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By

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Freedom and the Moral Condition in F.W.J. Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*

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This dissertation is a study of F.W.J. Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. It focuses in particular on the Kantian themes of autonomy and the primacy of the practical as they are developed by Schelling. It is argued that Schelling, following Kant, gives primacy to the practical and thereby attempts to demonstrate that human existence unfolds within a metaphysical order of the whole. He does this by means of an analysis of human freedom (the ability to choose between good and evil by Schelling's definition), which he sees as the conduit through which we gain awareness of our moral and ontological role within the process of reality. In other words, Schelling recognizes that, through our practical existence as free beings, human beings are self-consciously aware of participating in (if not fully grasping) an overarching reality that precedes any individual's existence. Schelling thus develops Kant's argument for the primacy of practical reason into an argument for the primacy of existence, or freedom, and, from that perspective, he shows that human freedom, or autonomy, articulates our awareness of our participation with full personal responsibility in a universal moral order that transcends the self and demands our assent as moral agents. In other words, Schelling offers a new and profound analysis of what it means to be free that captures a balance between the modern emphasis on individual freedom and the need to recognize that we are always already subject to inescapable moral obligations.

This dissertation by Steven F. McGuire fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in political theory approved by David J. Walsh, Ph.D., as Director, and by Stephen F. Schneck, Ph.D., and Holger Zaborowski, Ph.D., as Readers.

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To Elizabeth-Jane

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Introduction

According to a common narrative, modernity is a story about the progressive liberation of the individual from the bonds of traditional authority, and the idea of autonomy, most famously articulated by Immanuel Kant, represents the climax of the tale: no longer beholden to any external source of moral obligation, the individual is subject only to those laws that he gives to himself. Autonomy is thus the ultimate expression of unhindered human freedom and, understood as such, it is the lynchpin of modernity.¹ This is an account of modernity that is agreed upon by proponents and critics of modernity alike, but it is an incomplete and one-sided version of the history of the modern era. From another perspective, modernity is also a story about the search for moral, political, and spiritual order in a disenchanted world: as the old sources of order in individual and collective life collapsed under the scrutiny of the Reformation and modern natural science, modern Europeans were faced with the prospect of reestablishing a sense of order on new grounds. Within this narrative, autonomy is not a claim for the absolute freedom of the individual, but an attempt to re-articulate on the basis of freedom the fact that we participate in a universal moral order that transcends the self. The present study attempts to demonstrate that the latter view of autonomy is the one that comes to the fore in F.W.J. Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (*Freiheitsschrift*), and it argues that, by taking autonomy in this direction, Schelling is the

¹ See, for instance, Robert Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

philosopher who carries the idea to its logical conclusion. In this way, the present study aims to make one small contribution toward recalibrating our understanding of modernity by suggesting that autonomy is representative of the modern attempt not to unqualifiedly liberate the self but to reestablish individual and social order on the basis of human freedom.

The main argument of the study is that the key to understanding the idea of autonomy in this way—both in Schelling’s philosophy and in Kant’s—is the idea that practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason. This is an important argument that originates with Kant and is then picked up and carried forward by Schelling and the other Idealists. The primacy of the practical has several meanings for Kant and Schelling, but its most essential meaning, one that remains inchoate in Kant’s mind but that becomes clearer in Schelling’s, is that we become aware of our participation in a universal moral-metaphysical order through our practical existence in a way that cannot be confirmed within the limits of theoretical reason or the subject-object mode of knowing. For Schelling, this means that our freedom itself points to our participation in a universal moral-metaphysical order, and the practical perspective, or freedom, thus becomes for Schelling the source of a new articulation of the order in which we live.

The importance of the primacy of the practical for Schelling and the German Idealists more generally has not received the attention that it deserves. Yet it is attested to by the well-known but anonymously authored document known conventionally as the “Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism,” which succinctly defines the intended trajectory of German Idealism. Various scholars have attributed authorship of the “Program” to Hegel, Schelling, or Hölderlin, but there is no scholarly consensus on the

question of authorship.¹ The lack of consensus itself is an argument in favor of the importance of the document for all three possible authors, and, as such, it is fair to suggest that it truly captures something of the original essence of German Idealism. The most interesting aspect of the document for present purposes is that its opening lines make plain the centrality of the primacy of the practical for the project of the German Idealists. It begins with the claim that “all metaphysics will henceforth fall into *morals*—for which Kant, with both of his practical postulates has given only an *example* and *exhausted* nothing, so this ethics will contain nothing other than a complete system of all ideas, or what is the same, of all practical postulates.”² The “Program” thus suggests that the whole system of human knowledge will rest on ethics—that it will emerge from the practical or moral aspect of human existence. Thus, the document demonstrates that the young Idealists were concerned above all else with making good on the new system of practical metaphysics that they found in Kant’s philosophy. They recognized that the *Critique of Pure Reason* had merely cleared an area in which a new system of metaphysics could be erected on the basis of freedom.

The “Program” also suggests that the Idealists hoped to establish a public recognition of the moral metaphysics that they wanted to develop on the basis of freedom. Thus, the “Program” states that the ultimate goal is to create “a new mythology.”³ This will be a “mythology of *reason*” that will unite all human beings under a common understanding:

¹ The “Oldest System Program” was published by Franz Rosenzweig in 1917. The original manuscript was destroyed during World War II. It was written in Hegel’s handwriting, but most scholars are convinced that the fragment did not originate with Hegel. I take no position on the authorship of the *Program*.

² Anonymous, “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism,” trans. Diana I. Behler, in *Philosophy of German Idealism: Fichte, Jacobi, and Schelling*, ed., Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 2003), 161.

³ *Ibid.*, 162.

Until we make ideas aesthetic, i.e., mythological, they hold no interest for the people, and conversely, before mythology is reasonable, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus finally the enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands; mythology must become philosophical, and the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make philosophy sensual. Then external unity will reign among us. Never again the contemptuous glance, never the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then does equal development of all powers await us, of the individual as well as if all individuals. No power will be suppressed any longer, then general freedom and equality of spirits will reign—A higher spirit sent from heaven must establish this religion among us, it will be the last work of the human race.⁴

Romantic overtones aside, this passage demonstrates that the German Idealists conceived of their ultimate goal as public and practical, and it illustrates two points of particular interest for the present study. First, it shows that the project of German Idealism is primarily a moral one, and, second, it indicates that such a project involves the articulation of a metaphysical order that we live within on the basis of our free existence within that order. From the perspective of ourselves as free beings living under moral laws, the Idealists intended to develop a publicly authoritative account of the whole, and it is in this context, or so it is argued in this study, that Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* should be read.

As suggested, however, despite the importance of the primacy of the practical for both Kant and the German Idealists, the argument has not been given its due consideration by scholars. This has left the idea of autonomy in an ambiguous position. In terms of Kant's philosophy, the inability to "prove" autonomy theoretically has led critics to claim that Kant and his followers are unable to offer a coherent account of the keystone of Kant's practical philosophy. Scholars have tried to defend Kant by addressing this criticism head-on, but the results have remained for the most part

⁴ Ibid., 162-63.

unsatisfactory. The problem is that both sides (pro- and contra-Kant) have become mired in this dilemma because they fail to grasp the meaning of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical over theoretical reason, which is essential to understanding his entire philosophical project. As will be shown in chapter one, this shortcoming is understandable, since Kant's own account of the primacy of the practical is ambiguous: while Kant recognizes that practical reason somehow enables us to recognize our participation in an intelligible reality that transcends the phenomenal world, he fails to follow out the full implications of that insight. Instead, he struggles to reconcile the insights of practical reason with the formal requirements of his theoretical philosophy, and, as a result, he does not fully embrace practical reason's confirmation that we take part in a reality greater than ourselves, one that includes a common human nature and a universal, transcendent moral order.

Thus, Kant never fully embraces his own insight into the primacy of the practical, but, as will be argued in this study, Schelling makes it thematic. We see this come to fruition in the *Freiheitsschrift*, in which Schelling, following Kant, gives primacy to the practical and thereby attempts to demonstrate that human existence unfolds within a metaphysical order of the whole. He does this by means of an analysis of human freedom (the ability to choose between good and evil by Schelling's definition), which he sees as the conduit through which we gain awareness of our moral and ontological role within the process of reality. In other words, Schelling recognizes that, through our practical existence as free beings, we human beings are self-consciously aware of participating in (if not fully grasping) an overarching reality that precedes any individual's existence. Schelling spends the remainder of his career working out this

insight, and he is thereby able to avoid many of the criticisms leveled at Kant: he is not subject to Kant's dualism; he more successfully incorporates the existence of evil into his theory of moral agency; and he gives personal content to Kant's concept of freedom on a stronger metaphysical basis. At the same time, Schelling maintains Kant's insight into the moral condition of human beings: through our practical existence we participate with full personal responsibility in a universal moral order that transcends the self and demands our assent as rational agents.

Schelling's development of Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical enables him to see that autonomy is not a theoretical description of human existence, but a *telos* that we live within and must ever strive to realize. For Schelling, we are not fully autonomous because of our finitude, and thus it is only God, or what Schelling also calls the Absolute, that is autonomous. Yet, finite existence is constituted by a drive to realize the autonomous absolute within ourselves, and, therefore, autonomy is a reality that we spend our lives striving (or failing) to achieve. Schelling argues that we pre-theoretically recognize this as our existential condition by virtue of our freedom, which is a participation in God's freedom and is therefore neither arbitrary nor directionless. In other words, the act of living out our freedom reveals to us the moral-metaphysical structure of the reality in which we operate. Thus, contrary to the standard view (in both Schelling's time and our own), it is argued that Schelling does not simply return to pre-Kantian or pre-critical metaphysics because he does not attempt to offer an objectified metaphysics. Rather, in line with the idea of the primacy of the practical, it is argued that Schelling is attempting to demonstrate that we exist within a metaphysical order that cannot be explained according to abstract theoretical reason but that we nevertheless

know as real. Thus, what Schelling offers is a new way of understanding what counts as knowledge as it pertains to freedom and morality, one that recognizes the authority of existence over thought in such matters. On that basis, he reframes autonomy as the recognition that we participate in an order that transcends the self. In other words, Schelling offers a new and profound analysis of what it means to be free that captures a balance between the modern emphasis on individual freedom and the need to recognize that we are always already subject to a web of inescapable moral obligations. He shows that our freedom is always already contained within a moral order that transcends the self, and he therefore offers a necessary corrective to the view of autonomy as unhindered human freedom.

Outline of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter discusses the Kantian background to Schelling's thought. Focusing in particular on the ideas of autonomy and the primacy of practical reason, it demonstrates how Kant struggles to articulate an account of our participation in a moral-metaphysical order that transcends the self. After discussing how autonomy should be understood from the perspective of the primacy of the practical, it briefly outlines how Kant's accounts of the postulates, religion, and politics all grow out of his moral philosophy. It shows that Kant erects a metaphysical account of the reality in which we live on the basis of the practical, but also that that metaphysical account remains in an ambiguous position in Kant's philosophy because he cannot finally shake his own commitment to his theoretical epistemology.

Chapter two examines Schelling's earliest published essays in order to show that

the primacy of the practical plays an important role in Schelling's thought from the outset of his career. It demonstrates that Schelling extends Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical insofar as his own early philosophy is a meditation on the theoretically-elusive reality in which we participate as finite beings. Schelling recognizes that autonomy is the center of existence, but he also makes clear that only God or the Absolute is truly autonomous—for human beings, autonomy is a *telos* that we strive to achieve; it is something that we must work to become. Thus, the chapter also demonstrates that the young Schelling maintained an ambiguous relationship to the systematic goal of German Idealism from the very beginning, since his idea of the absolute does not admit of the certain and transparent first principle in which the German idealists purportedly sought to ground their system. Rather, it is argued that the young Schelling is engaged in a transcendental meditation on the nature and structure of our existence as free beings that led him to realize that our existence is constituted by an absolute reality that cannot be contained within reflective thought. Instead, as finite beings, we exist within the absolute, and we are driven by our very nature to realize it in ourselves as an infinite moral-practical task that structures our entire existence.

