

**Evil and the Absolute:
The Paradox of the Future in Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*¹**

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Introduction

The reception of Schelling today as the great thinker contra Hegelian absolutism, the great celebrator of the contingency of existence over logical necessity, the thinker of the open future and creativity of philosophical thinking—this reception has yet to acknowledge the greatest innovation and paradox of Schelling's philosophy: that the Absolute must be thought of as a *life* with a *destiny* yet unrealized. As early as Plotinus, eternity has been grasped as a simultaneously whole life; with the Christian reception of Neoplatonism, this life becomes an active procession of Son from Father, with Spirit uniting both; only with Schelling does this active life become a *destiny* structured around the eternally active temporalities of past, present, and future.² Through the eternal temporalities, Schelling reconciles human freedom for good and evil with a systematic metaphysics that leaves nothing outside of this differentiated eternal life; as explained below, this dynamic enables Schelling to assert the omnibenevolence of God's will alongside the free *moral decision* of humanity for good and evil, for a will that either uses its individuality to embody a universal love or encloses itself in a selfish and destructive egoism. While God Himself does not will the evil made possible by human freedom, the possibility of the freely

¹ This version contains slight edits/corrections to citations and footnotes. It also contains minor edits to word choice for the purpose of clarification. I have included the typeset page numbers from *Science et Esprit* in brackets for citation purposes.

² Schelling uses the language of the eternal past in the drafts of the *Ages of the World*, though not explicitly in the freedom essay itself. However, I argue below that this schema is also at play in the freedom essay.

chosen good, and thus the very purpose of revelation, is inextricably tied therewith. Evil is justified only so long as it is reduced to the temporary means for this good and is ultimately overcome *tout court*—lest it eternally persist alongside or even outweigh the good itself in contradiction to God’s omnibenevolence. Yet, the paradox of the *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809 is that the final purpose of this divine life—the raising of the good to an everlasting unity with God and the casting of evil to eternal nothingness³—is a transformation of eternity *that ‘is’ not yet*. The promise for the realization of this transformation grants reality of evil in the present [288] as the index of the incompleteness of destiny and its annihilation in the fulfillment of a destiny only through which the Absolute, as an omnibenevolent God, might be conceived as a *life* at all: “All life has a destiny, and is subject to suffering and becoming.”⁴

As I explain in this essay, the fulfillment of divine destiny, as a condition of this life, necessitates the paradoxical—indeed inconceivable—dissolution of the *eternal* ‘past’ through which both God’s love and creation might emerge at all in their eternal presence/existence.⁵ This eternal past engenders the possibility of evil but is required for the ‘becoming’ or development of both creation and God’s own life *and thus the good of both as such*. Thus, although the question of the future has been almost completely ignored in the critical reception of Schelling’s freedom essay, I claim that it is the specter haunting Schelling’s philosophical project, caught between the demand for divine completion through which his systematic metaphysics gains meaning *as an omnibenevolent life* that promises the triumph of the good and the inability for this systematic metaphysics to realize this destiny intelligibly or coherently within the system that Schelling posits. If Schelling’s system is given meaning in view of the future, if the present condition of a suffering humanity and the reality of evil might be understood only in the future abolition of both

³ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, tr. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, Albany: SUNY Press, 2006, p. 68. Henceforth *EF* in footnotes.

⁴ *EF*, p. 66.

⁵ *EF*, p. 67.

conditions, the irreducible paradox of the future brings Schelling's project into crisis or systematic 'excess' as its necessary fundament.

I claim that the paradox of the future must be understood in connection to the tension between Schelling's attempt to construct a logically rigorous reconciliation of freedom and system and the increasing turn to historical events as 'proving' the omnibenevolent divinity of the Absolute in what ultimately becomes 'positive philosophy.' The reconciliation of system and freedom would be incomprehensible for Schelling outside of the concrete historical moment of Christ, whose revelation both makes conscious the moral freedom of humanity for good and evil and promises of the ultimate abolition of evil. If the realization of Schelling's future cannot be known or derived from any logical necessity, Schelling nonetheless calls it a "moral necessity" *contained immanently in the system itself*,⁶ revealed in the living spirit of Christ to which history bears witness. Nevertheless, reason must continue to adhere to a rigorous conception of these terms so as not to regress to dogmatic, pre-Kantian metaphysics. Thus, the tension in Schelling's philosophical commitments is clarified when brought into conversation with Kant's philosophical legacy and the drive to overcome the limitations of transcendental philosophy. Underscoring the relationship between history and the eternal principles of the Absolute as the crux of concern, I organize this essay into two sections: [289] first, I provide an overview of Schelling's systematic metaphysics that *explains* and *derives* the decision for good and evil from the eternal principles of the Absolute; second, I clarify the relation between destiny and evil to explain the paradox of the future, borne from Schelling's post-Kantian explanation of the expression of eternity in time, including humanity's freely chosen 'transcendental act' for good and evil.

⁶ EF, p. 61.

