The Metaphysics of Human Freedom: From Kant's Transcendental Idealism to Schelling's Freiheitsschrift

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'How must a world be constituted for a moral being?'
('Oldest System-Programme', 1796/97)

This is a discussion of Schelling's 1809 work, Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom, in relation to Kant's theory of freedom. What I want to focus on is the connection between their theories of freedom and their idealism or general metaphysics – the way that the demands of freedom motivate different forms of idealism, or perhaps in the case of the Freedom essay, an idealism that goes beyond itself. There are numerous important and extremely interesting elements in the essay that I am not going to address – including the discussion of identity and predication, and the indifference point – and nor am I going to try to assess whether Schelling's view of freedom is adequate in its own terms.

The Freedom essay marks a turning point in Schelling's development, the end of his attempt to define a satisfactory form of absolute idealism, and the beginning of his late philosophy, which is by any measure one of the most obscure parts of German Idealism. Themes discussed in the essay include, in addition to human freedom: moral psychology, good and evil, pantheism and philosophical systematicity, the nature of God, and the nature of being: which is where Schelling seems to change key and perhaps to envisage a new type of metaphysics – making it no accident that Heidegger seized on the essay and declared it of great importance.

The idea I want to explore is that the central claims of the Freedom essay can be derived from Kant's theory of freedom and the problems it encounters. This is not how Schelling explicitly presents it. On his own account, the Freedom essay is concerned with the problem of incorporating (genuine) freedom within the system of philosophy. But this is compatible with interpreting Schelling as taking over where Kant leaves off, and if the strange speculative claims of the Freedom essay can be viewed as rooted in a Kantian problematic – if an argument can be constructed from broadly Kantian premises to Schellingian conclusions – then that is all to the good.

1. Kant's theory of human freedom

First, then, an account of where Kant leaves matters.

Kant's conception of human freedom is of course highly complex; what follows is highly abbreviated.

Freedom is in the final instance 'incomprehensible'. What philosophy can nevertheless do is to specify the conditions of free agency, and to underwrite the incomprehensibility of freedom – there can be a metaphysical explanation of its resistance to rational insight, which at the same time reassures us of its reality. The conditions Kant sets on free agency are these. In order to act freely, it must be true that the agent could act (or have acted) otherwise than she does (did). Second, the determining grounds of the action must lie within the agent's control or power, in meiner Gewalt. Third, their action must be determined by reason. Fourth, the agent must be motivated or motivatable by the moral law (pure practical reason). And in order for these conditions to be
fulfilled, Kant argues, two *metaphysical* conditions have to be met. First, the agent must have the peculiar power of reflexive causality or spontaneous self-determination that Kant calls 'transcendental freedom' and defines as 'an unconditioned causality which begins to act of itself'. Second, the agent and her action must have intelligible grounds: the action must be the product of intelligible causality issuing from the agent's intelligible character. Kant thinks that, if (and only if) transcendental idealism is assumed, a justification can be given for taking these two metaphysical conditions to be fulfilled, and so that we are justified in attributing freedom to human agents.

For present purposes, we can set aside all the epistemological questions surrounding Kant's account, and also his famously problematic connection of freedom with morality. What I want to focus on is the *metaphysical* difficulty that critical discussion of Kant's ideas in the very earliest years of Kant reception brought to light.

The two central figures are Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, and Karl Leonhard Reinhold. Both professed themselves Kantians, believed that Kant's teachings on freedom required clarification, and proceeded to rework Kant's theory of freedom, in ways that are however diametrically opposed.

According to Schmid, the exercise of reason must be *intelligibly determined*, and such *intelligible fatalism* (as he calls it) represents a consistent and defensible position which Kantians should espouse. According to Reinhold, Kant's theory must be recast in terms of an irreducible power of self-determination, a capacity to bring about states of affairs by virtue of one's so choosing and nothing else – which Reinhold, following Kant, calls *Willkür*, the power of choice, as opposed to *Wille*, the faculty of mere practical reasoning.

Schmid's reasoning is simply that, if no intelligible causality governs human agency, then freedom is reduced to mere accident, *Zufall*, and its moral meaning is destroyed; while intelligible determinism, Schmid asserts, is sufficient for moral purposes, since it at least lifts us out of natural causality. Reinhold, quite reasonably doubtful that a deterministic supersensible realm is any more hospitable to morality than a deterministic sensible realm, argues that freedom is a basic power distinct from the power of practical reasoning, not explicable in terms of any other concept, independent of the other powers of the mind, and no more mysterious than the faculty of empirical knowledge; freedom is 'fully comprehensible', *völlig begreiflich*.