Chapters three and four offer argue that Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* marks a turning point in Schelling's understanding of the themes that are already present in his earliest essays. Although Schelling recognizes the importance of the primacy of the practical in his early work, he still does not fully grasp the radical incapacity of thought to give a complete account of being. This changes in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Focusing on the introductory portion of the *Freiheitsschrift*, chapter three demonstrates how Schelling develops a new existential mode of philosophy as a meditation on the order of reality

from with the perspective of participation in that reality. With this new approach, Schelling finally admits what he seems to have recognized inchoately all along: that we cannot finally obtain a complete theoretical account of reality because freedom is the heart of existence. Schelling realizes that a purely rational explanation of the world cannot account for finitude or individual personhood in a meaningful way, and he thus recognizes that existence is always more than what can be captured in thought. He thus realizes that philosophy must become a meditation on the order of reality as it reveals itself to us through our moral existence.

By discussing Schelling's new philosophical approach, Chapter three prepares the way for the discussion of Schelling's substantive position in the *Freiheitsschrift* that is offered in chapter four, in which it is argued that Schelling establishes autonomy as a transcendent reality in which we knowingly participate through our own freedom. It shows that, for Schelling, the primacy of practical reason has become the primacy of existence because he now recognizes that our freedom, as the capacity to choose between good and evil, is not identical to practical reason. Rather, it is the capacity to choose for or against the order of being. We must choose between self and God, or between selfishly turning inwards or pouring ourselves into the reality of God as the autonomous source of all reality. Schelling thus shows that human freedom is thus constituted by a moral-metaphysical context that transcends the self, and that, as such, freedom rather than practical reason becomes our point of access to the order of being.

Finally, chapter five summarizes how Schelling's position carries Kant's ideas of autonomy and the primacy of the practical to their logical conclusions, and explores what this means for our understanding of modernity. The first part of the chapter examines

two texts that Schelling wrote shortly after completing the *Freiheitsschrift*: the *Stuttgart Seminars* and *The Ages of the World*. Through these texts, the chapter indicates how Schelling would spend the remainder of his career attempting to unravel the insights gained while writing the *Freiheitsschrift*. The chapter then argues that Schelling establishes that the idea of autonomy points to our participation in a moral order that transcends the self, and that he is able to show this by developing Kant's insight into the primacy of practical reason into a philosophy of freedom grounded in the primacy of existence over thought. Schelling thus demonstrates that our freedom itself points to our participation in universal moral order that transcends the self, and this in turn suggests that we should understand modernity as an attempt to reestablish individual and social order on the basis of human freedom, rather than as an attempt to liberate the individual from the moral and metaphysical order of existence.

Chapter I

Autonomy and the Primacy of the Practical in Kant's Philosophy

Even Kant himself, after he had completely eliminated the positive from the theoretical philosophy, introduced it again through the back door of the practical.¹

Introduction

More than any other philosopher, Immanuel Kant set the philosophical agenda for Schelling's time, and, therefore, in order to appreciate Schelling's thought, it is helpful to understand something of the framework that Kant provided. This is especially so for the present study, since it will be argued in later chapters that Schelling develops some of Kant's most important insights, especially as they relate to the idea that we knowingly participate in a reality that cannot be reduced to the subject-object model of theoretical reason.² The present chapter will form the foundation for the argument by demonstrating that Kant was moving in the direction that Schelling ultimately would go (although for Kant the path remained inchoate and the results ambiguous). By focusing on some of Kant's key ideas—the primacy of practical reason, autonomy, the fact of reason, and the postulates—it will be shown that, through his practical philosophy, Kant was working to

¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (SUNY Press, 2007), 148 (84).

² Kant distinguishes between theoretical and practical reason. The former applies to the realm of nature and is the basis for scientific knowledge (the mechanical laws of nature and so forth), whereas the latter concerns the realm of freedom and is the basis for moral knowledge. Kant thus recognizes, although problematically, as will be discussed below, that human knowledge is not confined to the empirical realm of nature or the theoretical paradigm of knowledge.

reformulate (against the threat of skepticism) the idea that we knowingly live within a metaphysical order that transcends the self and makes inescapable moral demands on us. This will be shown primarily through a reading of the idea of autonomy from the perspective of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical over theoretical reason.

Kant's idea of autonomy is widely recognized as the centerpiece of his moral and political thought, and yet scholars have struggled to offer a coherent account of what he means by it. The primary difficulty is that the idea of autonomy seems to include two incompatible claims: on the one hand, Kant says that we give the moral law to ourselves; on the other, he maintains that the moral law is universal. Most of Kant's interpreters want to emphasize the former aspect of autonomy, since they think of autonomy as a moral doctrine that aims to liberate the subject: we give the law to ourselves, and, therefore, we are not subject to external moral authorities. But reading autonomy in this way leaves a number of questions unanswered: How are we to reconcile this view of autonomy with Kant's claim that the moral law is universal? What does it mean to say that one is subject to and bound by a law that one gives to oneself? Moreover, how and why do we break with a law that we give to ourselves, i.e., commit evil? While the idea of autonomy has been influential in both the history of philosophy and the cultural history of modernity, scholars continue to struggle with these and other issues that arise from Kant's account of it.

This chapter suggests that these difficulties can be overcome by interpreting the idea of autonomy in light of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason. Kant's contention in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason is one of the most remarkable aspects of his philosophy, and yet it has

hardly received the attention from scholars that it deserves.¹ At least in part, this is probably due to the fact that taking this claim seriously leads down a path of interpretation that undermines the traditional view of Kant as the demolisher of metaphysics, a liberator of the subject, and the founder of deontological ethics. But these views of Kant overemphasize the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, while failing to recognize that these works mark only the beginning of Kant's critical project, and not its end—in either sense of the word. A more robust view of Kant's philosophy, one that takes his arguments for the primacy of the practical seriously, must not only recognize the role that the primacy of the practical plays in these works themselves but also place greater significance on the development of Kant's philosophy subsequent to the first *Critique*.

Such attention will show that, over the course of his writings, Kant makes substantial progress towards establishing that we knowingly live within a transcendent metaphysical order, i.e., an order of reason that extends beyond the theoretical paradigm of knowledge. In the course of developing his practical philosophy, Kant comes to realize that through reason in its practical mode we know more about ourselves and the transcendent order in which we participate than we ever could know through theoretical reason. In other words, having demolished dogmatic metaphysics in his *Critique of Pure Reason*,² he resurrects metaphysics in a new form through his practical philosophy as it is

¹ Some exceptions include Sebastian Gardner, "The Primacy of Practical Reason," in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. Graham Bird (Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² In Kant's language, a dogmatic metaphysician is one who tries to prove the existence of realities beyond experience through theoretical or speculative reason. One of the primary aims of the first *Critique* is to outline the limits of theoretical reason, and Kant argues in contrast to these dogmatic metaphysicians that

gradually thought out over the course of several works, including the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. This development is the product of Kant's insight into the primacy of practical reason. He realizes that reason in its practical mode affords us deeper insight into our existence than theoretical reason does (and, furthermore, that our theoretical reason is itself not only made possible by the freedom which is confirmed through practical reason, but that its problems arise out of practical necessity as well). Practical reason takes priority over the theoretical both because practical concerns are primary for us and because it is through the practical that we reestablish metaphysics as the horizon of our existence.

Kant arrives at the realization that the practical illuminates our position within a metaphysical order through his attempt to articulate the idea of autonomy in particular. It will be argued that the key insight contained in Kant's notion of autonomy is the recognition that we are always already aware of our participation in a moral order of which we are not the authors. We know we are autonomous because we live within the moral condition, but we also know that the source of that order is beyond us. This is why autonomy as it is commonly understood can never be shown through: we do not construct the law; we discover it. Kant expresses this realization by suggesting that the moral law is a "fact of reason": the moral law simply resides in reason and no further explanation is possible. We cannot prove that we are obligated to follow the moral law because the moral law is the basis of all obligations.

From our recognition of the moral law as a fact of reason, other insights into the

metaphysical realities such as freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul are beyond those limits.

order of reality emerge: our freedom, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul—what Kant calls ideas or postulates of reason. Moreover, as will also be shown, Kant constructs his philosophies of religion and politics out of his moral philosophy as well. For Kant, these dimensions of human existence are part of the metaphysical order in which we exist; thus, the moral condition becomes the basis for erecting an entire account of that moral-metaphysical order. What Kant denies to theoretical reason he readmits through practical reason.

In the end, however, this whole edifice remains ambiguous for Kant. He hedges his bet with the claim that these ideas always remain regulative and not constitutive for our existence.³ Yet, in articulating them, he nevertheless travels quite far down the path of recognizing that we live within an order of which we are aware, even if we cannot capture it theoretically. In others words, that which constitutes the horizon of our experience can never be reduced to an object of experience—and yet, through our existence, through the practical, we are aware of these horizons. Ultimately, it could be argued that Kant's philosophy contained the resources within itself to overcome these difficulties. But Kant did not marshal those resources and overcome the problems. This was the task he left to his successors, and the chapters to follow will argue that Schelling seizes upon and carries out the logic of Kant's position. But in order to understand Schelling's path, we must first examine the difficulties surrounding Kant's idea of autonomy, and it is to a discussion of these that we now turn.

³ In other words, they are subjective ideas that we can use for the purpose of ordering our existence, but we cannot know (in the theoretical sense) that they actually exist. Thus, they regulate our existence, but we do not know if they actually constitute it.

Interpreting Autonomy

Kant first introduces the idea of autonomy in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. He argues in the Preface to the *Groundwork* that the study of ethics can be divided into two parts, an a priori or purely rational part and an a posteriori or empirical part, and he notes that a “metaphysics of morals” would deal with the former, while a “practical anthropology” would treat the latter.⁴ As its title indicates, the *Groundwork* is meant to set the foundations for the metaphysical part of ethics, i.e., the part that can be known through pure reason alone. For Kant it is necessary to establish that there is such a part of ethics because he believes that the moral law would not be binding without it:

Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command “thou shalt not lie” does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason; and that any other precept, which is based on principle of mere experience—even if it is universal in a certain respect—insofar as it rests in the least part on empirical grounds, perhaps only in terms of a motive, can indeed be called a practical rule but never a moral law.⁵

It is Kant’s belief that it is only according to such a view that it can be claimed that the

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor with an introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-2 (4: 388). Kant also developed an anthropology, which it is important to consider for developing a full understanding of his moral philosophy, but he develops it elsewhere. For discussions of his anthropology, see Allen W. Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Robert B. Louden, *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Kant, *Groundwork*, 2-3 (4: 389). As Kant also writes, “unless we want to deny to the concept of morality any truth and any relation to some possible object, we cannot dispute that its law is so extensive in its import that it must hold not only for human beings but for all *rational beings as such*, not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but with *absolute necessity*, then it is clear that no experience could give occasion to infer even the possibility of such apodictic laws. For, by what right could we bring into unlimited respect, as a universal precept for every rational nature, what is perhaps valid only under the contingent conditions of humanity? And how should laws of the determination of *our* will be taken as laws of the determination of the will of rational beings as such, and for ours only as rational beings, if they were merely empirical and did not have their origin completely a priori in pure but practical reason?” Kant, *Groundwork*, 20-1 (4: 408).

moral law is free of contingency and, therefore, both universal and necessary. Thus, the primary aim of Kant's moral philosophy is to establish that there are universal and necessary moral laws, and that all rational beings are capable of knowing them. The idea of autonomy must be understood within this context.

Yet, Kant's formulations of autonomy often appear to challenge such a view, since he often suggests that we give the law to ourselves. The term itself derives from the Greek words for self (*autos*) and law (*nomos*), thus suggesting self-rule. This aspect of the idea is also suggested by the fact that Kant appears to have culled the term from the political sphere.⁶ Thus, the very word selected by Kant to express his moral insight points to the claim that we give the moral law to ourselves, or that we are self-legislating. But what does it mean to say that we give the law to ourselves if the law is both universal and necessary? The tension between these two ideas is illustrated throughout Kant's practical works. Consider, for instance, Kant's discussion of what he means by "respect for the law" (the sole motive of the good will) in the *Groundwork*. On the one hand, Kant indicates that "respect" suggests that we are beholden to the authority of the moral law when he claims that it "signifies merely consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law without the mediation of other influences on my sense."⁷ On the other hand, in the same paragraph, he adds that we "impose" the law upon ourselves: "The *object* of respect is therefore simply the *law*, and indeed the law that we impose upon *ourselves* and yet as necessary in itself. As a law we are subject to it without consulting self-love;

⁶ J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 14, n. (4: 401).

as imposed upon us by ourselves it is nevertheless a result of our will.”⁸ In sum, we subordinate ourselves to the law out of necessity, but we are also the source of it. Thus, for Kant, the fact that we give the moral law to ourselves does not undermine the universality and necessity of the moral law. Still, properly understanding what Kant means by autonomy is going to depend on accurately grasping what it means to say that we impose the law on ourselves.