Metaphysical Science as Divine Life

As late as the *Identitätsphilosophie*, Schelling's philosophy might be considered, as Michael Vater claims, a Kantian metaphysics that respects the inapplicability of the categories of the understanding beyond experience.⁷ Yet, by the time of the freedom essay, Schelling places greater focus on explaining the relationship between the Absolute and creation, which requires application of the concepts of causality and substance to the Absolute itself. Retrospectively in his lectures on the history of philosophy, Schelling launches several critiques that explain this abandoning of the Kantian limitation of metaphysics, including the claim that the critique of cognition is a critique of knowing of knowing, which should go on to infinite regress,⁸ that the analogical use of the categories to describe the Ideas of reason in their practical validity violates their supposedly *a priori* status anyway,⁹ and that Kant does not *prove*, but merely *assumes*, that we cannot apply the categories of the understanding to the supersensible.¹⁰ Most importantly, Schelling claims that Kant abandons the demand of philosophy to explain the genesis of nature and to elucidate the concepts of God, freedom, and the soul because he fails to recognize the limited applicability of his critique to metaphysics outside of the rationalist tradition of Wolff and Baumgarten.¹¹ While recognizing the validity of his rejection of the traditional proofs of God, Schelling claims that the Kantian critique “does not affect Spinoza” and other metaphysical systems that reflect the development of its own object rather than applies external predicates to a subject.¹² Leaving aside possible defenses of Kant on each of these points, Schelling takes it that a systematic metaphysics remains possible so long as it unfolds the contents of the Absolute

⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, *Bruno, or On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things*, tr. Michael Vater, Albany: SUNY Press, 1984, p. 73.

⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, tr. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 98.

⁹ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p.105.

¹⁰ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p.105.

¹¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 103.

¹² F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 103.

through its own immanent determinations. Schelling's defense of Spinoza against claims of pantheism on the principle that a system is a relation of *antecedens* to *consequens* rather than an immediate identity of God with finite things, underscores one aspect of this [290] self-development; Schelling's critique of Spinoza for failing to recognize that this relationship does not abolish the freedom of what is dependent, underscores the other.

As Schelling constructs his philosophical system, he attempts to reconcile the critical legacy of Kant and the view that reason is animated not by its own contents but rather the concrete events of historical revelation. Despite the theosophical influences of Böhme and the mystical language present in the freedom essay, Schelling neither regresses—as Christopher Lauer rightly notes—to “the methodological stupor of dogmatism”¹³ nor asserts an indefensible account of the Absolute through immediate intuition. While Schelling at times appeals to the ‘depths’ of the human soul as intuitively ‘conscientious’ [*mitwissenschaftlich*] of the Absolute,¹⁴ he is surprisingly close to Hegel in claiming that reason must demonstrate and justify metaphysical science, lest the contents of this intuition remain abstract, merely subjective, and thus contingent. Thus, in one sense, Andrew Bowie is right that Schelling's system does not require “belief in God in the dogmatic sense;”¹⁵ yet, against Bowie, neither is Schelling's philosophy reducible to an abstract investigation of the disclosure of Being in the Heideggerian sense. The very principles of the Absolute, *revealed* as an omnibenevolent *God*, come to take on meaning disclosed historically—not as dogmatic belief but as a treatment of Christian revelation as the unfolding a spiritual content to be grasped scientifically as the reconciliation of freedom and system. That is, the highest expression of philosophy, as a ‘system of freedom’ that does justice both to human freedom and a grounding Absolute philosophical principle, is made

¹³ Christopher Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, New York: Continuum, 2010, p. 137.

¹⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, tr. Jason Wirth, Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, p. xxxvi. Jason Wirth emphasizes that this ‘conscientiousness’ implies not only consciousness but also a moral conscience.

¹⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 95.

conceivable (and ‘provable’) by an *historical* content. By the time of freedom essay, Schelling’s system must be understood as the effort to *explain* and *derive* the principles of reality from the Absolute itself. Writing retrospectively of his philosophical method by the time of the *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling asserts that metaphysical principles must either be proven in reality or have an expression in reality.¹⁶ Perhaps most importantly, Schelling’s freedom essay gives a nascent account of what he later calls a ‘metaphysical empiricism’ that takes the concrete reality of spiritual events, including revelation and freedom of other subjects, as observable factual events that require an explanation through the principles of the Absolute as well.

The freedom essay is not Schelling’s definitive metaphysical science nor should it be taken as a fully consistent work, but it does express certain principles [291] and structures of his thought that underscore the fundamental tensions in this method. Rather than provide an exhaustive and idiosyncratic account of the metaphysical system of the freedom essay, which remains rife with interpretative ambiguities, it is productive to ruminate on how certain logical principles come to take on content divined from historical revelation. For instance, the *Ungrund*, which is later supplanted by the ‘unprethinkable’ Being or *prius* of ‘positive philosophy,’ expresses Schelling’s adherence to the idea that Being is the first principle of metaphysical science from which thinking derives and on which it reflects. Following Hölderlin in “Judgment and Being,” Schelling takes it that Being must be presupposed as Absolute because all thinking (alongside all finite existence) is marked by a relativism or schism of subject and object and thus lacks the necessary unity of a first principle. The need of thinking for the copula indicates a prior unity of Being through which a relation between subject and predicate can be established at all or through which knowledge can recognize *itself* as limited.¹⁷

¹⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *On The History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 118.