Now it's plain that not both of these accounts can be correct as an interpretation of Kant. It's also clear where their respective weaknesses lie. As another contemporary, Christian Andreas Leonhard Creuzer, pointed out, the strength of each is the weakness of the other. Schmid's position satisfies *theoretical* reason but contradicts *practical* reason: if we fail to act morally because we cannot do so, then we cannot view our immoral acts as *effects of our reason*, or regard their opposites as *real possibilities*; so the concepts of guilt and merit fall away. Reinhold's position satisfies *practical* reason but is incoherent from the standpoint of *theoretical* reason, since it is absurd to postulate a cause which contains the sufficient basis for contradictorily opposed effects. So, Creuzer argues, advancing to a skeptical conclusion, the two views cancel one another out – we are left with no reason to think that freedom is real and every reason to think that it is a deception arising from our ignorance of the real causes of our actions.

It is of course remarkable that Kant's theory allowed itself to be pulled in two such contrary directions. And we might ask: What did Kant himself think of these construals? We know what he thought of Reinhold from *The Metaphysics of Morals*, where he explicitly denies that the power of choice, *Willkür*, is the locus of our freedom. The concept of a power of free choice, *freie Willkür*, is not a primary but a *derivative* concept: it presupposes the objective legislation of *Wille* and signifies
the mere possibility of failure to execute it. To treat it as primitive and independent, Kant suggests, is either to proceed from the empirical phenomenon of choice, as if transcendental freedom were merely abstracted from it, or it is to suppose, falsely, that we have insight into that power as a noumenal reality.

Regarding Schmid, there is one place in his writings, in the Critique of Practical Reason, where Kant does confront head on the threat of intelligible fatalism. This is also, in my view, where the weakness in his use of transcendental idealism in the defence human freedom shows itself. Here is the relevant passage:

'But a difficulty still awaits freedom insofar as it is to be united with the mechanism of nature in a being that belongs to the sensible world, a difficulty which, even after all the foregoing has been agreed to, still threatens freedom with complete destruction ... [I]f it is granted us that the intelligible subject can still be free with respect to a given action, although as a subject also belonging to the sensible world, he is mechanically conditioned with respect to the same action, it nevertheless seems that, as soon as one admits that God as universal original being is the cause also of the existence of substance (a proposition that can never be given up without also giving up the concept of God as the being of all beings and with it his all-sufficiency, on which everything depends), one must admit that a human being's actions have their determining ground in something altogether beyond his control, namely in the causality of a supreme being which is distinct from him and upon which his own existence and the entire determination of his causality absolutely depend.' (Critique of Practical Reason, 5:100–101).

In such circumstances, Kant says, a human being 'would be a marionette or an automaton', 'built and wound up by the supreme artist; self-consciousness would indeed make him a thinking automaton, but the consciousness of his own spontaneity, if taken for freedom, would be mere delusion' – since, although the proximate determining causes of thought would be internal to the agent, 'the last and highest' cause would be 'found entirely in an alien hand'. Kant explicitly refers to the threat hereby posed as 'Spinozism'.

The solution offered by Kant involves transcendental idealism once again, but deployed in a different way from the Third Antinomy. Were God the creator of beings in the sensible world, then freedom would be annihilated, Kant tells us; but appearances are the work of the human subject, whose forms of intuition are space and time. God thus cannot fix (not even if he wanted to!) the facts in the realm of appearance:

'[T]he concept of a creation does not belong to the sensible way of representing existence or causality but can be referred only to noumena. Consequently, if I say of beings in the sensible world that they are created, I so far regard them as noumena. Just as it would thus be a contradiction to say that God is a creator of appearances, so it is also a contradiction to say that as creator he is the cause of actions in the sensible world and thus of actions as appearances, even though he is the cause of the existence of the acting beings (as noumena).' (Critique of Practical Reason, 5:102)

Human freedom is not itself an appearance, but human agency consists in a synthesis of practical reason with appearance; so if appearance falls outside the scope of divine determination, then so too does human agency. Insulating appearances from God's determining power thus makes human freedom possible.
The problem here becomes more readily visible in light of Fichte's redevelopment of Kant's transcendental idealism. Transcendental idealism as invoked in the context of Spinozism seeks to cut loose empirical reality metaphysically from things in themselves, the objects of intellectual intuition which compose Spinoza's ontology. Kant's argument is that, if things in themselves were the only constituents of reality, then reality would not contain freedom; but there are also appearances, and this makes freedom possible.

The difficulty is to understand the sense in which the world of appearances, Nature, is ours, not God's. If we push the thought, there are various ways it can go, and none of them seem to agree with Kant. (i) If appearance is not determined, not even indirectly, by things in themselves, then it must be thought to form a sui generis reality beholden to nothing outside it – which is the heretical Fichtean version of transcendental idealism. (ii) Alternatively, if appearances are a sub-realm within the totality of what exists, distinguished simply by their dependence on our forms of sensibility, then (since reality in toto must have a rational character) there must be laws relating them to the whole to which they belong – whereupon appearances are reabsorbed into Spinoza's single substance. (iii) And if appearances neither comprise sub-items within a comprehensive reality, nor form a (Fichtean) reality of their own, then Kant has failed to show that freedom is anything more than a matter of how practical reason represents the world – and Spinoza has no need to argue with that; the representation can be explained away as a function of imagination, in Spinoza's sense.

