact? If we are, as Schelling avers one should, not give an explanation of mythology, but let mythology explain itself, then this would have to be through internal criteria.²²⁶ Such criteria are not forthcoming.

²²⁶ Thus the seventh lecture of the *Philosophie der Mythologie*: “Auf den Standpunkt, von dem wir jetzt die Mythologie betrachten werden, haben nicht *wir* die Mythologie, sondern hat die Mythologie *uns* gestellt. Von

If we ignore the reference to an outside of conscience, however, a more fruitful way of reading the distinction between mythology and revelation becomes possible. For from the fact that both mythology and revelation are shapes of religious consciousness, it does not follow that they cannot have their own proper modality – much the contrary. Mythology then is by Schelling's lights a necessary process; revelation has to do with a free cause. Centering the distinction on this contrast, we might say that mythology indeed does not know a free cause, because the beginnings of all are not depicted in it as a divine *act*, but as a natural occurrence. Where in Genesis God sets out in the beginning to create heaven and earth, so in Hesiod by contrast "Chasm came to be",²²⁷ in the passive voice, and the first active verbs are of gods "giving birth", that is bringing forth as a natural process rather than creating by fiat.²²⁸ So too the succession of gods in which Schelling sees what is proper of mythology is a natural cycle. In other words: mythology is historical in that it *makes* history – the succession of gods constitutes and re-constitutes religious consciousness in its relationship to it – but it does not, cannot *thematize* this history other than as necessity, as somehow cause and effect lifted to the level of an ever-turning cycle of coming into being, achieving dominance, and falling off into decrepitude. The mythological, we might say, does not, cannot yet grasp its own historicity. This is where the crucial distinction with monotheism lies, for there we are

nun an also ist der Inhalt dieses Vortrags nicht die von uns erklärte, sondern die sich selbst erklärende Mythologie" (SW II/2, 139).

²²⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* l. 116 (tr. Glenn Most).

²²⁸ The full passage reads: "In truth, first of all Chasm came to be [Χάος γέενετ'], and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus' peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros [...]. From Chasm, Erebus and black Night came to be [ἐγένοντο]; and then Aether and Day came forth [ἐξεγένοντο] from Night, who conceived and bore them [τέκε] after mingling in love with Erebus" (Theogony, l. 116-125; tr. Glenn Most).

not locked into a natural cycle but are faced with free creation which no cause precedes or predicts. If the historical is inherently evenemental, then we might say that the mythological world, though evenemental, does not know itself as such – and it is in this sense, if at all, that we can understand the mythological condition as being shut in upon itself. Monotheism on the other hand brings to the fore that nothing brings about the event, nothing makes it happen – other than God's will; for God remains sovereignly free to act or not to act.

Revelation in Schelling's account does not appear all at once on the scene to vanquish the world of mythology. Mythology is slowly overcome and replaced by it, and the Old Testament is the story of this overcoming. An index of this is the use of divine names. Schelling makes much of the two main Biblical names for God: *Elohim* (אלהים) and the tetragrammaton (יהוה). This distinction has of course not gone unnoticed in the history of Biblical exegesis, and particularly the Rabbinic tradition sees it as a key to distinguish between God's judgment and his mercy. Schelling's understanding is, however, singular in more than one respect.²²⁹

Elohim in this reading is God's universal name, Jehovah his particular one. But this difference is not merely to be understood as one between a more general and a specifically personal name. *Elohim* as a general name can, grammatically, be understood as a plural, and it is in this sense that all but the Jewish people – who alone have held onto monotheism in the wake of the crisis of the Tower of Babel, and understand the name *Elohim* correctly as a *pluralis majestatis* – worship a multitude of gods. This is why it only becomes necessary after the Deluge for the people of the one true God to *call in the name of the the Lord* (לקרא בשם)

²²⁹ See for the following in particular the seventh lecture of the *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung* (SW II/1, 144f) and *Paulus*, lecture 27 (278f).

יהוה),²³⁰ and why the Israelite confession of faith says *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord* (שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד)²³¹ – the Name is repeated to make clear that it is only as Jehovah that our God is one.²³² Under the name *Elohim* the power of myth remains hidden, the true God of monotheism manifests himself as Jehovah.