¹⁷ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling*, pp. 60-67.

In the freedom essay and more explicitly in the *Weltalter*, the *Ungrund* becomes an ‘abyss’ of will/freedom that freely bestows actuality on (or otherwise sets in motion) a series of ‘potencies,’ each I take to correspond to a causal principle in the creation of the world.¹⁸ The Absolute ‘contains’ or develops its own immanent self-revelation as an omnibenevolent living spirit *through* these potencies; by choosing to reveal itself, the *Ungrund* is revealed to have always already been the goodness of God’s free will. Leaving aside complications to his often changing account (for instance, in the *Weltalter*, each potency contains all three potencies in a distinct hierarchy), the eternal yearning for existence, or the ‘ground,’ is the real principle or material cause;¹⁹ the ‘light’ or ‘Word’ of God is the ideal, formal cause with the power to subordinate this *chora*-like yearning; spirit, as *actu* real or the loving will for creation,²⁰ stands over and unifies these two potencies, subordinating the ground to the Word, selfhood to love, and acting as teleological and efficient cause.

While this structure may appear to be a piece of “empty speculation,” Jerry Day rightly emphasizes that, across Schelling’s works, “the potencies of the divine are ostensibly discovered in human experience.”²¹ The importance of the historical revelation of Christ, rather than an abstract ‘disclosure of Being,’ is nowhere clearer than on this point: because God reveals Himself/His will in history as *living spirit*, the Absolute can be said to contain the same potencies exhibited in human spirit and natural life more generally. Schelling can hope to obviate [292] the critique that he projects principles of experience and finite life onto the structure of a

¹⁸ Tyler Tritten relates the potencies to causal principles in Schelling’s later philosophy. I take this to be in conjunction with this earlier work in the freedom essay. See: Tyler Tritten, *Beyond Presence: The Late F. W. J. Schelling’s Criticism of Metaphysics*, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 230-231.

¹⁹ Note that this materiality is not the extended matter of the spatialized world, which Schelling argues emerges only with the ‘fall’ of creation from the Absolute; materiality should be understood rather in terms of an enclosing/contracting being-in-itself or selfhood.

²⁰ In the freedom essay, Schelling claims that God Himself transforms with this revelation, thus ‘completing’ Himself through revelation; yet, we might ask whether he understands this not as a transformation of the *Ungrund* itself (since as the abyss of freedom it lacks nothing), but as the revelation of its *will* for creation.

²¹ Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, London: University of Missouri Press, 2003, p. 141.

supersensible cause only because he takes this cause as itself having authorized such a projection by revealing its affinity with creation. Thus, with modifications, Schelling transposes the structure of reality he outlines in the *Naturphilosophie*, which unfolds the tension in all of life between ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ principles, on the Absolute. While critics including Hegel take Schelling’s philosophy of nature to be a prefigured logical structure imposed abstractly and contingently on the world rather than truly derived from it,²² Schelling claims that these same principles are expressed distinctly at each stage of inorganic, organic and spiritual life, with all things in existence expressing a ‘real’ being-in-itself or materiality and an ‘ideal’ expression and development, culminating in human knowing and history. Full investigation into the various expressions of these principles would require extensively more space, though Schelling works from the general notion that any revelation or expression of existence cannot take place without a ground or selfhood that is initially contracted, while the ‘real’ principle requires the expansive moment of ideality in order to *reveal itself at all*.²³

In the *Weltalter*, and I argue at play in the freedom essay as well given his discussion of God eternally giving birth to Himself from the ground,²⁴ Schelling describes the potencies in the paradoxical language of eternal temporality, most notably calling the ‘yearning for existence’ or ground the ‘eternal past’ from which spirit— suffering to overcome the dominance of the real principle—frees itself as the eternally present and teleological ‘to come.’ As opposed to a passing away of one moment into the next *in time*, eternal temporalization organizes these potencies in relations of grounding and mutual activity that are ‘always already’ and thus *from eternity*. As Schelling writes, the ground and spirit are “two equally eternal beginnings of self-

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, 1830*, tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, pp. 191-192.

²³ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, pp. 57-58; see also Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, pp. 139-142.