The difficulty we encounter here in determining the meaning of transcendental idealism is of a general kind – are appearances merely a part of a larger reality, or are they in some way a reality of their own? – and not specific to the theory of freedom; but freedom is what makes it burst forth as a problem, since in that context (and not in that of empirical knowledge) we need to be able to spell out the doctrine of transcendental idealism in a way which shows it to underwrite human freedom.

Here is a summary assessment of Kant's achievement.

The gains that Kant makes by referring human freedom to an intelligible ground are offset by a series of problems. That the intelligible grounds of human agency, our intelligible character and exercise of causality of reason, are subject to further intelligible determining conditions is a genuine possibility, which nothing in Kant's system rules out; Kant gives no reason for thinking that the principle of sufficient reason fails to apply to things in themselves. And even if this wholly general worry is regarded as an idle, 'merely theoretical' possibility which the interests of practical reason entitle us to put aside, there are two aggravating considerations that restore its force.

(i) First, the fact of human evil obliges us, as Ulrich, Schmid and Creuzer all point out, to regard the intelligible determination of our intelligible agency as more than a mere conceptual possibility: on the face of it, given Kant's identification of morality with pure practical reason and of the causality of reason with intelligible causality, the natural inference to draw when confronted with immoral conduct is that some intelligible factor has impeded our intelligible agency; which gives positive reason for thinking that in the intelligible domain, our agency is not causally insulated.

Kant, to be sure, has an account of evil which precludes the postulation of any such extraneous intelligible factor – this is his famous doctrine of radical evil, which says that our intelligible disposition to give preference to incentives of self-love over moral incentives is rooted in an intelligible choice of that very disposition. But the motivation for this doctrine, the reason for affirming it, derives entirely from practical interest, our practice of holding morally responsible, the
integrity of which is here in question; and in any case, Kant himself admits that the postulation of radical evil explains nothing and generates a regress, thus failing to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason.

(ii) Second, Kant leaves us at a loss when it comes to thinking up a configuration for the intelligible realm which would so much as grant a toehold for transcendental freedom. Kant denies that a Leibnizian characterization of the intelligible realm would be consistent with human freedom, and affirms in any case that the correct (or at any rate, most warranted) conceptualization of the intelligible realm is not Leibnizian but Spinozistic; and Spinozism, Kant thinks, destroys human freedom directly. Kant signals his acceptance that the question of how things in themselves are configured has logical implications for the existence of human freedom when he accepts that the threat of Spinozism needs to be met – which he seeks to do by invoking transcendental idealism (as a metaphysical doctrine). But this leads to the problem I indicated.

The problems of Kant's theory are rooted in his dual component conception of human freedom: freedom involves both intelligible causality, required to lift human agency out of the empirical causal network, and transcendental spontaneity, required to provide for the dimension of self-conscious self-determination or choice between alternatives. That these do not necessarily cohere is shown by the opposed reconstructions of Kantian freedom in Schmid and Reinhold. The explanation for their coming apart has no doubt something to do with the fact that Kant doesn't tell us which of the two is the more basic (which is a condition of the other): Is it that we need to have an intelligible identity in order that we can enjoy transcendental spontaneity, which is what freedom consists in? Or is transcendental spontaneity simply what makes space in the empirical realm for intelligible causality, which is what freedom consists in? What Kant of course needs is the identification of intelligible causality and transcendental spontaneity, but Kant is not in a position to make that identification, because he has allowed the principle of sufficient reason to stand unchallenged as the law of intelligible reality – this is what sets intelligible causality and transcendental spontaneity in conflict. Ultimately, then, the principle of sufficient reason is what upsets Kant's solution to the problem of human freedom.

That completes my account of the limitations of Kant's solution to the topic of human freedom, which we can perhaps talk about later. What matters for now is just that it corresponds in its essentials to Schelling's estimate of Kant's legacy on the topic of freedom.

2. Schelling's conception of human freedom

Schelling agrees with Kant that intelligible agency provides the key to human freedom, describing this as the great insight of idealism: 'It was, indeed, idealism which first raised the doctrine of freedom into that realm in which it alone is comprehensible. According to idealism, the intelligible being of every thing and especially of man is outside all causal connectedness as it is outside or above all time ... Free action follows immediately from the intelligible aspect of man.' *(Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom, 383–384).*

Schelling also follows Kant in denying that human freedom consists in the bare undetermined power of choice postulated by Reinhold ('equilibrium of choice', Gleichgewicht, as Schelling calls it): 'For the usual concept of freedom, according to which freedom is posited as a wholly undetermined capacity to will either one of two contradictory opposites, without determining reasons but simply because it is willed ... leads to the greatest inconsistencies' (382).
Schelling's departures from Kant begin with his importantly different view of the problem set by evil and its role in relation to freedom. Schelling holds that there must be – for the sake of freedom – some sense in which the choice between good and evil is open, some sense in which they are both real options. As he puts it: '[T]he real and vital conception of freedom is that it is a possibility of good and evil' (352), 'a vital positive power for good and evil' (354); '[i]f the reality of evil [is] in some way denied, then the real concept of freedom vanishes' (353).