This Schelling explicates in reference to the story of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. For here it is *Elohim* who demands Abraham to sacrifice his son – the sacrifice in which Schelling after a fashion sees the purest expression of the mythological gods and their bloodlust – but it is the angel of *Jehovah* who appears and prevents the sacrifice from taking place. The pagan principle is thus put to a halt, but not once and for all overcome – for this in Schelling’s supersessionist account remains to be achieved in Christ.

Jehovah is to Schelling not merely the proper name of the one true God, however, and in this again he reflects long-standing patterns of Biblical exegesis. In Rabbinic tradition, for example, the tetragrammaton is referred to as *šem ha-mephoraš*, the *revealed* name. Schelling notes first that Jehovah (יהוה) is to be understood as coming from an archaic form of the verb “to be” (הוה, in standard Biblical Hebrew היה).²³³ The third person imperfect יהוה can, as

²³⁰ Gen. 4:26.

²³¹ Deut. 6:4.

²³² See *Der Monotheismus*, lecture 2, SW II/2, 47.

²³³ Modern scholarship of the Hebrew Bible tends to see matters differently: the archaic root from which the tetragrammaton is derived is not to be equated with *to be*. An alternative is *to blow*, which would fit well with the proposed historical origins of the Bible’s one God in a Semitic storm god. But that we are dealing with folk etymology here does not undermine the essential point: that the Exodus author is engaging in a potent play of words that brings out a theological point. For an up to date discussion of the etymological origins of the tetragrammaton and the play on words it occasions, see Thomas Römer, *L’Invention de Dieu* (37-50).

Biblical Hebrew distinguishes between aspect rather than tense, at least in principle be read as *he was*, *he is*, or *he will be*.

From this hang grave theological consequences. For when Moses asks God at the Burning Bush his name is, God responds אהיה אשר אהיה. When the King James Bible translators rendered this as *I am that I am*, they connected with a line of interpretation starting in Antiquity which reads the divine name as the affirmation of God's inscrutable self-identity. Thus famously the Septuagint renders it ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, with a participle more easily rendered in German than in English: *Ich bin der Seiende*; *I am the one who is*, or even, *I am the being*. The Vulgate opts for *ego sum qui sum*, I am who I am. These translations, which suggest to the philosophical mind God's rootedness in the concept of being, give rise to what has been called a "metaphysics of Exodus", the equation – however precisely understood – of God and being.²³⁴

Schelling rejects this reading and opts, with Luther, for a futural sense: *I will be who I will be*. It is here that Schelling's critique of onto-theology, which we have seen at work throughout the negative philosophy, bears fruit. The concept of a necessary being cannot pass over from concept to actual being; what is more, even if we were assured of the

²³⁴ Of the voluminous scholarly literature on the theological and philosophical interpretation of the "metaphysics of the Exodus", see in particular the collection published by the Centre d'études des religions du livre, *Dieu et l'Être: exégèses d'Exode 3, 14 et de Coran 20, 11-24* and Alain de Libera and Emilie Zum Brunn (eds.), *Celui qui est : Interprétations juives et chrétiennes d'Exode 3-14*. Franz Rosenzweig's last essay, "Der Ewige" from 1929, discusses Mendelssohn's translation of the tetragrammaton as "the eternal one" in a philosophically relevant light (*Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:801-15). Both the phenomenological and theological work of Jean-Luc Marion are deeply involved in rejecting the equation of God and being as conceptual idolatry; see in particular his *Dieu sans l'être*, in sympathetic occasional reference to Schelling. Marion adopts a more critical tone in his more elaborate discussion of Schelling in his recent *Givenness and Revelation*.

existence of this being, it would not be free, and thus not God. Schelling consequently says “it would be entirely illegitimate to seek here also the expression of the metaphysical eternity or immutability of God”.²³⁵ The futurity of the divine name is now understood in a number of ways. First, what Abraham receives from God are not present bounties but promises of a future in which his seed will become a great nation. Second – and more peculiarly Schellingian – Abraham’s relation to God is still being purged of its pagan elements; he knows the truth of his religion lies in the future. What Abraham presumably does not yet know is that, third, it is in *Christ* that this fulfillment of pure monotheism takes place – for God’s name points forward beyond himself to the Christ; “the Father presages the Son”.²³⁶