²⁴ *EF*, p. 28.

revelation,” each having no actuality without the other.²⁵ In divine spirit, the union of real and ideal principles is asymmetrical, the ideal having preponderance over the real by reducing it to a mere non-active grounding for the revelation of His omnibenevolent existence/Word. Yet, as *eternal* principles constituting this very identity, these potencies must remain eternally active and distinct from their equally eternal moment of union. Hence, this account of eternity allows Schelling to assert that God’s spirit is omnibenevolent, willing only love and unity between real and ideal principles, yet that it also requires a grounding principle grounding its eternal presence (and without positing a strict dualism precisely because this is His *own* past in which He yearns to give birth to Himself as spirit/will). [293] Despite not being actively or specifically willed by God, this ground must remain independent, lest there be no true distinction in spiritual life between the forces of selfhood and love. Without this active principle *from which to emerge as its own past*, spirit would not undergo a ‘becoming’ or ‘suffering’ constitutive of life and the merely ‘potential’ ground of yearning would not truly be its own principle, reducing spirit to an undifferentiated, lifeless infinite without *telos*.²⁶ In other words, without the active real principle, it would lack the creative tension constitutive of life itself.

Schelling’s concept of destiny is also explained in relation to the temporalization of eternity constitutive of a differentiated life. Using the language of divine destiny, Schelling explains why spirit and the ground, as different eternal temporalities, interact at all for the eternal creation of nature and finite spirit. As Schelling describes, creation is guided not by a lifeless logical or conceptual necessity but rather a divine will to inform the ground with *logos* as a teleological cause.²⁷ Schelling’s metaphysical science, as a divine life, is driven by a *moral* necessity that contains in it the “concept of revelation as a conscious and morally free act.”²⁸

²⁵ *EF*, p. 59.

²⁶ God would be a mere “logical abstraction” (*EF*, p. 58).

²⁷ *EF*, p. 61.

²⁸ *EF*, p. 60.

God's freedom is a moral necessity not in the sense of an external compulsion but rather a fulfillment of an omnibenevolent essence, not in the sense of a logical requirement but rather a free disclosure of love. Most importantly, the concept of destiny unfolds the contents of this moral necessity through which God reveals Himself as a *living*, loving Absolute; without this moral necessity, the Absolute would not have the qualities of omnibenevolence and a desire to reveal a freely chosen good in creation and, ultimately, to abolish evil. To realize divine destiny, spirit reveals itself to "what is like [God], free beings acting on their own"²⁹ and thus capable of realizing the good alongside evil—a possibility unintended by omnibenevolent spirit yet ultimately necessary to reveal the good—as *consequens* of the Absolute. As revealed by Christ, the final purpose of creation, and thus the destined life of God, is to cast out the freely chosen evil of human spirit into total non-being. As Alan White claims, Schelling ultimately waffles on whether God's destiny is one that He must fulfill for His *own* sake (to know Himself in self-reflection) or whether he does it for the sake of creation itself (since the abyss of freedom 'needs' nothing);³⁰ regardless of this ambiguity, however, the *act* of God's self-revelation, and thus the *life* of this *actualized* spirit/will, is 'incomplete' without the fulfillment of this destiny. [294]

The question of creation and its relationship to the eternal interactions of the potencies brings to bear an important yet difficult and obscure point of the freedom essay. If the eternal potencies are interacting in order to create the world *from eternity*, then creation is itself 'eternal' in some sense (namely, it turns out, in terms of the essence³¹ of things). But how does a world that is *in* space and time itself come about? Although he leaves this point unspecified in the freedom essay itself, in *Bruno, Clara*, and *Philosophy and Religion* and resonating even with his

²⁹ *EF*, p. 18.

³⁰ Alan White, *Schelling: Introduction to the System of Freedom*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 176.

³¹ See, for extended discussion of the relationship between atemporal essence and temporal existence, Charlotte Alderwick, "Atemporal Essence and Existential Freedom in Schelling," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 23, pp. 115-137, 2015.

later work, Schelling claims that the realm of time comes about with the ‘falling’ of creation from eternity due to the egoism of humanity. I take this as Schelling’s attempt to overcome Kant in *explaining* and *deriving* the existence of a temporal world in which transcendental human freedom is expressed. While resulting in a temporal and spatialized world, the ‘fall’ from eternity does not imply that eternal creation is itself destroyed (since, as eternal it is ‘always already’); instead, taking human freedom as coherent only *transcendentally*, Schelling indicates that the eternal expresses itself in time as that which ‘essentially’ always already is and must be. From eternity and as expressed in time, all of creation comes about between the opposing forces of ideality and reality, between the revelation of reality by ideality and the active resistance of reality, as a progressive unfolding of increasing complexity. Adhering to the principle that any attempt to identify being with thinking creates a ‘remainder’ that cannot be captured fully by *logos*, the active principle of the ground becomes a *resistance* or irreducibility to the universalizing ideality of the Word.³² Schelling thus explains and derives the principles of creation by claiming that all life exhibits the tension between this irreducibly real principle and the ideal principle through which it expresses its existence. Unlike the rest of nature, which exhibits these principles in a lower ‘potency,’ human spirit experiences them as an opposition or full separation that is ultimately subject to the *eternally* free and conscious decision for good and evil. Only this free decision, in relation to the possibility of evil, realizes divine destiny to unite with a freely chosen goodness/love to which it is the *antecedens*.