The tension between these two aspects of autonomy has occupied a prominent place in the literature on Kant’s moral philosophy. Andrews Reath, for instance, suggests that the main challenge facing Kant’s interpreters is “to combine Kant’s pronouncements about the autonomy of the will and the will’s own legislation of the moral law with the necessity and universal validity of moral requirements. The presence of these two strains in Kant’s moral theory is both a defining characteristic and a deep source of tension.”⁹ Most scholars look at this tension as a conflict between voluntarism and moral realism,¹⁰ and this leads to the problem that autonomy either renders morality purely subjective or else adds nothing new to the history of moral philosophy. Allen Wood summarizes the problem succinctly:

it is...easy to regard Kant’s conception of autonomy as either incoherent or fraudulent. To make my own will the author of my obligations seems to leave both their content and their bindingness at my discretion, which contradicts the idea that I am *obligated* by them. If we reply to this objection by emphasizing the *rationality* of these laws as what binds me, then we seem to be transferring the source of obligation from my will to the canons of rationality. The notion of self-legislation becomes a deception or at best a euphemism.¹¹

⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 14, n. (4: 401).

⁹ Andrews Reath, *Agency and Autonomy in Kant’s Moral Theory: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this discussion, voluntarism is the idea that laws are binding because we have authored them as binding for ourselves, whereas moral realism is the idea that laws are binding because they are true and independently existing propositions.

¹¹ Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 156.

In short, either autonomy results in relativism or it is just another statement of moral realism.

Despite Kant's insistence on the universality of the moral law, most Kant scholars lean toward a voluntaristic interpretation of autonomy. Note, for instance, how Reath distinguishes between the "autonomy of the will" and the "necessity and universal validity of moral requirements" in the passage above even as he sets up the problem. However, as many scholars have argued (both those who wish to defend autonomy and those who seek to refute it), autonomy understood as giving oneself the law appears to offer a hopelessly incoherent basis for explaining moral obligation.¹² Two problems in particular have occupied the literature. The first is the already-noted problem that the "voluntaristic" aspect of autonomy seems to be irresolvably at odds with Kant's insistence on the universality and rationality of morality. How can we both give the law to ourselves and be beholden to universal moral principles? The second is that autonomy understood in this way seems to lead to an infinite regress, since the bindingness of every act of self-legislation would appear to depend on a prior act of self-legislation. What is the ultimate normative basis for taking any law, self-made or otherwise, as normative?

The remainder of this section will outline these two controversies, and then point to some

¹² Particularly relevant for the present study are Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. ch. 3; Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The scholarly literature on Kant's idea of autonomy is vast. For representative and influential discussions in addition to the above, see Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Reath, *Agency and Autonomy*; Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*; Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

more recent advances in the scholarly understanding of autonomy that point in the direction of the interpretation of autonomy that will be offered in the remainder of this chapter.

There appear to be good reasons to emphasize the voluntaristic side of autonomy. First, as Allen Wood suggests in the passage above, this seems to be what is new in Kant's concept of autonomy; it is what distinguishes it from other systems of rationalist ethics. Second, as Schneewind as shown, it seems to fit with the historical development of ethical thought, including Kant's reliance on Rousseau.¹³ Third, and perhaps most importantly, such a reading fits with the common narrative of modernity as the progressive liberation of the subject. If modernity is about throwing off external authorities and pursuing the Enlightenment goal of pure rationality and self-mastery, then Kant's idea of autonomy seems to be the perfect expression of modernity.¹⁴ Released from any obligations that derive their authority from an outside source—God, nature, etc.—the individual is free to follow his or her own reason, to make law for him- or herself. Most scholars simply seem to think that this is the narrative into which Kant must fit.

However, despite the overwhelming tendency to read autonomy in this way, most contemporary scholars do not defend an outright voluntaristic (i.e., relativistic) account of autonomy. Instead, recognizing that the voluntaristic aspect has to be reconciled with Kant's belief in the universality of the law, many have tried to find a third way. As Onora O'Neill writes, "Somewhere in the space between realist and relativist accounts of ethics

¹³ Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*.

¹⁴ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

there is said to be a third, distinct possibility. One such position, allegedly both antirealist and antirelativist, is John Rawls's 'Kantian constructivism'.¹⁵ According to constructivists, morality depends on following a procedure: justice is determined by what a group of ideal agents would reasonably and rationally agree to in a hypothetical social contract situation.¹⁶ The problem with such a view is that it either appeals to transcendent moral claims (the ideal agents) or simply advances cultural relativism (if it is claimed that justice is what is decided by any group).¹⁷

Despite the efforts of its proponents, it is not clear that constructivism can ever successfully advance itself as a third way, since it always seems to end up as relativism or realism. Constructivists are usually more worried about avoiding moral realism, and, therefore, as Allen Wood has argued, the constructivist usually ends up in relativism.¹⁸ Christine Korsgaard's work is representative of the problem. Although she wants to defend Kant against the charge of relativism, she nevertheless claims that Kant's concept of autonomy "means that voluntarism is true after all. The source of obligation is the legislator. The realist objection—that we need to explain why we must obey that legislator—has been answered, for this is a legislator whose authority is beyond question and does not need to be established. It is the authority of your own mind and will."¹⁹ But this simply suggests that the subject is not beholden to any laws that he or she does not want to be beholden too, which is clearly at odds with Kant's view. Moreover, although she claims that "voluntarism is true," Korsgaard tries to ground normativity in our nature

¹⁵ Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 206.

¹⁶ John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1980), 515-72.

¹⁷ O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 206.

¹⁸ Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, 295-296, n. 11.

¹⁹ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 104.

as practical agents, but then, like Rawls, it is not clear how she avoids making an appeal to some transcendent fact about the individual. In sum, Korsgaard's own view seems to point in the direction of moral realism even as she strives to deny it.

Wood himself is representative of those scholars who emphasize the universal aspect of the moral law and argue that Kant is, in fact, a moral realist. Thus, Wood stresses that, for Kant, the moral law issues from the rational will, and not from individual fancy. As he writes,

To ground the moral law on the idea of the will is...to distinguish moral truth from what any finite rational being (or all such beings) might believe. Since Kant holds that moral truth is irreducible either to what people think or to the results of any verification procedures, he is a moral realist in the most agreed-upon sense that term has in contemporary metaphysics and metaethics.²⁰

For Wood, since Kant grounds the law in the rational will, and not the will of any particular individual, and since he holds that reason itself issues the law, then Kant must hold that there is an objective, or real, moral order. The problem is that it becomes unclear how Wood thinks that autonomy is not simply, as he puts it, a "euphemism." What is different about autonomy in comparison to other realist theories or morality?

These scholarly debates over the meaning of autonomy can be somewhat difficult to navigate. It is not always clear exactly what each of the participants is arguing for. For instance, while Korsgaard defends the voluntaristic aspect of autonomy, she also denies that this leads to relativism. In a qualified sense, she also states that "realism is true."²¹ Wood argues that Kant is a moral realist, but he also wants to argue that autonomy represents the liberation of the subject from the authority of the Church.²² One

²⁰ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 157.

²¹ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 108.

²² Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 37.

difficulty seems to be that scholars approach Kant by trying to figure out which pre-determined category he fits into, but Kant's thought does not fit into any of the pre-built boxes that govern the discussion. In any event, these debates remain unsettled, and Kant scholarship has yet to unlock fully the meaning of Kant's idea of autonomy.

Another important line of interpretation is offered by students of the post-Kantian Idealists, especially Hegel. These scholars believe that the confusion in the Kant scholarship is a product of the impossible difficulties that accompany the notion of autonomy itself. Somewhat ironically, these scholars attempt to understand autonomy on the same terms offered by Kant scholars, but, rather than attempting to work out a coherent account of autonomy on those terms, they argue that there is no such account to be had. In other words, they agree with the Kant scholars about what an account of Kantian autonomy would have to look like, but, unlike the Kant scholars, they do not believe that such an account can be defended (at least on purely Kantian terms). Terry Pinkard, in particular, has argued that Kant's idea of autonomy contains a "Kantian paradox," which Pinkard believes is expressed in Kant's appeal to a "fact of reason" in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. This is the second problem, the infinite regress problem, that was mentioned above: if we give the law to ourselves, then whence comes the first normative law that makes any law binding on us in the first place? How do I bind myself to be bound? Pinkard explains:

...if we are to impose a principle (a maxim, the moral law) on ourselves, then presumably we must have a reason to do so; but, if there was an antecedent reason to adopt that principle, then that reason would not itself be self-imposed; yet for it to be binding on us, it had to be (or at least had to be 'regarded' to be, as Kant ambiguously stated) self-imposed. The 'fact of reason,' as an expression of the 'Kantian paradox,' thus is supposedly practically undeniable, not theoretically proven: we simply could not entertain such a view of ourselves and still be free,

practically acting agents.²³

Ultimately, the normative has to be grounded in an unquestionable reason, but if we supply all reasons to ourselves, then how do we ever legislate a reason that cannot be ignored?

Pinkard suggests that he derives the notion of a “Kantian paradox” from Robert Pippin, but, in a more recent work, Pippin has distanced himself from Pinkard’s language. As Pippin writes, the “point is to try to understand what he [Kant] is trying to say without interpreting it [autonomy] as unavoidably paradoxical.”²⁴ Pippin thus suggests that “the first point to make about Kant’s claim is that it is *metaphorical*.”²⁵ Nevertheless, conjuring Pinkard’s Kantian paradox, Pippin continues: “The image of some sort of putatively law-less person making or originating or legislating a principle and only thereby being bound to it—otherwise not bound at all—makes it very hard to imagine on what sort of basis such a law-less subject could decide what to legislate. Unless you are already bound to the constraint of reason, on what basis could you subject yourself to such constraints?”²⁶ The implicit suggestion on Pippin’s part is that this could not possibly be what Kant means to suggest with the idea of autonomy. Instead, Pippin recognizes, the problem is that Kant is noting the reality that we are always already obligated in some way.²⁷ There is no paradoxical moment when we provide ourselves with the first reason in some magically binding way. Rather, we find ourselves always

²³ Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 59-60.

²⁴ Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, 72, n. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

already imbedded in a reality that includes the fact that we are obligated by the moral law.

Thus, Pinkard, Pippin, and others hold that the working out of the idea of autonomy is the project of the later idealists,²⁸ and, therefore, turn to the post-Kantians (and Hegel in particular) in effort to resolve the contradictions of autonomy. For Pippin and Pinkard, the solution is found in Hegel, who they read in a completely non-metaphysical fashion. They argue that Hegel solves the “Kantian paradox” (or perhaps helps us to understand the “metaphor” of autonomy) by situating or concretizing autonomy in history and society.²⁹ In this sense, Pippin’s account perhaps gets closest to what Kant must have meant when he articulated the idea of autonomy, but Pippin nevertheless remains on the threshold refusing to enter because, like Pinkard, he will not move into a metaphysical account of moral obligation. But only a metaphysical account will be satisfactory, since embedding autonomy in history and society only begs the question insofar as it continues to suggest an infinite regress. How does the fact that norms are socially-based make them any more obligatory? How are the first social norms made normative? These sorts of questions cannot be answered by simply historicizing reason. History itself must be anchored in a metaphysical reality.

But this does not mean that we should look for a theoretical understanding of the metaphysics of autonomy in Kant either. In what follows, it will be argued that, in order to understand what Kant means by autonomy, it is necessary to take into account his

²⁸ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*. Pinkard, *German Philosophy*. Although he is critical of the post-Kantian developments, Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, also holds that the post-Kantian developments largely concern autonomy.

²⁹ See also Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

insight into the primacy of practical reason. On this basis, it will be argued that autonomy represents Kant's insight that we have participatory or pre-reflexive knowledge of a universal moral law—because, as rational beings, we de facto live within it.