But God’s futurity does not for Schelling stop with the Biblical account – and with this matters acquire a deeper philosophical interest. A speculative passage from the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* reads:

[T]rue freedom I recognize only where I could be indifferent [*wo es mir in Ansehung meiner selbst gleichgültig sein kann*] to be this way or that, to act in this way or that. Only here therefore is being that Is [*Seiendes, das Ist*] = altogether free spirit = God. Only here is the perfect spirit no longer merely non-necessity of passing over into being, but also freedom has been achieved to take on a different being, distinct from

²³⁵ *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, SW II/1, 171; tr. Richey and Zisselsberger, 120.

²³⁶ *Paulus*, 281. Such Christian supersessionism is of course not merely Schelling’s idea or a dogma of the established Christian theological tradition; the fourth Gospel already (which Schelling does not quote in this context) has Christ uncannily echo the tetragrammaton in saying to the Jews: “Before Abraham was, *I am* [πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί]” (John 8:58).

While holding out for a final redemption in Christ for all, Schelling does not suggest that the Jews should for the time being leave the religion of their fathers in exchange for a *Vernunftsreligion*, but should receive political emancipation as they are (SW II/4, 150f.). This brief remark on the world-historical role of Judaism encapsulates the distance that lies between the theologico-philosophical assimilationism of Hermann Cohen’s *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* and the insistence of Franz Rosenzweig – himself an avid reader of Schelling – that the Jew remain Jew.

from its eternal or conceptual being [*ein anderes, von seinem ewigen oder Begriffs-Sein verschiedenes Sein anzunehmen*], that is, as freedom to go out of one's self. Only here can he say of himself: I will be, who I will be, i.e. who I want to be; it depends merely on my will, to be this one or someone else – there the perfect spirit manifests itself [*stellt sich dar*] as God; here we are justified to give him this name.²³⁷

In this sense, then, the futurity of the name establishes God's absolute freedom, and makes him not the being of perfection and necessity that onto-theology had made of him, but the being beyond being (*der Überseiende*), or the Lord of being (*der Herr des Seins*). It is this aspect of the Trinitarian God, that God can go out of himself, become his other, and yet in this freedom remain himself, that is for Schelling also the lesson of Christ's incarnation. As the supreme act of freedom, God's becoming other, emptying himself out, dying and rising, it puts a permanent end to the unfreedom of mythology. This unfreedom was most directly visible in the sacrificial nature of paganism: so enthralled by the gods of mythology and bound to their force was the mythological consciousness that it lived this relation most pressingly in ever-repeated bloody sacrifice. In Christ's death, on the contrary, God sacrifices himself and so brings an end to the sacrificial relationship as a whole: "Thus truly all sacrifices have as their goal that one last great sacrifice, which at the same time cancels paganism and Judaism".²³⁸

So far it may indeed seem that for Schelling, Christianity as the result of the whole dynamic of the history of religious consciousness is the one, true, and final religion. But this is not, in fact, the case. For Christ is not merely the end of revelation in that he is the goal; he likewise puts an end to it:

²³⁷ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 13, SW II/3, 269.

²³⁸ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 29, SW II/4, 146.

Christ is the end of revelation, just as he is the end of paganism; he makes an end of revelation which, as we said, always presumes an occulting principle [*ein verdunkelndes Prinzip*], as he does with paganism. The actual appearance [*wirkliche Erscheinung*] of Christ is therefore more than just revelation, precisely because it cancels out [*aufhebt*] the presupposition [*Voraussetzung*] of revelation and in doing so it itself. If we posit the three grand forms of all religion as paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, then the revelation of the O.T. is only the revelation which works through mythology [*die durch die Mythologie durchwirkende Offenbarung*], Christianity is the revelation which has broken through this shell (paganism), and therefore at the same time and in the same way cancels out both Judaism and paganism.²³⁹

Revelation in Schelling's precise sense, the revelation that is not merely Christian but that is the Christ, comes to an end in achieving its goal of freeing religious consciousness from its blind adherence to the last vestiges of pagan belief. In a God who is not a being but the being over beings and its Lord. Once this freedom is established, there is, despite Schelling's inconclusive and somewhat whimsical remarks on ecclesiology, no further historical role for Christianity to play.²⁴⁰

The Christian revelation is, as Schelling tirelessly repeats, the historical religion par excellence. But effectively, it has come to an end. Is this, then, the end of history?