Reinhold's postulation of a power intrinsically indifferent to moral distinction might seem to acknowledge but in fact precludes this condition – it fails to capture the way in which the field of freedom is morally polarized; and so too does Kant's merely negative understanding of choice (rendering Kant's conception of freedom merely 'formal', as Schelling puts it). What is required for a solution to the problem of evil, then, is that its ground within the agent be identified in positive terms, such that we grasp the 'pull' of evil.

We see from this that an account of evil is required by Kant and Schelling for quite different reasons. For Kant, it is needed in order that we should be able to impute immoral actions to agents, that is, it is required in order to resolve the puzzle that reason (and hence also freedom) is exercised even in violations of the moral law. For Schelling, it is required in order to give reality to freedom – a proposition which Kant would not accept. For Kant, the reality of freedom is given through the moral law alone. To be sure, the existence of evil follows from this indirectly as a corollary, since, if we were not capable of departing from the moral law, then that law could not appear to us in the distinctive modality of a Sollen, which is the ground of our knowledge of freedom. Evil is therefore a negative, indirect condition of freedom, for Kant, but it does not belong directly to the concept of human freedom – as it does for Schelling.

This difference concerning the conceptual role of freedom entails a difference of view concerning what a theory of evil needs to provide. Both Kant and Schelling hold that the existence of evil requires us to locate within the agent a non-empirical ground of the will's non-conformity to the moral law – for both, evil must have an intelligible locus; both deny that evil is a direct function of the empirical nature in us. But for Kant, this obliges us only to construct a representation of the ground of evil that, as said, sustains the moral imputability of immoral actions. For Schelling, the account must explain evil in the considerably more substantial sense of making it intelligible that we are drawn to it, a datum for which inclination provides no explanation. This explains why Schelling cannot simply take over Kant's theory of radical evil: whether or not Kant's theory is in its own terms coherent, it does not do the work Schelling thinks is needed.

The second and equally striking departure from Kant is Schelling's all out identification of freedom with intelligible necessity: 'The intelligible being can, as certainly as it acts freely and absolutely, just as certainly act only in accordance with its own inner nature; or action can follow from within only in accordance with the law of identity and with absolute necessity, which alone is also absolute freedom' (Freedom, 384).

This immediately raises two questions: Can this modification of Kant be motivated from within the theory of freedom, or does it simply reflect Schelling's general metaphysical differences from Kant (his move from subjective to absolute idealism)? And if this is Schelling's view, has he not thereby embraced the intelligible fatalism which Kant sought to avoid (and with good reason)?

Schelling describes his identification of freedom with absolute necessity as a direct inference, not from the Kantian concept of freedom in Kant's own words, but 'as we believe ... it would have to be expressed in order to be comprehensible' (Freedom, 384). Schelling therefore
believes his innovation to be motivated from within the Kantian theory of freedom. Why does he think this?

If we take into account the all-or-nothing character of the predicament of human freedom as Kant defines it – either Spinozism or transcendental idealism – and the difficulty that, I argued, arises for Kant's transcendental idealism, then we can see how Schelling's modification of Kant can appear unavoidable, once it has been accepted that freedom requires an intelligible grounding. I cited two options concerning the interpretation of transcendental idealism. If the first, the Fichtean, represents a dead end, as Schelling believes (for reasons relating to general metaphysics), then that just leaves the second, the Spinozistic. This looks to destroy freedom so long as containment within God has the character of an annihilation of individuality. Schelling is well aware of the charge of nihilism levelled against Spinoza – by Jacobi – and appreciates that it has some basis. But, Schelling argues, Jacobi has misidentified the source of the threat: it is not Spinozism's monism, or pantheism, that is nihilistic, but the 'lifelessness' of Spinoza's substance and the correspondingly mechanical character of Spinoza's world-order. So if, as Schelling believes, the Spinozistic system can be recast, 'spiritualized', then the world qua totality of things in themselves can be reconceived in a way that grounds rather than extinguishes individuality. If so, then the right strategy, in fact the only way forward from Kant's transcendental idealism, is to make provision for human freedom by virtue of the individual's existence within God: 'Since freedom is unthinkable in opposition to omnipotence, is there any other escape from this argument than to say that man is not outside, but rather in, God and that his activity belongs to the life of God?' (Freedom, 339).