Yet, precisely because this reunion relies on the abolishment of the eternal yearning of the ground since it engenders the eternal possibility of evil, Schelling’s system is mired in paradox. How can a life proclaim the abolition of the very condition by which it lives? Having described Schelling’s metaphysical science as a divine life, it is necessary to consider how the

³² EF, p. 47.

problem of evil reveals crisis and contradiction engendered between the rigor of metaphysical science and the facticity of historical and spiritual revelation.

The Transcendental Act

The influence of transcendental philosophy on Schelling's system is nowhere clearer than in his discussion of the human freedom for good and evil. For [295] Schelling, Kant's greatest discovery is that the intelligible being of humanity is outside or above all time and thus never determined by it; following Kant, if humanity were *merely* temporal, freedom would be inconceivable insofar as its actions and (coming to) being would be determined by 'empirical,' causal relations to other temporal beings. Thus, humanity's freedom precedes time "not so much temporally as conceptually, as an absolute unity that must always already exist fully and complete so that particular action or determination may be possible in it."³³ Yet, for Schelling, Kant leaves unexplained *how* a moral decision for good or evil is made atemporally and expressed in time. Schelling critiques Kant for having recognized the freedom of the human being as "a subjective ground of human actions preceding every act apparent to the senses"³⁴ but not having risen to a coherent account of the transcendental nature of this decision. Kant leaves unexplained how a non-temporal decision for good or evil might be made *qua* empirical subject lacking any capacity to transform or cognize the depths of the will. At once, the empirical subject knows the moral law as it appears for its realization in time and yet cannot know with certainty the moral constitution of the will itself; this moral constitution must be somehow inferred in the activities of the world yet these activities cannot be given as proof or knowledge of the moral constitution of the will. Perhaps most problematic in Kant's account is the inconceivable notion that empirical actions may hope to transform an atemporal will, a will that is always already as it

³³ EF, p. 49.

³⁴ EF, p. 49.

is, as the determining ground of the empirical itself.³⁵ For Schelling, this claim is antithetical to the idea of transcendental human freedom, leading him to posit the *transcendental act* from eternity. The transcendental act is a kind of ‘predestination’ in the sense that the actions of humanity “[do] not become, just as [humanity itself] does not become as moral beings, but rather it is eternal by nature,” from the free decision for good and evil as one’s own essence as finite spirit.³⁶ The actions of individuals are not arbitrary or contingent but rather in accordance with a will and “disposition” [*Gesinnung*]³⁷ that has always already been decided from eternity.

Hence, in the wake of Kant, the construction of a ‘system of freedom’ that *explains* transcendental freedom rather than merely posits it requires an account of how and why the moral law appears to us as *eternal* beings and *how* this eternal decision is expressed in empirical actions. As Schelling writes, [296] the free decision for good and evil might emerge only through a suffering for existence experienced by finite spirit. While good and evil are ‘positive’ principle of free decision rather than the ‘lack’ of finitude *per se* (as nothing else in nature rises to moral understanding), the possibility of this decision emerges only with the suffering of spirit in its finitude. Against Dale Snow, the human being is not, for Schelling, “grounded in itself” or “self-positing,” even if the essence of humanity is its own free deed and independent of determination by other created beings.³⁸ To invoke Heidegger, the freedom of humanity is instead a *predicate* of the freedom of the Absolute itself, meaning that the condition of existence is always *outside* of finite creation. In contrast to God’s “eternal joy of overcoming”³⁹ His own eternal past of yearning, that is emerging from His own past to unite the real and ideal principles in their proper hierarchy, finite spirit suffers an indelible sadness that “clings to all finite life,” given that human

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, tr. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 6:48.

³⁶ Bernard Freyberg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2008, p. 72.

³⁷ *EF*, p. 51.

³⁸ Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, p. 169.

³⁹ *EF*, p. 62.

selfhood “can never rise to full actuality [*zum Aktus*]” in the sense of this necessary yet free self-identity in self-differentiation.⁴⁰ The sadness of finitude must be understood as the fear of the ‘consuming fire’ of love that abolishes individuality for its self-dispossessing universality. As such, finite spirit is initially opposed to self-dispossession and clings instead to its own particularity in the drive to posit itself as absolute in its own inward subjectivity and to use the Word of reason for the benefit of its own enclosed egoism. Against Manichaeism, evil is not its own ‘fundamental being’ [*Grundwesen*]⁴¹ existing co-eternally with the principle of the good (and thus eternally outside of the systematic Absolute), nor is the will of the ground, in its active resistance to *logos*, *in itself* evil. Evil is rather a parasitic inversion of the relationship between the ‘contractive’ craving for existence, or the egoism of personality, and the universal self-dispossession of love. In history, this may be expressed as the valorization of egoistic benefit, the attempted mastery of other spirits by absolutizing the particularity of one’s own will, and the failure to conform to universalizable maxims.⁴²

Schelling commends Kant for recognizing radical evil from mere empirical observation (rather than systematic *deduction*), writing that it is even remarkable that he ascends to this knowledge.⁴³ Yet, it remains unclear in the text, and in the secondary literature, to what extent Schelling considers the initial [297] suffering state of human spirit a ‘radical evil’ in the sense of a *transparently* free act. While Schelling leaves ambiguous whether or how finite spirit might itself be understood in terms of eternal temporalities, he draws a comparison between this state of finite spirit and the eternal past of God/spirit, in which a ‘seed’ of light is present in the ground yet not fully realized as full understanding.⁴⁴ Even by the late *Philosophy of Mythology*,

⁴⁰ *EF*, p. 62.