§ 3 Philosophical Religion

²³⁹ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lecture 29, *SW II/4*, 124.

²⁴⁰ The 37th and last lecture of the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (*SW II/4*, 313f.) draws out the historical arc of Christianity through this ecclesiology: the Church of Peter (Catholicism) and the Church of Paul (Protestantism) will yet give way to a Church of John, the apostle of the future. It has been remarked by commentators that, for a philosopher who wants to be grounded in history, this is a somewhat meager way of encapsulating all history – even the sort of higher history Schelling is interested in – from Golgotha to the nineteenth century and beyond.

What comes after Christianity? Schelling's late philosophy, which insists on the inherently historical dimension of consciousness, and sees the historical as that which cannot be assimilated to pure reason, opposes as we have seen the idea that there could be such a thing as a *religion of reason* – either a religion of theoretical reason, the *theoria* which Aristotle saw as our highest achievement, or a religion of practical reason, where it is through the moral law and the building of a moral world order, that we worship the divine and accomplish it. The religious, to state it in another register of Schelling's thought, is not merely ideal, but also real. It cannot strike us as other than surprising, then, that the late philosophy ends in the call for a *philosophical religion*.

Yet this is not an afterthought. The collection of texts put together by Schelling's son under the title *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, which has formed the primary basis of the present interpretation of the late philosophy, has it placed at its head, and sets it out from the very beginning as its goal and culmination.

The philosophical religion, such as we demand it, does not exist. But insofar as its position determines it to be the one that understands [*die begreifende*] those that came before it, the religions independent of reason and philosophy, in this sense it is the goal [*Zweck*] of the process from the beginning, therefore that which, while not today or tomorrow, remains without a doubt that which is to be realized and never to be given up, that which, just as philosophy itself, is not reached immediately, but only over the course of a large and long-lasting development.

All things have their season [*alles hat seine Zeit*]. The mythological religion had to come before. Mythology is the blind religion, because it produces itself in a necessary process, the unfree and unspiritual [*ungeistige*] religion. Revelation, that is to say, the one destined to penetrate through paganism (Judaism merely excludes paganism), the last and highest revelation therefore, mediates free religion in this way. This revelation overcomes the unspiritual religion from the inside [*innerlich*], liberates consciousness from it, and itself mediates the free religion, the religion of

the spirit, which, as it is its nature that it can only be sought in freedom and found in freedom, can only realize itself fully as philosophy.²⁴¹

It is a strident beginning, but despite a number of scattered remarks on the subject throughout the late philosophy, Schelling tells us all too little about what his philosophical religion is to amount to. What then are we to make of the idea that the true and free religion realizes itself only as philosophy? If the route we have taken so far through the negative and the positive philosophy had not warned us against it, we might be tempted to think that the idea of a philosophical religion brings us back, after a lengthy and often tormented detour through the history of religion, to Lessing's old suggestion: that religion is a pedagogy into reason, the ladder we ascend and kick away once we have found the truths of philosophy. What else does Schelling suggest here than dissolving religion, once it has been understood in the light of reason, into a philosophy – a philosophy that, in and of itself, has precious little to do with the religious any longer?

It all depends, one might say, on what we understand by the philosophical religion as that which comprehends (*die begreifende*) the religions of mythology and revelation. If we were to take it that it brings those religions under a concept (*Begriff*), then indeed we are back with Lessing – or rather with the Hegelian philosophy of religion, which puts an end to religion by extracting its rational elements and leading it over into a pure philosophical logic. A reading of Schelling's late philosophy that puts, as Schelling himself indeed seems to do, the dialectic of the potencies at its heart cannot help but do this. And yet the religious was

²⁴¹ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 11, SW II/1, 255.

meant to be precisely that which by its very nature *escapes* the concept. This would be philosophy, but hardly a philosophical *religion*.