As regards the second question raised by Schelling's identification of freedom with absolute necessity – the issue of intelligible fatalism – Schelling again does not consider that he has broken with Kant, and again one can see why he thinks this.

Though at first glance it may seem that Schelling with his talk of 'inner necessity' has reverted to the Leibnizian automaton spirituale derided by Kant, Schelling explains why this is not the case. The non-empirical determination and 'absolute necessity' that Schelling postulates is, he insists, self-determination, for the reason that the intelligible ground of free agency consists in a doing:

'[I]ndividual action results from the inner necessity of a free being and, accordingly, from necessity itself ... But what then is this inner necessity of the being itself? Here lies the point at which necessity and freedom must be unified if they are at all capable of unification. Were this being a dead sort of Being [ein totes Sein] and a merely given one with respect to man, then, because all action resulting from it could do so only with necessity, responsibility [Zurechnungsfähigkeit] and all freedom would be abolished. But precisely this inner necessity is itself freedom; the essence of man is fundamentally his own act; necessity and freedom are in one another as one being [Ein Wesen] that appears as one or the other only when considered from different sides, in itself freedom, formally necessity. The I, says Fichte, is its own act; consciousness is self-positing—but the I is nothing different from this self-positing, rather it is precisely self-positing itself.' (384-385)

Here Schelling says, invoking Fichte, that the intelligible ground of freedom is not 'a dead sort of Being [ein totes Sein]', 'a merely given one with respect to man'; rather 'it is real self-positing, [...] a primal and fundamental willing, which makes itself into something and is the ground of all ways of being [Wesenheit']. Intelligible fatalism, 'predestinarianism' as Schelling calls it, is avoided by locating the ground of freedom in a deed and not in a prior existing spiritual substance. The Kantian
element of spontaneity and transcendental freedom is conserved, in so far as the 'I do—' is
contained within the act which I am.

The solution to the problem of intelligible fatalism is therefore to reject the assumption that
the self-determining agency of the agent is anything separate from the agent's intelligible character:
this distinction – which is maintained in Kant, and reflected in Schmid's and Reinhold's opposed
reconstructions of Kantian freedom – is held to vanish. And since Schelling cannot of course simply
invoke the Wissenschafstlehre as the basis for his identification of the self with a deed, Schelling
will have to show that his overhauled Spinozism makes room for that notion.

The task bequeathed by Kant to Schelling, guiding Schelling's redevelopment of Spinoza,
has therefore the following elements. First, Kant's theory of radical evil must be overhauled, since it
fails to provide for the reality of evil in the strong sense required by Schelling. Second, if an appeal
to the intelligible is to help with the problem of human freedom, and if the human agent cannot be
separated off from the totality of existence by means of transcendental idealism in the way Kant
supposes, then it must be shown that this totality is of a kind capable of containing free subjects and
endowing them with freedom – something that Spinoza did not do (to that extent justifying Kant's
rejection of Spinozism). Third, Kant's difficulty in uniting intelligible character with transcendental
spontaneity must be resolved.

Now I want to refer to an issue not on the official agenda of the Freedom essay but, I suggest,
strongly present in the text. This is the problem of the derivation of the finite from the infinite – that
is, of answering the question of how there can be a world of finite things 'in addition to' (so to
speak) the absolute – which Schelling had wrestled with in the course of his attempt to formulate a
Spinozistic post-Kantian idealism in writings from 1801 to 1804.

Eschenmayer drew attention to the importance of this question in his 1803 Die Philosophie
in ihrem Übergange zur Nichtphilosophie, though it had been raised previously by Schelling
himself on several occasions. In the 'Allgemeine Deduktion' from 1800, Schelling answers the
question of how something finite and real can proceed from the infinite by appeal to an infinite
striving of nature to return to the original identity out of which it was torn by an original division,
which he however leaves unexplained, and in the 1801 Darstellung (§30) the question is again
raised and its answer deferred. It finally receives a full treatment in Bruno, where Schelling's
strategy is to insist on the containment of the finite within the eternal and to refer the separateness
of the finite to the perspective of the finite. The question arises whether this reduces the reality of
the finite to a matter of mere representation, viz. the existence of mere misrepresentations of finite
existence, and here Schelling's answer is not entirely clear: the finite actualizes, he says, a
possibility for viewing (or 'positing') itself as separated, a possibility which is supplied for it by the
absolute. Whether this allows the finite to exist in any sense beyond representation – whether the
'actualization' can amount to more than misrepresentation – is uncertain, as it is in any case how
the absolute, conceived as absolute identity, could bestow even the idea of separate existence, let alone
the power of actualizing it. This is the gravamen of Eschenmayer's objection, and Schelling's
recognition of the limitations of his account shows in Philosophie und Religion where he, replying
to Eschenmayer, declares somewhat abruptly that in fact there is no continuous transition to the
finite and instead presents the doctrine of Abfall, whereby the Gegenbild of the Absolute rests not
on the Absolute's processing out from itself but on the finite's falling-away from it. But if this
counts as a solution, in a way that the 'original division' Schelling spoke of in 1800 does not, it is
not explained why it does so. So relocating human freedom in the context of a new post-Kantian
post-Spinozistic metaphysics requires more to be said concerning the problem of deriving the finite.