The Primacy of Practical Reason

The primacy of practical reason has several meanings in Kant's thought. First, it means that the ultimate goal of all inquiry—theoretical or practical—is practical because it is meant to serve the moral end of human existence. Moreover, it means that all inquiry emerges out of the moral perspective: it is our existence as practical agents that leads us to inquire after the nature of reality and the ends that we should pursue. Further, it indicates that even theoretical philosophy is an activity. In terms of Kant's system of philosophy, it also means that the interests of practical reason are superior to those of theoretical reason, and, therefore, theoretical reason must submit itself to practical reason. Finally, and most importantly, the primacy of the practical means that the practical exercise of reason offers us knowledge of reality that transcends the limits of theoretical reason. It points to the fact that we are participants in a reality that we can only understand from within the perspective of participation. In short, practical reason reveals knowledge to us that cannot be accounted for according to the theoretical mode of knowing.

Kant argues most explicitly for the “primacy of pure practical reason” in the second *Critique*,³⁰ but he recognizes from the outset of his critical project that practical

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary Gregor with an Introduction by Andrews Reath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100-02 (5: 119-21). Kant does indicate the superiority of our capacity for moral knowledge in the *Groundwork*, however. As he writes, “we cannot consider without

reason legitimately transcends the limitations that apply to reason in its theoretical mode.³¹ Thus, Kant acknowledges in the first *Critique* that his critique reserves the possibility that reason in its practical mode may afford us knowledge to which we could never make a claim from within the theoretical perspective. As he writes:

when all progress in the field of the supersensible has thus been denied to speculative reason, it is still open to us to enquire whether, in the practical knowledge of reason, data may not be found sufficient to determine reason's transcendent concept of the unconditioned, and so to enable us, in accordance with the wish of metaphysics, and by means of knowledge that is possible a priori, though only from a practical point of view, to pass beyond the limits of all possible experience. Speculative reason has thus at least made room for such an extension; and if it must at the same time leave it empty, yet none the less we are at liberty, indeed we are summoned, to take occupation of it, if we can, by practical data of reason.³²

Kant does not pursue metaphysics through practical reason in the first *Critique*,³³ but, as we shall see below, he takes it up in his later works on practical philosophy. He does make it clear from the start, however, that the first *Critique* undermines metaphysics only in the dogmatic mode practiced by his predecessors such as Leibniz and Wolff, and he leaves open the possibility of a metaphysics that could be achieved through reason in its practical application. As he famously writes in this context, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*," by which he means that

admiration how great an advantage the practical faculty of appraising has over the theoretical in common human understanding." Kant, *Groundwork*, 17 (4: 404).

³¹ As he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "reason has, in respect of its practical employment, the right to postulate what in the field of mere speculation it can have no kind of right to assume without sufficient proof." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith with an introduction by Howard Caygill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 617 (A 776/B804).

³² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 24-25 (B xxi). In fact, Kant adds shortly thereafter: "we are convinced that there is an absolutely necessary *practical* employment of pure reason—the *moral*—in which it inevitably goes beyond the limits of sensibility. Though [practical] reason, in thus proceeding, requires no assistance from speculative reason, it must yet be assured against its opposition, that reason may not be brought into conflict with itself." Ibid., 26-27 (B xxv).

³³ "At some future time we shall show that the moral laws do not merely presuppose the existence of a supreme being, but also, as themselves in a different connection absolutely necessary, justify us in postulating it, though, indeed, only from a practical point of view. For the present, however, we are leaving this mode of argument aside." Ibid., 527 (A 634/B662).

he had to restrict the operations of theoretical reason in order to ensure room for the “*practical extension* of pure reason.”³⁴ Thus, considered systematically, the first *Critique* moderates theoretical reason, containing it within its proper area of competence (the world of experience, of phenomena or objects), and it leaves the realms of morals and metaphysics open to reason in its practical employment.

Kant also holds from the beginning of his critical project that the ultimate end of his project is moral.³⁵ As he writes,

Reason is impelled by a tendency of its nature to go out beyond the field of its empirical employment, and to venture in a pure employment, by means of ideas alone, to the utmost limits of all knowledge, and not to be satisfied save through the completion of its course in [the apprehension of] a self-subsistent systematic whole. Is this endeavor the outcome merely of the speculative interests of reason? Must we not rather regard it as having its source exclusively in the practical interests of reason?³⁶

Kant has found it necessary to define the limits of our reason in its theoretical employment, but our desire—inherent to reason—to go beyond these limits is inextinguishable. For Kant, this desire is practical: it is tied to our moral existence, to the question of how we ought to live our lives. It is this practical desire that is the source of transcendent theoretical inquiry insofar as the existence of certain metaphysical realities—God, immortality of the soul, and freedom—are necessary to our moral existence. As Kant writes in the first *Critique*, “The ultimate aim to which the speculation of reason in its transcendental employment is directed concerns three objects: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God.”³⁷ But our

³⁴ Ibid., 29 (B xxx).

³⁵ Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* has argued this point, while also arguing that it goes back before Kant’s critical days.

³⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 630 (A 797/B 825).

³⁷ Ibid., 631 (A 798/B 826).

interest in these objects is not theoretical: “In respect of all three the merely speculative interest of reason is very small.” Rather, our interest is driven by moral concerns. Thus, already in the first *Critique*, Kant suggests that the ultimate ends of reason are moral or practical. Finally, Kant concludes that “it is evident that the ultimate intention of nature in her wise provision for us has indeed, in the constitution of our reason, been directed to moral interests alone.”³⁸ Thus, even in the first *Critique*, we see that reason (and Kant’s critique) is both motivated by practical interests and directed toward practical interests; and that reason in its practical mode tells us more than it does in its theoretical mode.

These reflections pave the way for Kant’s explicit arguments for the primacy of practical reason in the second *Critique*, in which Kant explicitly argues for the primacy of practical reason as a solution to the problem of the unity of reason: “in the union of pure speculative with pure practical reason in one cognition, the latter has primacy, assuming that this union is not contingent and discretionary but based a priori on reason itself and therefore necessary.”³⁹ Kant notes that the “primacy” of practical reason means that the interests of practical reason trump those of theoretical reason in two senses: “By primacy among two or more things connected by reason I understand the prerogative of one to be the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest. In a narrower practical sense it signifies the prerogative of the interest of one insofar as the interest of the others is subordinated to it (and it cannot be inferior to any other).”⁴⁰ In other words, we must determine the relationship between practical and theoretical reason from the practical perspective, and the end of theoretical reason (knowledge) must be subjected to the end

³⁸ Ibid., 632-33 (A 801/B 829).

³⁹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 101 (5: 121).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 100 (5: 119).

of practical reason, which “consists in the determination of the *will* with respect to the final and complete end.”⁴¹

In the first respect, Kant argues that theoretical reason must accept the insights of practical reason insofar as they do not conflict with its own findings. As he explains:

if pure reason of itself can be and really is practical, as the consciousness of the moral law proves it to be, it is still only one and the same reason which, whether from a theoretical or a practical perspective, judges according to a priori principles; and then it is clear that, even if from the first perspective its capacity does not extend to establishing certain propositions affirmatively, although they do not contradict it, as soon as these same propositions belong inseparably to the practical interest of pure reason it must accept them—indeed as something offered to it from another source, which has not grown on its own land but yet is sufficiently authenticated—and try to compare and connect them with everything that it has within its power as speculative reason, being mindful, however, that these are not its insights but are yet extensions of its use from another, namely a practical perspective; and this is not in the least opposed to its interest, which consists in the restriction of speculative mischief.⁴²

Thus, Kant does not claim that theoretical reason must include the insights of practical reason as theoretical knowledge, but that, insofar as it is able, it must include them in its operations. As will be discussed below, this leaves the insights of practical reason in an ambiguous relationship to Kant’s definition of knowledge, but it also points to Kant’s awareness of the reality that is accessed only through practical reason in his system.

The second reason that practical reason is primary is that its interests are superior to those of theoretical reason. Above all else, we are practical agents; the moral condition of our existence is the most important aspect of our existence. Thus, as Kant writes, “all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone.”⁴³ Even theoretical philosophy and science serve our

⁴¹ Ibid., 100 (5: 120).

⁴² Ibid., 101 (5: 121).

⁴³ Ibid., 102 (5: 121).

moral ends. This suggests why Kant thinks it is important that, although theoretical reason cannot confirm the results of practical reason, it must assume them as legitimate and incorporate them into its own operations. Our practical interests trumps the interests of theoretical reason, and, therefore, the theoretical must do its best to serve our practical interests. This includes attempting to account systematically for the insights into the theoretically unobtainable noumenal realm offered by practical reason.

Kant further argues that theoretical reason must not only serve the interests of practical reason, but that it itself depends on our practical insight into freedom. This is because, for Kant, the problem of freedom first arises for us in the context of our moral existence: “morality first discloses to us the concept of freedom, so that it is practical reason which first poses to speculative reason, with this concept, the most insoluble problem so as to put it in the greatest perplexity....”⁴⁴ Our moral existence raises the question of our freedom. As Kant continues, “one would never have ventured to introduce freedom into science had not the moral law, and with it practical reason, come in and forced this concept upon us.”⁴⁵ Thus, practical reason introduces the problem of freedom, but, more than this, theoretical philosophy and science require freedom. As Kant writes, “the concept of freedom, insofar as its reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason, constitutes the keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason.”⁴⁶ If we were not free, we would not be free to speculate. Thus, practical reason is also primary because it makes speculative reason possible.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27 (5: 30).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3 (5: 3-4).

Finally, there is another sense in which practical reason is primary for Kant, one that is constantly present in his practical philosophy but never satisfactorily explained. This is the sense that, above all, the primacy of practical reason means that through the exercise of our practical reason we gain insight into our existence that is not afforded to us by reason in its speculative mode. Thus, we attempt “to seek in the moral use of reason and to base on it the concepts of *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality*, for the possibility of which speculation does not find sufficient guarantee.”⁴⁷ Kant establishes that it is through reason in its practical mode that we can establish these postulates. Reason in its practical mode allows us entry into a world that we cannot access theoretically. Through the moral law we become aware of our free participation in the world of reason that transcends the empirical world of appearances, a world to which we have to access through reason in its theoretical mode, according to Kant. In critiquing practical reason, then, Kant realizes that it gives us access to a metaphysical order that we cannot confirm theoretically, and, in so doing, he paves the way—perhaps without realizing it—for Schelling’s conception of metaphysics as the practical or free unfolding of the order of reality in which we live. For through practical reason, Kant shows, we know in some sense that we participate in a rational and moral world order that transcends the finite world of cause and effect.⁴⁸ However, as will be discussed below, the status of this knowledge remains ambiguous for Kant (and, as will be argued in later chapters, this is where Schelling improves on Kant’s position).

Thus, there are a variety of senses in which one can speak of the primacy of practical reason in Kant, and the idea is clearly central to his philosophy as a whole. Yet,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5 (5: 5).

⁴⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 17 (5: 404).

Kant's claim that practical reason holds primacy over theoretical reason has not received the attention it deserves. This is surprising, since it is a remarkable claim for the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to make. The oversight can only be due to the privileged place that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* continues to hold in our understanding of his corpus: many scholars (especially those in English-speaking circles) still think of Kant's theoretical philosophy as his most important contribution to the history of philosophy, and they certainly accept that we only know what we can verify theoretically. Yet Kant himself—and not only in later works, but within the first *Critique* itself—tells us that it is only one step in a larger project. For the theoretical is not the only mode of reason: reason also has a practical exercise and in this sphere Kant re-admits the metaphysical questions that he places out of the reach of speculative reason.

Paying proper heed to Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason is especially important for understanding the idea of autonomy, since autonomy, much like the postulates (which will be discussed below), is an idea of practical reason, which is to say that it is a concept without an empirical object. As such, autonomy is an idea that we live within; it is a metaphysical condition of our moral experience. Thus, we cannot get outside of it in order to explain it objectively; we can only reflect on it from within the perspective of the practical. For this reason, the attempts to give a theoretically sound account of autonomy are somewhat misplaced, since autonomy—like God, the immortality of the soul, and freedom—can neither be theoretically proven nor explained. Rather, we must understand it as Kant's attempt to articulate the nature of the moral from within, and it is from this perspective that we should approach the idea of autonomy.