⁴¹ *EF*, p. 73.

⁴² *EF*, p. 57.

⁴³ *EF*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ *EF*, p. 32.

Schelling wavers between attributing guilt and innocence to the Fall, because as Jerry Day writes, “our ancestors had no knowledge of differences between which they could have chosen freely.”⁴⁵ However, this does not prohibit the attribution of the egoism of evil to human spirit’s original condition. Schelling goes so far to claim that it is only from this initial condition of ‘darkness’ can “the good as light can be developed,”⁴⁶ thus implying that a free decision for evil and good is realizable only after passing from this initial state of spiritual suffering. Following Kant once more, only with the help of divine assistance or grace, a “transformation” [Transmutation]⁴⁷ may occur from all eternity, bringing human spirit to full understanding of good and evil and allowing spirit to overcome its initial existential suffering (presumably) *if it so freely chooses*. With this, Schelling provides a theodical justification for radical evil as the necessary state of suffering prior to the raising of the good to consciousness; without the possibility of evil coming from the active resistance of the ground, “the good [would have remained] hidden together with evil,”⁴⁸ thus failing to realize the moral necessity of God’s omnibenevolent life and, in a sense, giving victory to evil.

Lest this conception of evil be accused once more of “empty speculation,” the principle guiding his metaphysical project in general—that the principles of eternity unfold in time and become the contents of history—apply here as well. Against the dominant materialist historical paradigms of today, Schelling relies on a reading of history that takes historical progress as driven by spiritual evolutions and events rather than material developments transformations. While Schelling’s reading of history remains open to the charge that he absolutizes only one, contingent historical narrative culminating in the revelation of Christ, he claims that without this

⁴⁵ Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, p. 145.

⁴⁶ *EF*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ *EF*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ *EF*, p. 67.

moment, “all of history would be incomprehensible,”⁴⁹ given that the philosophical reconciliation of freedom and system is possible only as such. What, then, is this (spuriously interpreted) historical content? Not only as individuals but also as a *species*, human spirit is faced with the existential suffering of finitude from eternity, expressed in the historical passage through suffering, its means in *sin* and its end in *death*. In his description of the epochal unfolding of history, Schelling emphasizes [298] that the spirit of love appears only after an era of ‘unconsciousness’ of good and evil; before the historical revelation of Christ, humanity has no knowledge of good and evil but only of the God yearning to give birth to Himself, a primeval time [*Urzeit*] in which the spirit of love has yet to be revealed.⁵⁰ A conflict is then declared between good and evil with the revelation of Christ, which brings humanity to full consciousness of this difference and the promise of an eventual overcoming of evil by good. In turn, the phenomena of sin, suffering, and death become for Schelling a “general necessity” for “the actual extinction of particularity through which all human will as a fire must cross in order to be purified.”⁵¹ All of humanity must pass through the ‘evils’ of sin, suffering, and death—called the ‘enemies’ of Christ to be abolished⁵²—in order to accept a self-dispossessing, loving union with God; all of humanity expresses egoism, laziness, the privileging of particularity over universal interest, or violent impulses for mastery to some degree, though only some ultimately overcome these moral failings. Even those who choose the good from eternity must suffer the historical expression of this passage from egoism as they are ‘purified’ of their ‘radical evil’ and enact their freedom on and through the rest of creation; death is the only means for full absolution

⁴⁹ *EF*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ *EF*, p. 46.

⁵¹ *EF*, p. 48.

⁵² *EF*, p. 68.

from undergoing or perpetuating suffering in the material world (even without evil intention), necessarily divided and internally conflicted for the very reason that it is ‘fallen.’⁵³

Yet, Schelling leaves the relationship between history and eternity impenetrably obscure and never fully coherent, never mind changing between texts. In the freedom essay itself, it is unclear whether these concrete actions and interactions amongst and between finite spirits and nature are always already determined as much as the ‘transcendental act’—that is, whether these beings stand in a *logical* relation to each other from eternity that is merely spatialized and temporalized with the Fall—or whether the realm of time engenders new and unforeseen interactions and forces. The former option would make eternal creation a fully transcendental condition of history in the vein of Fichte and, arguably, would follow certain Spinozistic elements of the *Identitätsphilosophie*. The temporal world would thus be ‘determined’ in accordance with relations that include the freedom of human spirit. Nevertheless, Schelling also appears at times to treat history as a means for a transformation of eternity itself, [299] motioning toward the good/purified soul’s return to and reunion with the Absolute after death under a higher perfection than before,⁵⁴ as is the case in *Philosophy and Religion*. Schelling must argue either that eternity is always already complete, which he denies through the language of divine destiny and *cannot* affirm because the ‘fallen’ world is a marker of its unfulfillment and the continued presence of evil from eternity, or else claim that ‘fallen’ creation somehow—impossibly—is the catalyst of the transformation or fulfillment of eternity into that which it is *not yet*. Leaving aside the problem of time transforming eternity itself (a reproduction of Kantian aporia), it is inconceivable how the principles of eternity could transform into what they are not