Just as the philosophical religion stands at the beginning of the *Philosophische Einleitung*, it stands at its end. The 24th and final lecture, having in its first half concluded its philosophical anthropology, then in its second half comes to reflect on its trajectory as a whole.²⁴² Here, Schelling underlines once more his distance from rationalism: “Reason does not lead to religion, as indeed it is Kant’s theoretical result that there is no religion of reason. That one knows nothing of God is the result of every true rationalism that understands itself”.²⁴³ This seems unequivocal, and yet is less so than it seems. For the end of negative philosophy *did* leave us, where we failed in the attempt to know the ground of being through reason, with the unfulfilled desire to know it in actuality and freedom; only in first acknowledging that we know nothing of God can we perhaps hope to come to know him best – know him not only through an unguided desire to “know what is above being”, as Schelling says we could do as well, but as the need of our highest rational faculty which yet exceeds its powers to satisfy it.

With the transition [*Übertritt*] into positive philosophy we first enter the region of religion and of religions, and can only now expect that for us the philosophical religion will come to be [*entsteht*], which is what this whole presentation has been about for us [*um welche es bei dieser ganzen Darstellung zu tun ist*], that is the religion which is to comprehend really [*reell zu begreifen*] the actual [*wirkliche*] religions, the mythological and the revealed. In this we get the clearest insight that what to us is called philosophical religion has nothing in common with the so-called religion of

²⁴² *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 560-72.

²⁴³ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 568.

reason. For if there were such a thing, it would belong to a wholly different sphere, not to the one in which the philosophical religion realizes [*verwirklicht*] itself for us.²⁴⁴

Philosophical religion understands the mythological and the revealed really (*reell*) – not, that is, ideally; in its actuality and freedom rather than in the concept – and in doing so it realizes (*verwirklicht*) itself for us. These key terms bring us closer in what sense a philosophical religion is neither a religion of reason, nor merely another form of religion. The philosophical religion is, we might be tempted to say, a second order religion, one that understands, keeps, and actualizes what was implicitly present in the mythological and the revealed religions – but crucially, without thereby losing its religious character. Now what made religion religious, for Schelling, was that it is historical – it realizes itself in and as history, as the relationship between consciousness and the divine. Schelling's insight – if we free him, that is, of the temptation to logicize the positive philosophy through the dialectic of the potencies – is that history, like the rose, is at heart without a why; not only is it the contingently given, but it remains free to become other.

Consciousness enclosed in myth is blind to this thought, and can only picture its world of the gods as natural necessity. Revelation on the other hand teaches us that God is free to be what he will be – that, in other words, history is to be understood as evenemental. But it also teaches that history in its evenementality does not merely fall over us as a fated verdict. It sees the freedom of God to be what he will be – the contingency of the event, which always “remains to be seen”, is always still *to come* – as intimately connected to us. For just as the event as the manifestation of primordial being, is – in Schelling's grandiose ontological

²⁴⁴ *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, lecture 24, SW II/1, 568-69.

metaphor – nothing but the will, nothing but a free act, so too we are free in our ability to relate to that which remains to come. For person seeks person.

To draw this insight, still only implicit even in the religion of revelation, out into the fullness of our understanding – this is the task of the philosophical religion. And yet philosophical religion does not lie only in an understanding of the religious past. It is an understanding of the religious that must also *actualize* itself as the religious, that is to say, as a constant anamnesis of the truth that what is given is given contingently, and leaves itself free in future to be what it will, to manifest itself otherwise – just as it leaves us free to anticipate it, to hope for it, and to welcome and receive it when it does.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the last philosophy lives by the grace of the notion that the human being is *sua natura* God-positing. Mankind lives in the face of the divine. What becomes of this divine after the last God, after the final revelation? To take the measure of this question, we would do well to take a certain distance from the theological vocabulary in which, for better or for worse, Schelling expresses himself, and instead have recourse to the terms we have at different stages of the discussion of the late philosophy found it instructive to use. These were the terms *world* and *event*. The distinction between logical reason, as we have seen it at work in the negative philosophy, and the historical reason of the positive philosophy is one between understanding *what there is* as primarily semantically structured, fully to be captured in an ordered logical space, and symbolically structured, as an open-ended