This problem is as it were the successor in Schelling to the problem we found in Kant's
transcendental idealism. Kant's problem of granting appearances sufficient autonomy to make
freedom possible, without allowing them to form a *sui generis* reality displacing things in
themselves, becomes in Schelling the task of balancing the Absolute's claim to reality with that of
finite entities.

Schelling does not refer to this problem at all in the *Freedom* essay; in fact he implies that,
aside from the problem of freedom and evil which has still to be dealt with, all is well with the
system of idealism; suggesting that he takes himself to have solved the problem in his 1804
*Philosophie und Religion*. However that may be – that is, whether or not the 1804 account is
adequate – it is also true that the *Freedom* essay offers a different solution to the problem of the
derivation of the finite, and one which is more convincing.

### 3. The metaphysics of the *Freiheitsschrift*

So what does Schelling come up with? We have seen what form the solution must take, but what is
its content? Here is an extremely compressed statement of the metaphysics of the *Freedom* essay. It
draws off Jakob Boehme and Plotinus, and takes the form of a theogony.

'Since nothing is prior to, or outside of [außer], God, he must have the ground of his
existence in himself. All philosophies say this; but they speak of this ground as of a mere
concept without making it into something real [reell] and actual [wirklich]. This ground of
his existence, which God has in himself, is not God considered absolutely, that is, in so far
as he exists; for it is only the ground of his existence. It [the ground] is nature—in God, a
being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him. [...] If we want to bring this way of
being closer to us in human terms, we can say: it is the yearning the eternal One feels to give
birth to itself. The yearning is not the One itself but is after all co-eternal with it. The
yearning wants to give birth to God, that is, unfathomable unity, but in this respect there is
not yet unity in the yearning itself. Hence, it is, considered for itself, also will; but will in
which there is no understanding ... This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the
indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in
understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground.' (357–360)

Schelling starts with a distinction, 'the distinction between being in so far as it exists and being in so
far as it is merely the ground of existence' (357), which he says must apply to all things – God
included. So with respect to God we must distinguish his existence as God, from the ground of his
existence, which Schelling says should be conceived as indeterminate objectless will or as longing
(or yearning). The implicit object of this primal will or longing, the final cause which draws it out
of itself, is understanding and self-consciousness, knowing itself as something existing, a formed
unity; and when this development is complete, then we have God as God. The ground of God's
existence has not however been consumed or sublated – Schelling refers to it as an 'indivisible
remainder', and it abides as the ground which continues to give God being as God. God has
therefore an internal complexity, comprehending two principles, one rational and one pre-rational
(principles of light and darkness, as Schelling calls them).

Now if Schelling were a theist, then the next step would be the creation of man and the
world, as a separate and further matter; which would involve God's making a decision, exercising
will and judgement, in the way that Leibniz supposes, and which renders the problems of evil and human freedom insoluble. But on Schelling's pantheistic account, man and the world result not from a separate act of creation but *come to be* in the course of God's self-genesis – their existence is implicated in God's becoming, and God does not come to completion without man and world. And this implies – this is crucial for Schelling's theory of evil – that the same duality of principles that makes up the being of God also makes up the being of man (and other creatures). The distinction of existence and ground of existence – principles of light and darkness – applies to man as it does to God, but with the essential difference that while these principles are inseparable in God (who is a necessary unity) they are separable in man. And this yields the possibility of evil – a condition in which the principles have come apart, the non-rational principle of darkness claiming for itself an independent existence. (Schelling identifies this with the attempt to give oneself a selfhood independent of God.)

The locus of evil lies for Schelling, as it does for Kant, in the *disposition* of the individual subject; and the determination of this disposition – the individual's decision for either good or evil – takes place (as per the Fichtean idea that the being of the self is that of an *act*) at the point where the individual comes into existence, a point not in time but eternity.

'Man is in the initial creation, as shown, an undecided being—(which may be portrayed mythically as a condition of innocence that precedes this life and as an initial blessedness)—only man himself can decide. But this decision cannot occur within time; it occurs outside of all time and, hence, together with the first creation (though as a deed distinct from creation). Man, even if born in time, is indeed created into the beginning of the creation (the *centrum*). The act, whereby his life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity: it also does not temporally precede life but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is eternal by nature. Through this act the life of man reaches to the beginning of creation; hence, through it man is outside the created, being free and eternal beginning itself. As incomprehensible as this idea may appear to conventional ways of thinking, there is indeed in each man a feeling in accord with it as if he had been what he is already from all eternity and had by no means become so first in time.' (385-386)

This is a very incomplete précis, but it gives an idea of the way in which the *Freedom* essay proposes to solve the various problems which I identified as its targets.