⁵³ Schelling indicates in such texts as *Clara* a belief in the spectral afterlife, however, given that few ‘good’ spirits are fully purified by the time of death and must continue their efforts until entering into a purified ‘spirit world’ (also subject to temporal change thus the Fall/incompleteness of eternity). Moreover, evil spirits exhibit an intractable desire to maintain materiality or are internally conflicted and suffering unceasingly after death. Schelling does not explain what happens to the spirits that lived before Christ.

⁵⁴ *EF*, p. 67.

‘always already.’ Perhaps Schelling attempts to evade this immanent paradox by characterizing the problem of evil as “merely temporal.”⁵⁵ Yet, in reducing evil to a mere accident of time, Schelling contradicts his own conception of evil as possible only through the structure of eternity itself, as the expression of an *eternal decision*.

As such, the solution to reconciling the reality of evil with the ‘revealed’ Word of God—that divine life has a destiny to abolish evil *from eternity*—engenders paradox that must be examined. While the good emerges only from the purification of the original principle of evil, this bringing forth of the good also preserves evil as a principle *alongside* the free choice for good, even being the ‘past’ condition of good spirits themselves. The ‘enemies’ of Christ, the suffering and destruction brought forth from the free decision for evil, are irreducible to their value as a pyre through which the good might emerge. They also indicate the real decision for evil, an eternal rejection of the universality of God’s love and an eternal spiritual suffering externalized as a destructive force in history, a breaking forth of the chaos of the ground. As Schelling warns, evil annihilates “the bond of creaturely existence”⁵⁶ in striving to become creaturely, thus paradoxically threatening to destroy the principles of creation, much as a disease or parasite does to the body. For this reason, numerous commentators, including Heidegger⁵⁷ and Žižek,⁵⁸ have questioned whether the transcendental act for evil indexes a rupture, the excess of human freedom to God’s divinity, an irreducible non-identity haunting Schelling’s systematic metaphysics in its power of annihilation. Yet, to emphasize once more, Schelling evades Manichaeism to claim that even evil is ‘within’ the life of God understood as God the *antecedens* to the *consequens* of human freedom. The destructive forces of humanity, committed against

⁵⁵ *EF*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ *EF*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1985, p. 161.

⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 63.

natural [300] and spiritual being alike, are always already contained in the system by being grounded in the principles of eternal potencies in a relationship of *antecedens* to *consequens*. Against Heidegger, the problem of evil is not a problem for the formal *system* or the *abstract* disclosure of Being because the Absolute could contain even the most egregious historical atrocities *in principle*.

Instead, the real problem of evil comes about when this system is a *divine life* structured as a moral necessity to abolish evil. Evil becomes wholly reducible to its role of revealing of the good only in view of the destined victory of the good in the future overcoming of this evil, in the dissolution of the active force of yearning that recoils from the will of love. Without the redemptive promise of Christ to defeat evil, the good might just as well serve to bring to full consciousness evil itself, to grant evil a place from eternity, to fail to bring divine life to completion. Accordingly, it would come into question whether the revelation of the good is truly justified in view of the evil it unleashes, whether the Absolute would have any realizable purpose constitutive of life as such, and whether the theodical motivation of Schelling's project—to reconcile God's omnibenevolent life with humanity's freedom for evil—is tenable. Thus, we must consider what it means that paradox lurks behind, or rather as, the promise of Christ.

Conclusion: The Paradox of the Future

Schelling discusses the end of evil as the “final crisis”⁵⁹ of a system moving toward the “final separation of good from evil.”⁶⁰ He writes that this separation signals the *abolishment* of the eternal yearning of the ground, such that it is neither active nor independent, unable to step out of potentiality, and thus unable to realize the inversion of eternal principles in the moral *decision* of humanity. Yet, the dissolution of the active and independent ground is the dissolution of the

⁵⁹ *EF*, p. 66.

⁶⁰ *EF*, p. 67.

suffering condition through which God grounds both His own spirit/will and creation itself. Any narrative of eternal progression to the fulfillment of destiny must be grounded in a past that is supposed to be abolished by that which it eternally grounds. If the eternal future is ushered with God's decision to transform the structure of relation with the eternal past, this intervention would remain an eternal moment realizing the transformation of the past 'after' the past, possible only because the past was, and always already was, preserved 'before' this transformation; alternatively, if the eternal future is precisely always *future* as an eternal condition of unrealizability as presence, the eternal past remains as what is always already 'before.' God's life would be either that which cannot be completed, in a perpetual state of coming to be its eternal future yet never actualizing, or else the destiny of God is precisely that the [301] future that must remain eternally 'to come' and thus never realize the abolition of evil from *all* of eternity. In any attempt at systematic intelligibility, the incompleteness of divine destiny would be the condition through which the completion of destiny might be conceived. The future is what must be posited to the present as its meaning-giving *telos* yet is proscribed from materializing without annihilating the very system to which it appears.