plenitude of meaning that by its nature eludes being so captured. This symbolic world, I have suggested, is the world in which what Schelling terms religious consciousness lives, and it is summed up in the relation of consciousness to the divine. The actual existence of God, which negative philosophy needed but could not grasp, is in this sense nothing more than the actual existence of the world. But the reason this actual existence eluded negative philosophy, we have seen, was that it must be thought to have an uncaused and therefore free cause at its root, a groundless ground. If the actual existence of God is to mean, when all is said and done, the facticity of the world as a symbolic whole which is always already *given*, its contingent *thereness*, then in what sense can we possibly conceive of this as freedom? The impression is hard to avoid that we are dealing with the opposite: human consciousness is finite, has neither made nor chosen its world; it is stuck in it, and stuck with it.

Yet this is not where the late philosophy would lead us. The history of religious consciousness is the history not only of the succession of different symbolic orders, different worlds that impose themselves on consciousness. It is to Schelling also a history of self-consciousness, in which self-consciousness undergoes an *experience*. This experience lies not only in finding itself, potentially traumatically, being moved from one symbolic order to another. Through the experience of *history*, it comes to understand the *historicality* of the world as it is given to us – that is to say, that the world as it is given is not a static fact, but is evenemental. How the world is given can and does change. Christianity in Schelling's analysis encapsulates this evenemental nature of the world's givenness in the idea that God is not being, but its sovereign and free Lord.

How this makes *us* free is, of course, a different question. The connection lies in the notion that primordial being is the will. For just as at the root of what logical reason would

see as the necessary being there lies nothing but the contingent fact of the world being given, thus or thus, so too we, as manifestations of the will, are not bound to either our practical or theoretical reason. Our freedom, which the philosophical religion Schelling speaks of serves to remind us of, lies in how in awareness of the ungrounded ground that is the world in its evenemental character, we can prepare our own ungrounded wills to give up the world as it is, so that we may receive it back under a different form. The horizon of history, and what is to appear on it for us to welcome, remains essentially and necessarily open. This lesson – that we are free not in the security of our selfhood, but precisely in the vulnerability of our ontological openness – is the lesson of the late philosophy.

Conclusion

Aim of this study was to argue for the idea that the fundamental stakes of Schelling's complex, conflicting, never quite settled late philosophy can be expressed with straightforwardness and elegance in a single thesis – that there is no freedom without revelation, no revelation without freedom. At stake in such an argument is, of course, more than the question of how Schelling's work is to be understood, or what place he is to be assigned in the history of philosophy. No less at stake is making plausible the suggestion that the thesis which I have imputed to Schelling is worthy of philosophical consideration in its own right, as a serious response to a genuine problem, and merits further pondering beyond the confines of Schelling's work and the specific historical trajectory that it opens. That is to say, in other

words, that it is a philosophical thesis deserving of contemporary critical defense and further elaboration.

How far then have we come with these tasks?

Our first step was to show how revelation, which may seem to the innocent bystander a hoary old idea deeply ensconced in the religious tradition, emerges as the central bone of contention between philosophy and religion only with what we have here termed “the age of metaphysics”, and which we have then seen Schelling analyze as the bedrock of negative philosophy in the modern world: the claim that reason in its theoretical use is not bound to any condition imposed upon it from the outside, be it by religious authority or the hold the senses have over us, but can be autonomous – autonomous, that is, in the sense that it can show not only its own internal validity as thought, but can ground itself in an absolute necessity that is not merely thought, but has to *be*. Such a project, which we referred to as the auto-constitution of self-sufficient reason, Schelling boiled down to a single fundamental issue: the ontological proof for the existence of God. If such a feat could be performed, then it is reason and only reason that can know God as the necessary being; in such a case, true revelation – if we wanted to speak of such a thing – would be purely identical with theoretical reason, seen as the self-uncovering of a purely necessary system of logic truths. Schelling’s late philosophy stands, as we have seen, in a layered relation to this attempt. On the one hand, it is the right and proper claim of reason to free itself from outside constraints and be self-determining. If philosophy is to take itself seriously, it cannot shirk this attempt or simply cede its place in the matter of God to either a publicly established orthodoxy or a private claim of direct experience or feeling.