Autonomy as the Primacy of Practical Reason

In Kant's language, an idea is opposed to a concept because it does not correspond to any object in our experience, and autonomy is an idea, which means that it is beyond the scope of theoretical reason. Nevertheless, Kant scholars have struggled to explain autonomy as a theoretical concept, and it is this misunderstanding that has been the greatest obstacle to understanding Kant's idea of autonomy. In order to avoid the problem, we must approach autonomy in light of Kant's arguments for the primacy of practical reason. From this perspective, it becomes clear that, for Kant, autonomy is an articulation of the moral condition of human existence as a reality that we can only know from within. It is an irreducible reality that cannot be proven theoretically: we cannot define it because it defines us. Moreover, this perspective also makes clear that autonomy has nothing to do with any voluntaristic assertions of the self; rather, it is the practical recognition of our inescapable participation within a moral order that we cannot fully grasp theoretically. In other words, autonomy and the primacy of the practical are one and the same insight.

Consider how Kant introduces the concept of autonomy. He argues that only a good will can be thought of us as good "without limitation,"⁴⁹ since anything else can be used either for good or for evil, depending on the disposition of the will. He then argues that the goodness of the will depends on its being oriented toward doing what is right simply because it is right: we must perform duty for duty's sake. It follows that the will is morally praiseworthy only when it acts out of "respect for law," rather than according to some other interest, whether that be happiness or another heteronomous motive. Moral

⁴⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, 7 (4: 393).

worth thus depends on following the moral law for the sake of following the law, and this leads to the Categorical Imperative, which Kant formulates as follows: “*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*”⁵⁰ As scholars such as Allen Wood have pointed out, this is only one of several formulations of the Categorical Imperative that Kant offers.⁵¹ A second is the so-called Formula of Humanity: “*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*”⁵²

It is important to recognize that, for Kant, “humanity” refers to our rational nature. Therefore, the Formula of Humanity really expresses the idea that “*rational nature exists as an end in itself.*”⁵³ Thus, as human beings we are ends in ourselves because we are rational beings; our status as ends in ourselves has nothing to do with our individuality or our peculiar human traits. Thus, in a sense, the “Formula of Humanity” is a somewhat deceptive moniker for the second formulation of the moral law; more accurately, it could be referred to as the “Formula of Rationality as an End in Itself.” As with the first formulation, reason remains that source of the moral law. This is absolutely essential to recognize because it means for Kant that it is our rational nature that must serve as the end of all our actions, not our peculiar nature as human beings, and certainly not our own individuality.

It is in this context that Kant develops the Formula of Autonomy as the third formulation of the categorical imperative: “the idea *of the will of every rational being as*

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15 (4: 402).

⁵¹ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*.

⁵² Kant, *Groundwork*, 38 (4: 429).

⁵³ Ibid., 37 (4: 428-9).

a will giving universal law.”⁵⁴ Like the Formula of Humanity, the Formula of Autonomy indicates that Kantian morality has nothing to do with human nature or the individual preferences of particular human beings; Kant even introduces the idea of autonomy as the “supreme condition of its [i.e., the will’s] harmony with universal practical reason.” The Formula of Autonomy is thus a further specification of what Kant means by the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity, which is that rationality is an end in itself, and that it is the basis for all morality. Autonomy, like humanity, is an expression of Kant’s position that reason is the basis for all morality.

The much more prevalent focus in the literature on the “giving oneself the law” aspect of autonomy is not without reason, however, since Kant himself formulates autonomy in such language. Immediately after introducing the Formula of Autonomy, Kant adds that “In accordance with this principle all maxims are repudiated that are inconsistent with the will’s own giving of universal law. Hence the will is not merely subject to the law but subject to it in such a way that it must be viewed as also giving the law to itself and just because of this as first subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author).”⁵⁵ The self-legislation aspect of autonomy is even stronger when Kant claims that an agent “is subject only to laws given by himself but still universal and that he is bound only to act in conformity with his own will, which, however, in accordance with nature’s end is a will giving universal law.”⁵⁶ Or, as he also writes: “This lawgiving must, however, be found in every rational being himself and be able to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 39 (4: 431), 40 (4: 432).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39 (4:431). The word translated as author is *Urheber*, which in the German is a likely reference to God, who is the *Urheber* of the Bible. I owe this insight to Terry Pinkard.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, 40 (4: 432).

arise from his will.”⁵⁷ Or:

the will of a rational being must always be regarded as at the same time lawgiving, since otherwise it could not be thought as an end in itself. Reason accordingly refers every maxim of the will as giving universal law to every other will and also to every action toward oneself, and does so not for the sake of any other practical motive or any future advantage but from the idea of the dignity of a rational being, who obeys no law other than that which he himself at the same time gives.⁵⁸

Clearly, autonomy means that we are self-legislating, but what does Kant mean by that?

In what sense are we self-legislating?

It is sure that Kant’s point is not that individual human beings are free to legislate whatever laws they choose as the moral law. The moral law must conform to reason, which is universal. Thus, the purpose of the Formula of Autonomy must be other than to establish that we are free to will whatever laws we like. This is evident in a number of passages in which Kant indicates that it is “reason” that legislates the moral law,⁵⁹ but it is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone* where Kant maintains that the moral law continues to assert itself even when we rebel against it: “The human being (even the worst) does not repudiate the moral law, whatever his maxims, in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it). The law rather imposes itself on him irresistibly, because of his moral predisposition....”⁶⁰ We cannot escape the moral condition, and our attempts to thwart the law only serve to further prove that the moral law is “a law through which our reason commands us compellingly.”⁶¹ As Kant

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42 (4: 434).

⁵⁸ Ibid. Again: “the dignity of humanity consists just in this capacity to give universal law. Though with the condition of also being itself subject to this very lawgiving.” Ibid., 46-47 (4: 440).

⁵⁹ For example, Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni with an introduction by Robert Merrihew Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 69 (6: 49); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 27 (5: 30).

⁶⁰ Kant, *Religion*, 58 (6: 36).

⁶¹ Ibid., 69 (6: 49).

writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for any rational subject, “A principle of duty...is a principle that reason prescribes to him absolutely and objectively (how he ought to act).”⁶² As these passages suggest, autonomy does not mean for Kant that we decide if and when we are morally obligated.

What, then, is Kant trying to indicate when he says that we give the law to ourselves? If we keep in mind that Kant speaks of autonomy as an idea and not as a concept (in a similar vein, he also says that we “must be viewed” as self-legislators), that is, if we examine it from the perspective of the primacy of the practical, then we move closer toward an answer. From this perspective, autonomy is not an object that we can theoretically comprehend; rather, it is an *a priori* reality that we recognize through practical reason as the horizon of our moral existence. Autonomy is a reality that we live within; it points to our participation in a moral order that transcends the self. This means that autonomy is a recognition that we can only know the moral order from within, and this is the same insight that governs the primacy of practical reason. It is the idea that we cannot gain a theoretical perspective on our existence as moral agents. Rather, we must explore the moral order that we live within from within the perspective of participants in that order. It is from within this perspective that we should understand Kant’s statements to the effect that we give the law to ourselves. To act morally is to follow the law for its own sake, which means to decide for oneself on the right course of action. This does not mean that we voluntaristically determine what is right, however. Rather, it means that only we can decide to respond to our moral obligations in way that has moral worth. This is what the Formula of Autonomy adds by insisting that we give the law to ourselves: we

⁶² Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor with an introduction by Roger J. Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18 (6: 225).

can be legally required to follow the moral law; in some instances, we can even be forced to follow the law; but only we can decide to follow the law for moral reasons. Thus, we do not create the law, but we decide whether or not we will rise to respond to it as moral beings.⁶³

It follows from this interpretation of autonomy that it is incorrect to suggest that the law would be heteronomous if its contents were determined by God or nature or reason. We may come to know the moral law through our own reason, but this is not incompatible with the idea that God originally formulated the law. (Perhaps Kant would not have countenanced such a view, but it is contained in the logic of his position, as we will see in the later chapters on Schelling.) In any event, the interpretation of autonomy offered here makes clear that we do not independently formulate our own moral laws as we see fit. The content of the law is the same for every agent. What autonomy does mean, however, is that we cannot be forced to follow the law as moral beings. We can be forced to maintain a legal relationship to the law, but only we can decide to make the law itself our motive. Thus, autonomy does recognize the freedom of the individual in one sense, but it also maintains that we are bound by a moral order that transcends the self.

In sum, autonomy and the primacy of the practical express the same insight, namely, the recognition that we have pre-conscious or pre-reflexive access to the moral law as a reality that we live within. What Kant is trying to show us is that we need not (in fact, cannot) look outside our own rational faculty in order to discover or ground our

⁶³ As will be seen, this will be an important point for Schelling, since he will insist that we cannot understand God as an object, as something external to us. Rather, we must understand God as beyond the subject-object mode of our consciousness. God is for Schelling, as Reason is for Kant, the reality in which we live. Kant, then, already anticipates Schelling to some extent, but he does not follow through on the point as Schelling does.

morality. We do not discover the moral law through theoretical reason, that is, as an object that is “out there” to be discovered. Rather, we know it because we live within it. Thus, for Kant, autonomy is not in any way about the self-assertion of the individual. Rather, it is a fairly strong argument for the idea that we knowingly participate in a universal and objective moral law. Moreover, Kant clearly recognizes that human beings do not perfectly manifest autonomy, since they routinely fail to follow the moral law. Autonomy understood as perfectly aligning ourselves to the moral law is thus a possibility that we should ever strive to approximate. As such, Kant’s articulation of the idea of autonomy should not be read as an attempt to offer a theoretical description of human beings. Rather, following his arguments for the primacy of practical reason, it should be understood as his attempt to articulate the nature of morality from within the perspective of morality itself—the only perspective from which we can in fact understand it, since we cannot escape the moral nature of our existence. This is an idea that Kant also tries to articulate through his appeal to the moral law as a “fact of reason.”

The Fact of Reason

Understanding autonomy and the primacy of practical reason in this way also comports with Kant’s discussions of how we come to know the moral law. In the *Groundwork*, Kant notes that the practical rule arising from the idea of autonomy—“choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition”⁶⁴—can only be shown to be an actually existing imperative through a critique of pure practical reason: “That morality is no phantom—and this

⁶⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 47 (4: 440).

follows if the categorical imperative, and with it the autonomy of the will, is true and absolutely necessary as an a priori principle—requires a possible *synthetic use of pure practical reason*, which use, however, we cannot venture upon without prefacing it by a *critique* of this rational faculty itself.” Kant outlines such a critique in the third part of the *Groundwork*, but he revises his attempt in the second *Critique*. Whereas he attempts to prove the moral law by establishing human freedom in the former, he appeals to the moral law in order to establish our freedom in the latter. Thus, both accounts rely on but start from different sides of what Henry Allison has called the “reciprocity thesis”: the view that our freedom implies our existence under the moral law and that the moral law implies our freedom.⁶⁵ Since Kant abandons the procedure of the *Groundwork*, we will only discuss it briefly before turning to his account in the second *Critique*.

As mentioned, Kant’s first attempt to demonstrate the reality of the moral law (in the third chapter of the *Groundwork*) begins with freedom. In the “negative” sense, freedom means that our causality “can be efficient independently of alien causes *determining it*.”⁶⁶ In the “positive” sense, freedom is “causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind,” or “autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself.”⁶⁷ Kant thus concludes that “a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.”⁶⁸ It is on this basis, beginning with freedom, that Kant attempts to establish the reality of the moral law in the *Groundwork*: “If, therefore, freedom of the will is presupposed, morality together with its principle follows from it by mere analysis

⁶⁵ Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 201-13.

⁶⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, 52 (4: 446).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52 (4: 446-7). Cf. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 30 (5: 33).

⁶⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 53 (4: 447).

of the concept.”⁶⁹ This requires the justification of the principle of autonomy, which is a synthetic a priori judgment. The justification of such a judgment in this case is what requires Kant to move into a critique of the faculty of practical reason.

For whatever reason, Kant abandons this course in the second *Critique*,⁷⁰ and he attempts instead to establish the reality of human freedom through the moral law. Kant still adheres to the reciprocity thesis—“freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other”⁷¹—but now he stresses that whereas freedom is the “*ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom.”⁷² In other words, we are subject to the moral because we are free, but it is through our knowledge of the moral law that we know ourselves to be free, rather than vice versa.