We saw that Schelling must, first, identify the positive ground of evil; second, explain how free individuality can reside within God; third, explain how intelligible necessity can coincide with spontaneous self-determination; and fourth, account for the derivation of the finite world. Schelling takes these apparently independent problems and proceeds to solve them in the manner of simultaneous equations, by cross-referring them to one another.

The reality of evil appears to set an insoluble problem, not just to Kant but to all metaphysics, for the reasons that Schelling goes over in the early part of the *Freedom* essay – in short, because no coherent way of introducing evil into the fabric of being, as philosophers have hitherto conceived it, suggests itself. And the existence of the finite world appears to set an insoluble problem for monism, so long as the absolute is conceived as an absolute identity – the problem that Spinoza failed to solve, and that Schelling had wrestled with in his Identity Philosophy without success. But when the existence of evil and the existence of the finite world are taken together, as interconnected primary data for metaphysical speculation, the basis is laid for the account that we have seen, of God's genesis and of our genesis out of God, through which the problems associated with evil and the finite are dissolved. We discover in human evil the reason (so
to speak) why there is a world of finite things, in so far as the structure of free human personality – its unity of opposing principles – presents a ground which makes the existence of the finite world intelligible (as the absolute identity of Schelling's earlier system did not). And this ground entails the reality and necessity of evil, without either making God the root of evil or lapsing into Gnosticism.

And if the genesis of the human subject out of God recapitulates and coincides with God's self-genesis, of intelligible character and spontaneity, as obtains in God, can and must find itself reproduced in the human individual. The disunity in Kant's conception of freedom, reflected in the Schmid-Reinhold opposition, is therefore eliminated: Schelling has protected intelligible causality from intelligible fatalism, without invoking an indeterministic power of choice.

Because man is created with and in God's self-creation, and is not the effect of an act of creation as per Leibniz, we do not stand under, we are not subject to, God's determination. Instead we partake of God's own dynamic and creative nature. So it is explained how free individuality can reside within God.

4. Schelling's strategy: some reflections

Let me conclude with some observations about Schelling's strategy.

The *Freedom* essay takes the structure of free human personality, rather than the structure of theoretical self-consciousness, as the guiding principle for the construction of metaphysics, and as it were reads this structure back into God. The structure of personality, shared by God and man, is that of conditioned autonomy or 'derivative absoluteness'.

In so doing, Schelling extrapolates from what Kant calls 'the practical point of view', yet the extrapolations are not mere 'practical cognitions' in the narrow sense of postulates validated by their function for practical reason. This then raises a question: If Schelling's metaphysics do not owe their truth to their role in facilitating the moral determination of the will, what is the basis for their extraction from the practical point of view?

Schelling's argument from human freedom to general metaphysics, from the practical to the theoretical, can be viewed in the terms helpfully proposed by Paul Franks. Kant's Fact of Reason provides, Franks argues, a template for German Idealism, which adopts the strategy of deducing the actuality of the intelligible ground of the world (ultimately, nothing less than the *ens realissimum*), an ontic ground, from an epistemic ground, our consciousness of the normativity of pure reason. In these terms, what may be said of Schelling is that he in the *Freedom* essay repeats the exercise of the second Critique on an amplified and modified basis. Whereas Kant restricts the data to the single, normatively positive fact of respect for the moral law – deferring the ground of evil to another, secondary context – Schelling admits evil into the primary data. Evil is not the absence but the inverse or negation of normativity. So what we work out from, the epistemic ground which leads to an ontic ground, is not simple one-sided awareness of obligation qua respect for the moral law, but complex two-sided awareness of, on the one side, respect for the moral law, and on the other side, the non-necessity, grounded in one's will, of determining oneself in conformity with that law, that is, awareness of one's own repudiation of the moral law. Kant's Fact of Reason becomes in Schelling the double fact of reason and correlative unreason, with all of the resulting metaphysical differences.

The feature of the opposition of good and evil which allows it to play a privileged role in metaphysical construction, is the asymmetry as regards their respective relations to Reason
(highlighted in Kant's analysis of rational agency): good is what there must be reason to do, evil is what there cannot be reason to do; the choice between good and evil is thus no choice at all; and yet we do choose between them, we are presented with a choice between them; meaning that the boundary of the space of reasons does not determine the limit of what we are acquainted with as having reality. The pair good/evil, one of which lies inside the space of reasons and the other outside, the two nonetheless being inseparably united, furnishes the conceptual form employed by Schelling to grasp being as such. Being as such is thought as having the shape and character of the opposition of good and evil. And since the opposition of good and evil is an opposition of what is reason to what is not reason, Schelling has pushed speculative thought beyond the principle of sufficient reason – meaning that the principle which, in its unrestricted form, posed the original threat to human freedom, and which Kant aimed to merely suspend with the aid of transcendental idealism, has finally been disarmed.