Against Tyler Tritten's interpretation of Schelling's *later* philosophy, the question of "whether or not the Good could be completely actualized, completely present"⁶¹ emerges not from a contingency of God's will but rather the 'moral necessity' of divine life itself. An immanent critique of Schelling's system reveals its fundamental condition as the paradoxical necessity of the future as contradicting the life it is tasked with fulfilling. The future is what *must arrive yet cannot conceivably arrive* in order for Schelling's metaphysical science to be the divine life that any post-Kantian system must be. At once, then, the future must be posited within this system and also, within this very positing, is never fully contained by it. As Schelling claims

⁶¹ Tyler Tritten, *Beyond Presence: The Late F. W. J. Schelling's Criticism of Metaphysics*, (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 343.

in the *Weltalter*, the future frustrates any attempt to be ‘narrated,’ ‘discerned’ or ‘presented’ systematically, even as it must be grasped within the system as its very condition of intelligibility. It is not a mere defect of the soul’s capacity for knowledge but rather the nature of eternity itself that the future be disclosed as an invocation, a prophesy, without which the past and the present would be given no retrospective meaning.⁶² In other words, it is the very nature of the future to elude logical anticipation or derivation, to frustrate systematic intelligibility in its imperative to arrive. Thus, it is necessary to understand Schelling’s system in terms of a destiny whose fulfillment is mired in paradox yet capable of being posited only as such: the meaning of the present must be posited only through the continued absence of what has been divined as the imperative realization of divine destiny.

I leave open whether this conception is merely an illicit attempt to obviate critique for the inconsistencies of Schelling’s method and thus attempt to answer the problem of evil. It is, at least, insufficient to resolve the concerns one ought to have approaching Schelling’s system. As receptors of Schelling’s work, we must recognize his metaphysical science as operating through this paradox: to deny either the realization of this destiny or its inconceivability is to deflate the paradox through which his very system lives. The renunciation of the utopian future in the disavowal of faith in Christ’s revelation, now common for readers of Schelling, annihilates the condition of divine life in turning away from Schelling’s insight that a true system must express a destiny. Yet, if Schelling’s project is to be understood as an overcoming of Kantian aporia, [302] what might it mean that we end with the same unverifiable hope or idea for a utopia that (possibly) cannot be realized, or at least cannot conceivably be so? Might Schelling’s overcoming of Kant be evidenced only by a future we are endlessly awaiting? And might this awaiting lead us to nothing but the apocalyptic destruction of the good against which we

⁶² Schelling, *Ages of the World*, xxv.

prophesize? These questions persist not only in the freedom essay but also through the positive philosophy, evidencing a recurrent tension in Schelling's method between the rigor of logical structure and the facticity of spiritual life. Against the triumphant pathos with which Schelling proclaims the certainty of the fulfillment of divine life, we confront a living system of contradictory demands that produce the life it brings into crisis. Perhaps being a Schellingean today means only to speak back to a divine promise and question: *Will the future ever arrive?*

Sommaire

Cet essai scrute le *Freiheitsschrift* de Schelling (1809) en tant qu'il tente de réconcilier la bonté absolue de Dieu avec la réalité (dite positive) du mal moral au sein de l'humanité. Schelling entreprend cette réconciliation à travers une métaphysique dont le fondement est la vie divine douée de temporalités éternelles. Néanmoins, cette réconciliation s'empêtre elle-même dans des paradoxes autour de la question concernant la possibilité de réduire le mal au bien puisque le premier pourrait être surmonté par le second. Afin d'examiner cette question, je vais d'abord rendre compte du «système de la liberté» dont Schelling est l'auteur, puisqu'il implique la structure de l'Absolu. Puis j'examinerai la question de la liberté humaine transcendante dont la structure de l'Absolu fournit le principe. Que la fin du mal doive arriver à l'avenir même si elle reste inconcevable conduira l'analyse de Schelling à une crise systématique.

Summary

This essay examines Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* (1809) as a post-Kantian attempt to reconcile the omnibenevolence of God and the 'positive' reality of moral evil in humanity. Schelling undertakes this reconciliation through a metaphysics based on a divine life with eternal temporalities. Yet, this reconciliation is mired in paradox over whether evil is ultimately surmountable and thus reducible to the good. To examine this question, I first give account Schelling's 'system of freedom' as it involves the structure of the Absolute. I then examine the question of transcendental human freedom grounded in this structure. I claim that it is the problem of the future end of evil that must arrive yet cannot conceivably do so that brings Schelling's account to systematic crisis.