The language that Kant uses to describe our knowledge of the moral law in the second *Critique* is striking. Kant writes that the moral law “offers itself to us,” and that we can become conscious of “pure practical laws just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles, by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us.”⁷³ It is in the wake of these formulations that Kant refers to the moral law as a “fact of reason.”

As he explains:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us) and because it instead forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ There seems to be a general consensus among Kant scholars that the argument from freedom to the moral law does not work. It is not clear, however, that they think the argument of the second *Critique* works either. Consider Allen Wood, who admits that the first argument fails and yet focuses on it. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 171-82.

⁷¹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 26 (5: 29).

⁷² Ibid., 4, n (5: 4). Cf. “the concept of the freedom of the power of choice does not precede in us the consciousness of the moral law but is only inferred from the determinability of our power of choice through this law as unconditional command.” Kant, *Religion*, 69, n. (6: 50).

⁷³ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 27 (5: 30).

not based on any intuition, either pure or empirical, although it would be analytic if the freedom of the will were presupposed; but for this, as a positive concept, an intellectual intuition would be required, which certainly cannot be assumed here. However, in order to avoid misinterpretation in regarding this law as *given*, it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving.⁷⁴

The moral law simply issues from our reason. “Pure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (to the human being) a universal law which we call the *moral law*.”⁷⁵

Furthermore, we find Kant again arguing that the moral law is the same for all rational beings: “Now this principle of morality, just on account of the universality of the lawgiving that makes it the formal supreme determining ground of the will regardless of all subjective differences, is declared by reason to be at the same time a law for all rational beings....”⁷⁶ Knowledge of freedom now depends for Kant upon the fact of reason. “How this consciousness of moral laws or, what is the same thing, this consciousness of freedom is possible cannot be further explained; its admissibility can, however, be defended in the theoretical *Critique*.”⁷⁷

Kant then argues that the moral law offers us access to a reality that transcends the grasp of reason in the theoretical mode: “the moral law...provides a fact absolutely inexplicable from any data of the sensible world and from the whole compass of our theoretical use of reason, a fact that points to a pure world of the understanding and, indeed, even determines it positively and lets us cognize something of it, namely a law.”⁷⁸

For Kant, we know the moral law even though we cannot prove theoretically that it is true. Thus, practical reason offers us access to a reality that transcends the empirical

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28-9 (5: 31).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 29 (5: 31).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29 (5: 32).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41 (5: 46).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 38 (5: 43).

reality that is explainable through theoretical consciousness. Kant writes that, as rational beings, we live

in accordance with laws that are independent of any empirical condition and thus belong to the *autonomy* of pure reason. ... The law of this autonomy, however, is the moral law, which is therefore the fundamental law of a supersensible nature and of a pure world of the understanding, the counterpart of which is to exist in the sensible world but without infringing upon its laws. The former could be called the *archetypal world* (*natura archetypa*) which we cognize only in reason, whereas the latter could be called the *ectypal world* (*natura ectypa*) because it contains the possible effect of the idea of the former as the determining ground of the will. For, the moral law in fact transfers us, in idea, into a nature in which pure reason, if it were accompanied with suitable physical power, would produce the highest good.⁷⁹

Thus Kant's point is that we live in a moral world that transcends empirical reality and it is from here that the moral law issues forth. In this context, Kant openly suggests that autonomy designates a reality that transcends objective experience but is nevertheless real:

Yet we are conscious through reason of a law to which all our maxims are subject, as it a natural order must at the same time arise from our will. This law must therefore be the idea of a nature not given empirically and yet possible through freedom, hence a supersensible nature to which we give objective reality at least in a practical respect, since we regard it as an object of our will as pure rational beings.⁸⁰

Thus, through the moral law—the fact of reason—we become conscious of our autonomy as definitive of our existence. Practical reason is an elaboration of a reality that we live within but cannot grasp theoretically. The fact of reason, autonomy, and the primacy of the practical all point to Kant's recognition of our participation in a reality that transcends theoretical cognition but that we nevertheless know as real.

Despite its apparent importance to Kant's practical philosophy, however, the fact

⁷⁹ Ibid., 38-9 (5: 43).

⁸⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 39 (5: 44).

of reason is generally seen as one of the least acceptable aspects of Kant's practical philosophy. Even Allen Wood, one of the best contemporary interpreters of Kant's moral philosophy, essentially ignores it.⁸¹ The fact of reason does not fit with the belief that autonomy is incompatible with the idea that the moral law comes from a source that is not ourselves. It seems to suggest, in contrast, that the moral law is given to us by something beyond ourselves, that it is an external fact to which we must submit. But, once we understand Kant's notion of autonomy in the way that has been suggested here, it becomes easier to understand why Kant thinks he must ultimately rely on what he calls the "fact of reason." The fact of reason forms the horizon of our moral experience. We cannot finally understand why we are moral beings, but only that we are moral beings.

Returning, then, to the connection between autonomy, the fact of reason, and the primacy of the practical, we can now see how all of these teachings of Kant are attempts to articulate Kant's insight that through our moral experience we are somehow inarticulately in touch with a reality that transcends the limits of theoretical philosophy. We can neither prove nor justify the moral life from the theoretical perspective, and yet we live within it. Kant's critical project, then, shows not the limits of our capacity to know the reality in which we participate, but only our inability to resolve that reality into a theoretical account. As we shall see in later chapters, this is precisely the insight that Schelling takes up in his effort to show that despite the looming failure of the project of German Idealism, it has nevertheless made the irrevocable gain of recognizing that we are somehow in touch with reality before the question of a correspondence between our minds and the world ever arises. It is just that this connection is necessarily pre-

⁸¹ Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 171-72.

theoretical (or pre-reflexive). It cannot be articulated theoretically, but it is not therefore any less real. In fact, our very ability to comprehend the limits of the theoretical suggests that we are already operating from a perspective that transcends it. Kant himself recognizes this on some level when he attempts to show the legitimacy of metaphysics and revelation from a practical point of view. Moreover, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, Kant rests on this insight when he turns to the study of metaphysics, religion, and politics. He approaches them all from within the moral perspective.

The Metaphysics of the Practical: the Postulates

Although Kant famously undermines metaphysics in the traditional sense, he is nevertheless a metaphysical thinker, and he establishes a new kind of metaphysics that is grounded in practical reason. There is insufficient space in the present chapter to offer a full discussion of the metaphysical system that Kant attempts to develop, and, in any event, a complete presentation is unnecessary. All that is required for present purposes is a brief overview of how Kant moves from his analysis of the moral condition to the various aspects of his system. The present section will address the postulates of practical reason; the next two will show how Kant builds his theories of religion and politics on his moral philosophy. Finally, having discussed these points, the chapter will turn to a brief discussion of the epistemological ambiguity afflicting Kant's system that he never overcomes.

So far it has been argued that autonomy is an idea of reason, which means that it is an a priori reality that transcends the grasp of theoretical reason but that we

nevertheless know as real from the practical or participatory standpoint. From the very outset of his critical project, Kant argues that we also have a practical interest in establishing three other ideas of reason—freedom, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God—for, without these three objects, Kant argues, our moral experience cannot be rendered coherent. As is well known, however, Kant adds that we cannot claim to have actual knowledge of these objects because we cannot prove their existence theoretically. They are not and cannot be objects of experience, and, therefore, we can never be certain that they exist. Yet, since our reason has an inherent tendency to attempt to prove the reality of these objects, they become sources of the speculative mischief that Kant wants to do away with in the first *Critique*.

Having removed freedom, God, and immortality from the jurisdiction of theoretical reason, however, Kant argues that this does not preclude the possibility that practical reason may legitimately lay claim to them (even if only, as Kant adds, from a practical point of view). Thus, he reintroduces them as postulates from the practical point of view because they are all necessary to render our moral existence coherent. In what sense are they necessary? As has already been discussed, we postulate freedom because it is necessary under the moral law: only as free beings can we be held responsible for our actions. The other two postulates arise in relation to what Kant calls “the highest good,” which is the unification of perfect morality with perfect happiness, or the complete coincidence of the moral and natural aspects of the world. Since we are finite and cannot achieve this goal during one lifetime, we postulate the immortality of the soul as a necessary presupposition for the “*endless progress*” toward “complete conformity of the will with the moral law” or “*holiness*,” which is the “supreme condition of the highest

good.”⁸² Then, we postulate the existence of God because it is necessary to conceive of a power capable of bringing about the “second element of the highest good, namely **happiness** proportioned to that morality.”⁸³ Thus, freedom is a necessary condition for having a moral existence at all, and immortality and God are necessary for ensuring that the moral life is not futile, which would be against reason.

In this way, by extrapolating from the moral law, which is a fact of our existence, Kant reintroduces what he takes to be the three fundamental objects of metaphysics—although not as objects, since he claims that we cannot possibly have an experience of them. Instead, he articulates them as realities that we must postulate in order to make sense of our moral condition. This leaves the postulates in an ambiguous place in Kant’s thought. On the one hand, they are concepts of objects of which we have no experience, and, therefore, we cannot claim knowledge of their existence. On the other hand, they cannot be discarded as unfounded assumptions or merely subjective beliefs, since, for Kant, they are necessary to the moral life. Kant always remains in a holding pattern concerning the postulates of reason: they cannot be proven to actually exist and yet we must operate as if they do. As will be discussed below, the ambiguity concerning the postulates is a manifestation of a deeper ambiguity in Kant’s philosophy concerning what counts as knowledge. Before turning to that discussion, however, we turn to brief discussion of Kant’s accounts of religion and politics, which also illustrate how practical reason points to our existence within an a priori metaphysical order.

⁸² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102 (5: 122).

⁸³ Ibid., 104 (5: 124).

Religion as the Horizon of Existence

The extent to which Kant attempts to articulate our participation in an order that transcends the self is perhaps most clearly revealed in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in which he argues that religion derives from morality as its necessary complement. Kant does not turn to religion as the basis for morality, but, rather, as a system of rational belief that logically completes the moral dimension of human existence. As has just been discussed, he argues that practical reason necessarily generates the idea of God as a being who can ensure that the realms of freedom and nature (moral worth and happiness) coincide. Although the moral worth of our actions is not determined by such an end, we nevertheless must conceive of our actions as leading toward it in order for them to make sense. Since we cannot guarantee the achievement of this end on our own, Kant argues that the moral life suggests the need for

an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance), that is, the idea of a highest good in the world, for whose possibility we must assume a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent beings who alone can unite the two elements of this good.⁸⁴

Thus, as noted above, the idea of God emerges as the guarantee that moral worthiness and happiness will eventually coincide. But, as Kant stresses once again, “What is most important here, however, is that this idea rises out of morality and is not its foundation; that it is an end which to make one’s own already presupposes ethical principles.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Kant, *Religion*, 34 (6: 5). For Kant, this points to the unity of reason in general: “only in this way can an objective practical reality be given to the combination, which we simply cannot do without, of the purposiveness [deriving] from freedom and the purposiveness of nature.” Ibid., 35 (6: 5).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 34 (6: 5). “Morality thus inevitably leads to religion, and through religion it extends itself to the idea of a mighty moral lawgiver outside the human being, in whose ultimate end (of the creation of the world) is what can and at the same time ought to be the ultimate human end.” Ibid., 36 (6: 6).

Religion does not motivate our ethical decisions; rather, it is the logical consequence of the moral law: “morality does not need the representation of an end which would have to precede the determination of the will, [but] it may well be that it has a necessary reference to such an end, not as the ground of its maxims but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity to them.”⁸⁶ Thus, our knowledge of religion and our interest in it derive from the moral condition of our existence. Nevertheless, Kant’s articulation of the religious context of the human moral condition points to a metaphysical order that transcends the self.