The opposition of good and evil also, I suggest, provides a key to Schelling's distinction of ground of existence from existence, on which the whole argument of the *Freedom* essay turns. Schelling's idea, as I read him, is that the opposition of good and evil exhibits – it in some way presents – the dislocation or disunity within being which he formulates as a distinction of existence from its ground. This distinction is clearly intended as revisionary, a radical modification of our understanding of ontological talk. As if to underline its revisionary character, Schelling intimates that the ground of existence is tainted with non-being, that is, cannot itself be said unequivocally to exist or have being. Schelling's claim is thus not simply that there are two fundamentally different types of being, on a par with the distinction of Nature and Spirit, nor is he simply invoking the distinction of the potential and the actual. The idea is, rather, that there is a complexity and conceptual opacity in being which is concealed in plain ontological assertion, such that the ordinary notion of something's simply existing or having existence, simply 'being the case', is defective. The assumption that existence as such is transparent and non-complex is not confined to ordinary understanding but extends to the highest speculative systems, Spinoza's and Hegel's included. Hegel says in the *Encyclopedia Logic* that although we 'must go further than mere Being ... yet it is absurd to speak of' anything as 'as it were outside and beside Being, or to say that there are other things, as well as Being'. Hegel's assumption of absolute primitive simplicity, which allows him to set being at the beginning of his *Logic*, is what Schelling must be taken to be challenging. And the underlying thought of the *Freedom* essay, I suggest, is that the non-simplicity of being is attested in our knowledge of good and evil, and of ourselves as entities for whom both are possibilities – which would not be possible if existence were the simple thing that it is taken to be in the ontologies of common sense, Spinoza, and Hegel. Compressed into a single sentence, Schelling's argument is that if existence were the bare and simple fact that it is naturally and universally taken to be, then it would be impossible for anything to exist with the possibility for good or evil. Though good and evil are necessarily unified – in so far as both fall within the span of a self's field of decision – the distance that separates them, the degree and kind of their opposition to one another, is too great to be contained within a single domain of 'existing things'. If we are to think both good and evil as having being, as we must, then the ordinary concept of being must be reconfigured.

One final issue. Can Schelling be said to have explained the existence of evil, freedom, and the finite, in the *Freedom* essay? Has he made freedom and evil comprehensible in the sense denied by Kant?

At one level, it would seem so. What emerges from the enquiry is a unified systematic solution to several problems: the structure of being is the ultimate ground from which God, the
world, man, human freedom, and evil arise as consequences. So we have metaphysical explanation in the full and proper sense. And as Schelling emphasizes in the close of the essay, the Freedom essay does the work of a traditional theodicy, supplanting Leibniz: it has been shown that God is as he needs to be, and does all that needs to be done, if the highest value is to be realized; evil has positive reality, yet all is for the best.

Putting it like this, however, misses something important, the very thing that distinguishes the Freedom essay from other treatments of the same material. The crux of Schelling's strategy, I suggested, lies in repositioning the relevant explananda – freedom and evil – at the outer limit of philosophical understanding, and in showing that this limit cannot be regarded as subjective, a consequence of the limits of our cognitive powers, but must be regarded as objective, as marking the point where being extends beyond reason. If so, then Schelling's aim cannot be to explain freedom and evil, for what he shows is that freedom and evil are necessarily and in themselves ungrounded. The aim must be, instead, to exhibit freedom and evil as ultimate ontological facts, features of being that could not be consequences of anything more fundamental. Thus one might say that Schelling has eliminated the incomprehensibility of freedom asserted by Kant, but without providing a comprehension of freedom; and, with reference to the problem of evil, that what Schelling has done is to allow the question, Why is there evil?, to receive the answer, For no reason – he has supplied conditions under which this counts as the complete and correct answer. The Freedom essay may do the work of the Theodicy in exonerating God and reconciling us to existence, but the means employed are the reverse of Leibniz's.

In this vein, but taking one step further the idea that Schelling is not engaged in metaphysical explanation of ground-consequent form, it may be suggested that the story of God's self-genesis and divine creation should be interpreted not as metaphysics, but as a mythological presentation of a philosophical insight (we are reminded here of the union of philosophy and mythology projected in the 'Oldest System-Programme').

So there is an ambiguity, and perhaps a tension. Whatever we make of it, the double-aspectedness of the Freedom essay sets the stage for Schelling's late philosophy, in which these two dimensions – rational insight into an a priori order of grounds; and the exhibiting of what is discovered to exist a posteriori – are separated and identified with two, distinct yet coordinated forms of philosophical enquiry, Schelling's 'negative' and 'positive' philosophies.