Yet on the other hand, the late philosophy shows with the aid of Kant how the attempt of negative philosophy to win itself equally makes it lose the world: it can *think* a necessary being as its own highest determination, but such a being remains necessary *in thought* only. Actuality remains outside the realm of the conceptual. Thus in basing itself in an *ens necessarium*, the logical unrolling of negative philosophy loses its sight of what its true ambition was: having God not merely as an immobile necessity but as *ens perfectissimum*. For such perfection would have to entail both God's actuality, which it cannot demonstrate, and his freedom, which if consequent it must deny. Negative philosophy is thus not simply a mistake that could be avoided, but a passage philosophy must go through in order to discover that its true object – a God who exists not in thought but in free self-actualization. The question remains how this God could reveal himself, how he might be *given* to us.

One might, on the other hand, also attempt to situate revelation *outside* of theoretical reason. Depending on how one conceptualizes the relationship between the theoretical and the practical, this can lead to two results. If the practical is ultimately an epiphenomenon of the theoretical, then reducing revelation to the sphere of the practical means making it an irrelevance – our only access to the divine being cognitive. Here Aristotle and Spinoza, despite the heterogeneity of their thought, in the final analysis shake hands. If on the other hand the practical sphere has a certain independence, perhaps even with Kant a primacy over the theoretical, then revelation might be accorded a role of its own in this sphere. And if the problem with theoretical reason was that it cannot understand freedom, then embedding revelation in practical reason would restore the link between it and freedom that is otherwise lost.

Yet this solution is as problematic as the problem it meant to solve. For practical reason in its Kantian shape is, no less than theoretical reason, a priori and universal. Freedom conceived as rational self-determination may require God as a postulate to guarantee such self-determination does not lead the moral agent to perdition, but in the world such a God could only act by being seen as speaking to us through the moral law. Now the thought that the moral law is at the same time authored purely and solely by the agent's own rationality and yet *at the same time* has to be seen as the will of God as a moral judge is incoherent.

Kant himself was, without ever quite breaking out into a full-throated admittance, onto this incoherence, and suggested another way: living according to practical reason need not be rewarded by an extramundane judge if it is *in* this world, through the establishment of a universal moral kingdom on earth in which blessedness would be proportional to morality, practical reason can be satisfied. This, admittedly, would be satisfaction not to the individual moral agent, but only to mankind as a whole, and not one guaranteed here and now, but only in the perspective of history as a collective enterprise aiming for this goal: God as moral world order is not given (*gegeben*), but assigned as a task (*aufgegeben*).

Such a project is the common Kantian inheritance that Fichte, the young Schelling, and Hegel share, and can be described as the revelation of freedom in history. But it prompts three questions.

First, how do we know that the kingdom of God will indeed come about? It would require in people a change of heart that history as we know it has been reluctant to show, and the temptation of radical evil to which Kant admits we are by our very nature exposed would point to reasons why it may well not.

Second, could such a moral world order truly be called free? Schelling himself articulates two responses to this question. First, if freedom in the full sense requires that we acquire through demonstration the awareness that the necessity of nature and the freedom of spirit can be and are indeed unified in the supersensible substrate, then the practical sphere alone can never establish this; only aesthetics can perform this role. But the realm of aesthetics, in which the unconditioned substrate is presented in the conditioned form of the work of art, is less one of universal demonstration than one of particular monstration; art, which the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* calls our one eternal revelation, is in this sense never done, and less closes the system than it opens it up to a performance which must steadily be repeated.