The moral origin of religion is emphasized by Kant’s starting place in *Religion*. He begins with an account of the human moral condition as a struggle between good and evil within every human being. According to Kant, human beings have a “predisposition” toward good, but we also have a “propensity” to evil, and he argues that we can think of these characteristics as features of human nature, although he insists that both must be understood as freely adopted maxims outside of time. We cannot understand how this is possible, just as we cannot understand why one individual chooses good over evil, while another fails to do so. The mystery of evil is beyond our comprehension, but the moral law, which points to our freedom, insists that every individual must somehow be responsible for the path he or she takes.⁸⁷ In addition to maintaining that evil is freely chosen, Kant insists that we must also think of ourselves as being able to overcome it, since, if we were not capable of overcoming evil, we would not be responsible for it (in which case it would cease to be moral evil).⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 34 (6: 4).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 64 (6: 43).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 59 (6: 37), 63 (6: 41)

Thus, Kant suggests that we are torn between good and evil. In fact, as Schelling will also do, he uses language that suggests that we are participants in a battle between good and evil principles that transcend us. Religion, for Kant, personifies these two principles or forces that are at war within us in the persons of Jesus Christ and Satan. The personification of these principles is acceptable to Kant, although he holds that they are known to us as representing principles that we know from within ourselves. Kant already anticipates this position in the *Groundwork*, where he suggests that our pre-reflexive knowledge of the moral law is the basis on which we can understand empirical examples of the moral law as such. Arguing that morality cannot be derived from examples, Kant argues that this is because “every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model.”⁸⁹ We are able to recognize the example because we already know the law. Kant then suggests that this even applies to our recognition of Jesus Christ as moral exemplar: “Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as such.”⁹⁰ Kant develops this insight in *Religion*, once again insisting that no external example could reveal the moral law to us unless we already knew it. Referring to Christ as a moral exemplar, he writes that “the required prototype always resides only in reason, since outer experience yields no example adequate to the idea; as outer, it does not disclose the inwardness of the disposition but only allows inference to it, though not with strict certainty.”⁹¹ Thus, Kant essentially argues for a Platonic anamnesis, although

⁸⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, 21 (4: 408).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Kant, *Religion*, 81-82 (6: 63). Also: “in the appearance of the God-man, the true object of the saving

without any wild claims about previous lives in the realm of the forms.⁹² This is a perfect example of the primacy of practical reason in Kant's thought, since he insists that "From the practical point of view this idea has complete reality within itself. For it resides in our morally-legislative reason. We *ought* to conform to it, and therefore we must also *be able* to."⁹³ Practical reason thus confirms a reality that theoretical reason never could.

The third essay in *Religion* turns to the social dimension of the struggle between good and evil. Jesus Christ is for Kant the great moral exemplar, but we must also conceive of a collective victory of good over evil, since the battle between good and evil takes places within a social context that must be taken into account. Thus, Kant also claims that practical reason establishes the idea of an "ethical community"⁹⁴ or "invisible church"⁹⁵ that serves as the teleological trajectory of our collective moral efforts. Kant holds that our existence among other human beings tempts us to evil, that we "mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil."⁹⁶ It is collective because human beings bring out the evil in one another, and, therefore, in order to work toward the victory of good over evil, we must collectively strive toward the establishment of a "kingdom of virtue."⁹⁷ This is the end toward which we work, and it is the model for

faith is not what in the God-man falls to the senses, or can be cognized through experience, but the prototype lying in our reason which we put in him (since, from what can be gathered from his example, the God-man is found to conform to the prototype), and such a faith is all the same as the principle of a good life conduct." Ibid., 125 (6: 119). Cf. 165 (6: 169) and Kant, "What is Orientation in Thinking?," in Kant, *Religion*, 10-11 (8: 142). As David Walsh shows, Schelling develops a similar insight in his late lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation. Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution*, 168-9.

⁹² It is highly doubtful that Plato himself believed such things literally.

⁹³ Kant, *Religion*, 81 (6: 62).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 106ff. (6: 95ff.).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 111 (6: 101)

⁹⁶ Ibid., 105 (6: 94).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 106 (6: 95).

our actions. It is “a society which reason makes it a task and a duty of the entire human race to establish in its full scope,” and, although never fully realized in the here and now, “The Idea of such a state has an entirely well-grounded, objective reality in human reason (in the duty to join such a state), even though we cannot subjectively ever hope of the good will of human beings that these will work harmoniously toward this end.”⁹⁸

Thus, Kant holds, as Schelling will, that the moral law must find its completion in religion. Reason on its own—even in its practical mode—cannot give a satisfying and coherent account of our existence as moral, rational beings. Thus, Kant constructs a religion of reason that completes the picture of our moral existence. We are inexplicably but self-responsibly locked in a struggle between good and evil as individuals and as social creatures, and religion emerges as the practical faith that makes sense of our moral condition. Moreover, it offers the context in which we should seek to understand Kant’s political theory, to which we now turn.

The Primacy of Politics

Like Kant’s reflections on religion, his treatment of politics points to our a priori existence within an order that transcends the self. Although he clearly distinguishes between politics as an order of right (*Recht*) and ethics as an order of virtue, Kant nevertheless includes politics within the *Metaphysics of Morals*, thus indicating its a priori status. The crucial difference is that political laws can only govern our actions externally, whereas ethical laws govern them internally. Thus, Kant draws a clear

⁹⁸ Ibid.

distinction between the “legality” of actions and their “morality.” As he states, “The conformity of an action with the law of duty is its legality (*legalitas*); the conformity of the maxim of an action with a law is the morality (*moralitas*) of the action.”⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the “Doctrine of Right” fits within the *Metaphysics of Morals* because it both concerns our a priori obligations and prepares the conditions that are necessary for the pursuit of virtue.

The basis for politics in Kant’s account is the principle of right, which states that “Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law.”¹⁰⁰ This is the ground for all laws of the state:

Obligatory law for which there can be an external lawgiving are called *external* laws (*leges externae*) in general. Those among them that can be recognized as obligatory *a priori* by reason even without external lawgiving are indeed external but *natural* laws, whereas those that do not bind without actual external lawgiving (and so without it would not be laws) are called *positive* laws. One can therefore conceive of external lawgiving which would contain only positive laws; but then a natural law would still have to precede it, which would establish the authority of the lawgiver (i.e., his authorization to bind others by his mere *choice*).¹⁰¹

Kant adds that the principle of right obligates us without also obligating us to make the principle itself our incentive. Rather, it is simply a factual limitation on our freedom: it

is indeed a law that lays an obligation on me, but it does not at all expect, far less demand, that I *myself should* limit my freedom to those conditions just for the sake of this obligation; instead, reason says only that freedom *is* limited to those conditions in conformity with the idea of it and that it may also be actively limited by others; and it says this as a postulate that is incapable of further proof.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 17 (6: 225).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 24 (6: 230).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17 (6: 224).

¹⁰² Ibid., 24-5 (6: 231).

Thus, for Kant, freedom simply is limited by the freedom of others, and others are justified in using coercion to make us recognize that fact.

Nevertheless, Kant argues that we also have an ethical duty to enter into political community because it is necessary for the achievement of our moral vocation. The ethical community that we must strive to achieve, i.e., the Kingdom of God on Earth, is not the same as a political community, but Kant argues that it demands that we enter into the latter, since “without the foundation of a political community, it could never be brought into existence by human beings.”¹⁰³ As one scholar notes, “it is only after the external relations between men have been put to some rational order that one may expect the more difficult and more important step, namely the conversion of their personal attitudes.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, while the state cannot make it our moral duty to follow the law, we should do so: as Kant writes, “ethical lawgiving cannot be external,” but “it does take up duties which rest on another, namely an external, lawgiving by making them, *as duties*, incentives in its lawgiving.”¹⁰⁵ Kant clarifies his stance with the claim that “all duties, just because they are duties, belong to ethics; but it does not follow that the *lawgiving* for them is always contained in ethics: for many of them it is outside ethics.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, I can take up laws from external sources and make them duties. For example Kant argues that “ethics commands that I still fulfill a contract I have entered into, even though the other party could not coerce me to do so; but it takes the law (*pacta sunt servanda*) and the duty corresponding to it from the doctrine of right, as already given

¹⁰³ Kant, *Religion*, 106 (6: 94).

¹⁰⁴ Yirmiah Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 111.

¹⁰⁵ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 21 (6: 219).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

there.” The law says that I must keep my contract whether I think I should or not, but the moral law teaches that it is also an ethical duty to think that I should. Kant thus concludes that “the giving of the law that promises agreed to must be kept lies not in ethics but in *Ius* [*Right*]. All that ethics teaches is that if the incentive which juridical lawgiving connects with that duty, namely external constraint, were absent, the idea of duty by itself would be sufficient as an incentive.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the difference between ethics and right lies not in the matter of a law, but in its source. Ethical duties are those for which only an internal lawgiving is possible, whereas legal duties are those that can be legislated externally.

Thus, in one sense, political order does not depend on ethical behavior for Kant. This is because the principle of right includes coercion as a legitimate possibility within its definition. For Kant, we are always already embedded within political order whether we choose to respect the law or not. This means that political order does not depend on an historical social contract; rather, we always already live within the idea of a social contract. As Kant writes in *Theory and Practice*, the “*original contract*” is not an historical “coalition of the wills of all private individuals in a nation,” but “merely an *idea* of reason, which nonetheless has undoubted practical reality; for it can oblige every legislator to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation.”¹⁰⁸ The social contract is an a priori reality that obligates every human being even before they consent to be governed. Thus, for Kant, politics, like morality, and like religion, is a metaphysical reality that we become aware of through practical reason.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 21 (6: 220).

¹⁰⁸ Kant, “Theory and Practice,” 79. Cf. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 92-3 (6: 316-6).

Kant's Ambiguous Accomplishment

The ambiguity in Kant's philosophy concerning the reality of the postulates was suggested above. On the one hand, he will not say that we know that the postulates exist, but, on the other hand, he insists at the same time that they are practical realities. The ambiguity illustrates the ongoing tension between theoretical and practical reason in Kant's mind. Although Kant argues that the practical is primary, he cannot fully reconcile himself to the implications of the claim. Kant realizes that we know things about reality that cannot be reduced to the theoretical model, but the latter remains his primary paradigm for defining what counts as knowledge. As a result, one cannot help but get the sense that the postulates are simply unfounded beliefs because theoretical reason cannot confirm that they are true.

Kant's struggles with the status of the postulates are evident from his shifting terminology and claims concerning them. Even the definition of a postulate—"a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law"¹⁰⁹—points to the tension between theoretical and practical reason in Kant's philosophy. On the one hand, Kant stresses that the postulates are not on the same level as theoretical knowledge (or even the moral law, for that matter). For instance, while claiming that it is morally necessary to postulate the ideas of freedom, God, and immortality, he notes that "this moral necessity is *subjective*, that is, a need, and not *objective*, that is, itself a duty; for there can be no duty to assume the existence of anything (since this concerns only the theoretical use of

¹⁰⁹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102 (5: 122).

reason).”¹¹⁰ Kant also refers to the postulate of God’s existence as an “assumption,” and he claims that “as a ground of explanation, it can be called a hypothesis,” but as “a need for practical purposes, it can be called a belief [*Glaube*] and, indeed, a pure rational belief since pure reason alone (in its theoretical as well as in its practical use) is the source from which it springs.”¹¹¹ Yet Kant also claims that the postulates “must be *assumed*” for the purposes of practical reason, and that “by means of the concept of freedom objective reality is given to the ideas of God and immortality,” and he asserts—in apparent contrast to his claim that there is not duty to believe in the postulates—that the need to assume the postulates “is not a hypothetical one for some *discretionary* purpose of speculation, where one must assume something if one *wants* to ascend to the completion of the use of reason in speculation, but rather a *need having the force of law*.”¹¹² As these passages suggest, the postulates hold an uneasy place in Kant’s philosophy: on the one hand, he wants to assert their reality without question (“no sophistry will ever convince even the most common human being that they are not true concepts”¹¹³), but, on the other, he struggles to reconcile his claims with the requirements of his own critical philosophy.

Kant’s struggles to justify his appeal to the postulates have transferred to many of his contemporary readers as well. For instance, commenting on Kant’s moral arguments for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, Allen Wood claims that “Just because they are not theoretical arguments, they do not provide reasons that directly

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 105 (5: 125).

¹¹¹ Ibid., 105 (5: 126).

¹¹² Ibid., 4 (5: 4-5).