More fundamentally, however, as the *Freiheitsschrift* has it, one may well ask whether rational self-determination under the moral law is adequate description of freedom even in the practical sphere, as the System had maintained. If we accept that freedom and morality mutually entail each other, then no immoral act is free; but then no immoral act is imputable morally either. If on the other hand immoral actions are imputable, then their source cannot merely be the inclinations of our sensual nature to which reason succumbs; for if reason is sovereign in that it always *can* determine us, then why would it be that it doesn't always? The only solution, as again Kant himself foresaw already, was to accord immorality an intellectual pedigree after all. Then, however, we would need to be able to understand it as well. The *Freiheitsschrift's* way of making evil understandable – as God's ground in us revolting against his existence as a moral world order – comes at a price, however; freedom in this perspective is no longer practical freedom to rationally determine one's self any longer, but must instead be conceived of an ontological freedom expressed in the act of

choosing to be not merely a rational self but a *person*. For this choice, no universal criteria are available. They can only disclose themselves. But how? What cryptic and paradoxical remarks the *Freiheitsschrift* in closing has to offer on nature as the site of revelation sheds little light on the matter.

The late philosophy does not altogether drop the ambition of articulating a philosophy of nature. But it does redirect the question of revelation from nature to history. For if it pertains to the human being to be by nature a God-positing consciousness, it is in history that such a consciousness manifests itself, and through history that it takes on different shapes. The positive philosophy speaks with a differentiated vocabulary about these different shapes; the world of paganism is not, under this vocabulary, revealed in the sense that monotheism is. And yet, crucial as it is that different shapes of religious consciousness be understood in their specific constitutedness, one may nevertheless want to claim, against Schelling's explicit terminological choices, that something in any such consciousness stands as revealed. For all such shapes, based as they are on the relationship between a finite religious consciousness and the fullness of meaning of its symbolic world, neither create nor master their world conceptually, but find themselves in it. Yet this characteristic of always-already that the world has for religious consciousness is not the only sense in which Schelling's restricted use of the term revelation might be deceptive. It is the lesson which monotheism teaches, after all, that the givenness of the world is not once and for all, but that God ever remains sovereignly free to be what he wishes to be. The world, that is, is not only founded upon the event; the event is never played out, can always break in upon religious consciousness again in new forms. And it is precisely here that it is not only God's freedom that is in play, but our human freedom as well – the ontological freedom that

lies in not being stuck with the world as we find it, but to open ourselves up to the possibility that the world may show itself afresh and in different ways. *That* this will happen, nothing guarantees. But in understanding that the world is grounded in the ungrounded event – and this understanding is not one we can simply have, but one that must be at each turn actualized – we can welcome it as an actuality. It is in this sense that freedom and revelation are one and the same.

This interpretation is open to two challenges.

On the one hand, Schelling argues that a full grasp of human ontological freedom requires revelation as the horizon of ultimate contingency within which such freedom can take place. Is the late philosophy not in fact in danger, whatever philosophical re-interpretative distancing it may have done towards Christianity, and however heterodox it may appear from a theological point of view, of collapsing back into a particularist position that cannot be philosophically defended?

One might, on the other hand, claim that what is achieved in positive philosophy is the not the bald assertion of revelation as a particular shape of religious consciousness, but the establishment of a universal model of revelation through a speculative history of exemplary forms of religious consciousness, which nevertheless does not exclude the possibility that other forms of religious consciousness might equally well illustrate the model. Yet if this is the case, does all the pathos for real existence and historical actuality which Schelling generates not collapse back into a thinking of revelation which, though it may have its pedagogical roots in a historical development, is itself independent of and even immune to history?

We have seen that Schelling asserts that, all things having their season, revelation is a matter of the past no less than mythology is, and that both are to be superseded by a philosophical, and thus free, religion. If the task of such a philosophical religion is to understand pagan mythology and Christian revelation, it is not limited by it; and if, on the other hand, it provides a model for understanding revelation, this does not mean it can be reduced to a logic, if logic is to be understood as a closed system founded upon necessity. Rather, such a philosophical religion, as the thinking acknowledgement of the limits of pure thought, and the avowal of an eschatological longing for a God – however secularly understood – who remains to come in fullness, can serve to provide a convincing basis for philosophical systematicity without thereby squandering freedom.

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