¹¹³ Ibid., 111 (5: 133-4).

produce belief in God or immortality.”¹¹⁴ For Wood, “Kant’s arguments do not show that there is a God and a future life, but only that belief in God and a future life would be very desirable for a moral agent to have, since it would rescue such an agent from a practical paradox.”¹¹⁵ According to Wood, practical reason cannot convince us to accept that God exists, since “Such belief requires either theoretical evidence, which Kant regards as unavailable, or else nonrational motivating factors, which Kant wishes to eschew.”¹¹⁶ But why is any belief that does not conform to the model of theoretical knowledge nonrational? Is not one of the crucial insights of Kant’s philosophy precisely that there is more to the world than what can be captured by theoretical reason? Wood’s analysis illustrates perfectly the tendency among Kant scholars to not take the primacy of practical reason seriously.

This should be especially troubling when one considers that the same ambiguity applies to not only the postulates, but to Kant’s whole moral philosophy. At what point has Kant proven that any of it is true? How do we know that we are autonomous? How do we know that we are bound by the Categorical Imperative? Kant’s last word on the source of the moral law is his appeal to the “fact of reason.” Having critiqued the capacity of theoretical reason to give a metaphysical account of the order of existence, Kant turns to practical reason to explore the moral-metaphysical order in which we exist. However, if we maintain that only the theoretical yields knowledge, then the whole edifice of Kant’s practical philosophy rests on what appears to be a very shaky foundation. The moral law, upon which Kant lays his claims to autonomy, freedom,

¹¹⁴ Allen W. Wood, “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 403.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 404.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 405.

immortality, God, religion, and the principle of right, is never theoretically justified. It is simply registered as an inescapable fact of reason in its practical mode. How could this be acceptable to the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason*? How can he claim to know any of these features of the human moral condition? He “deduces” the moral law from a fact of reason, he refers to the postulates as “assumptions” and “presuppositions,” and he admits that not only the existence of God and the immortality of the soul but even our freedom cannot be proven.¹¹⁷ Yet, Kant never waivers in his commitment to the moral law.

As suggested, the ambiguities stem from the continuing and unwarranted primacy of theoretical epistemology in Kant’s philosophy. Even though he argues for the primacy of the practical and continues to operate on that basis, he never fully relinquishes the distinction between subjective and objective knowledge, of which only the latter is truly knowledge. To be sure, Kant claims that practical reason confirms that objective reality of certain ideas of reason, but, in other places, he continues to hedge his bets, suggesting that speculative reason must accept the findings of practical reason and incorporate them into its operations, but that these findings are not to be accepted as pieces of objective knowledge. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Orientation* essay:

A purely *rational belief* can never be transformed into *knowledge* by any natural data of reason and experience, for in this case, the grounds on which it is held to be true are (and always will be, so long as we are human beings) purely subjective; in other words, reason has an essential need simple *to presuppose*, rather than to demonstrate, the existence of a supreme being.”¹¹⁸

This statement is then shortly followed by the following:

On the other hand, a rational belief which is based on the need to use reason for

¹¹⁷ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 17 (6: 225).

¹¹⁸ Kant, “Orientation,” 244 (8: 141)

practical purposes could be described as a postulate of reason; for although it is not an insight capable of fulfilling all the logical requirements for certainty, this conviction of truth is not inferior in degree to knowledge (provided that the person who holds it is of sound moral character), even if it is totally different from it in kind.”¹¹⁹

These two passages juxtaposed display all the ambiguity that still pervades Kant’s notion of the primacy of practical reason. The term, “knowledge,” means “objective knowledge,” or knowledge of objects in the world; i.e., it is theoretical knowledge. The “knowledge” that practical reason yields is not really knowledge at all, but “rational belief (or faith).” The findings of practical reason can be employed for practical purposes (indeed, they must be), and they can be assumed or hypothesized by theoretical reason, but they can never gain the status of true knowledge. Despite all of Kant’s appeals to the primacy of the practical, he always remains tied to his theoretical epistemology. For both Kant and his readers, the specter of doubt never ceases to haunt his practical philosophy.

Yet, as we have seen, the ambiguous status of the practical does not undermine morality for Kant. He is perhaps more sure of the reality of the moral law than anything else, and he believes that morality is an irreducible condition of human existence that cannot be escaped. This is because, as has been argued in this chapter, Kant operates from the perspective of the primacy of the practical (even if he is not fully committed to it). His epistemological reservations aside, Kant is engaged in a meditative unfolding of the order of human existence from within the perspective of the moral condition. And this is in fact what Kant’s idea of autonomy is meant to capture: we cannot gain a theoretical hold on the moral life, because we can only know it from within. We give the moral law to ourselves because we are the ones who recognize the obligations that

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 245 (8: 141-42).

freedom brings with it. We are always legally bound by those obligations, but as autonomous agents we are morally bound as well because we recognize our obligations.

As we will see in future chapters, Schelling overcomes the ambiguity by taking Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical to its logical conclusion. Thus, the argument is not that Schelling refutes Kant's ideas of autonomy and the primacy of the practical, but that he reformulates them for the better. Indeed, even Kant points in the direction of Schelling's positive philosophy when he writes of God that

it is absolutely impossible to cognize the existence of this being from mere concepts, because every existential proposition—that is, every proposition that says, of a being of which I frame a concept, that it exists—is a synthetic proposition, that is, one by which I go beyond that concept and say more about it than was thought in the concept, namely, that to this concept *in the understanding* there corresponds an object *outside the understanding*, which it is absolute impossible to elicit by any inference.¹²⁰

With this statement, Kant moves quite close to Schelling's later distinction between the negative and positive philosophies insofar as he recognizes that abstract thought can never guarantee the existence of anything other than thought. We must move into the realm of the positive, the realm of history and empirical existence, in order to determine whether or not our reason in fact corresponds to reality—and this is precisely what Kant does in his practical philosophy, although he has not fully justified it to himself. Thus, while Kant's own position remains ambiguous, he nevertheless inaugurates the movement towards Schelling's metaphysics of freedom.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Kant's idea of autonomy, the centerpiece of his moral

¹²⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 115 (5: 139).

philosophy, should be understood in the context of his arguments for the primacy of practical reason. In fact, it has suggested that autonomy is itself an expression of the primacy of practical reason. As noted, the primacy of practical reason has several meanings for Kant, but the most important is the recognition that our practical existence as moral beings reveals to us an order of existence that we cannot grasp through theoretical reason. We are participants in the moral order, and, therefore, we cannot know it from the perspective of an onlooker. With the idea of autonomy, Kant recognizes that we are embedded in this order that transcends the self, but he also insists that only we can choose to be moral. This does not mean that we can choose whether or not we have moral obligations, and it does not mean that we can decide what those obligations are; rather, it means that only we can choose to meet our obligations for moral reasons, i.e., simply because they are our obligations.

As has also been discussed, Kant's meditations on our existence as moral beings do not yield only the moral law. Kant also uncovers a whole metaphysical account of the reality in which we find ourselves. The moral condition is grounded in a reality that transcends time and place. This is why the social-historical interpretations of autonomy remain unsatisfactory. Eventually, obligation must come from somewhere. Thus, for Kant, the moral law is a metaphysical reality, and so are the other features of his system that derive from it: the postulates, religion, and politics. Each of these aspects of Kant's moral philosophy grow out of his account of our moral existence. They represent attempts to explain the world given the fact of the moral condition.

Despite the trajectory of his philosophy, however, Kant never embraces the full implications of his recognition that we have a pre-theoretical knowledge of the order of

reality. He can never bring himself to say that we know the reality that is revealed to us through our moral experience. He always remains beholden to the principles of theoretical knowledge and the theoretical criteria for knowledge. Thus Kant speaks of the postulates or ideas of reason as regulative rather than constitutive. In so doing, however, Kant is denying the logic of his own philosophical trajectory, and for this the Idealists rightly criticize him. Kant remains caught in a tension between his recognition of the insights into the order of reality that are afforded to us through practical reason and his own theoretical bent of mind. This tension in Kant's thought is in part to blame for the misinterpretations he suffered from his own immediate successors, and it has continued to affect the reception of his thought up to the present time. Only very few scholars recognize the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of Kant that flows from an overemphasis on the first *Critique* and the *Groundwork*. The chapters that follow will show how Schelling helps us to correct this problem by emphasizing our non-reflective participation in an order that transcends the self. They will show that, whereas Kant remained beholden to the formal principles of his theoretical philosophy, Schelling made great strides towards the recognition that the order of being is disclosed to us non-theoretically.

Chapter II

Autonomy and the Primacy of the Practical in Schelling's Early Idealism

Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of Schelling's earliest published writings, in which he begins to develop his own contribution to the post-Kantian idealism that was initiated by Karl Leonard Reinhold and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In so doing, it sets the stage for the analysis of the *Freiheitsschrift* that is to come in chapters three and four. As will be demonstrated in those chapters, Schelling's argument in the *Freiheitsschrift* both builds on insights that are present in his own early thought and confronts fundamental difficulties contained in the same. An outline of Schelling's early philosophy will therefore prepare the reader to understand better the problems that Schelling grapples with in the *Freiheitsschrift*, since, in many ways, they evolve out of the problems that Schelling pursues from the beginning of his career.

The argument of the present chapter is that Schelling's early thought should be understood primarily as a development of Kant's argument for the primacy of practical reason, and that, for this reason, the young Schelling already stands in an ambiguous relation to the goal of German Idealism, which is to construct a systematic philosophy on the basis of an autonomous first principle that contains all thought and being. Initially, Schelling buys into the project of German Idealism as initiated by Reinhold and the early Fichte, since he agrees with them that the Kantian philosophy must be grounded in an absolutely certain and unconditioned (i.e., autonomous) first principle if it is to overcome

skepticism once and for all.¹ Schelling believes that there is such a principle and he follows Fichte in his early works by designating it as the absolute I. As unconditioned, the absolute I is beyond objective experience (and therefore also theoretical reason), and Schelling argues that we can only know it immediately as the all-encompassing reality in which we exist. He further argues that our existence is constituted by a striving to realize the absolute I within ourselves, and it is primarily in this sense that he carries forward Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical: for Schelling, our existence reveals to us our participation in a reality that is deeper than what can be contained in thought. This leaves Schelling, even at a young age, in an ambiguous relationship to the project of early German Idealism, since he maintains that autonomy is the first principle of thought and being, while also denying that we can theoretically grasp that autonomy. Instead, Schelling argues, we recognize autonomy as the reality that constitutes our existence, but transcends our experience.

As mentioned, the analysis in this chapter is based on Schelling's earliest publications. They include: *On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy*; *Of the I as the Principle of All Philosophy, or On the Unconditioned in Human Knowledge*; *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*; and *Treatises Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge*. All of these texts predate the systematic efforts for which Schelling is better known (the *Naturphilosophie*, the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and the *Identitätsphilosophie*), and they have been chosen deliberately for this

¹ The post-Kantian Idealists accept the critique that Kant's philosophy remains open to skeptical attack because he cannot guarantee that our representations actually correspond to things-in-themselves. The Idealists also believe that this deficiency must be overcome through the discovery of an absolutely autonomous first principle, since that alone would guarantee the ultimate unity of thought and being. The attempt to discover such a principle and develop a systematic philosophy upon it is essentially the project of post-Kantian German Idealism.

reason. There can be no doubt that Schelling desired to develop a philosophical system; to his mind, a systematic account of the whole was the defining goal of philosophy. Yet, Schelling's writings are also permeated by a recognition that reality cannot be captured within a rational system, and it appears that, as a result of this tension, Schelling was never satisfied with any of his systematic efforts. It thus seems odd that Schelling is best known for his systems, even though hardly anyone (himself included) believes that any of them were successful. Contemporary scholarship has begun to recognize that Schelling's lasting achievement must lie elsewhere, namely, in his recognition of the impossibility of system, but the pervasiveness of Schelling's insight into this matter—the fact that it is present from his first writings to his last—has not been adequately recognized. These works have thus been chosen to show that Schelling was aware of the impossibility of system from the very start—at least inchoately—and that he struggles with the conflict between the desire for system and the recognition of its impossibility from the beginning of his career. By focusing on these early pre-systematic works, this chapter thus intends to show that the now traditional narrative of Schelling's development—that only after having witnessed the failure of his own systematic efforts did he come to recognize the impossibility of system—must give way to a more nuanced account.

The chapter proceeds in several stages. First, it shows that Schelling's early thought is initially framed by contemporaneous debates between Kant's skeptical critics (especially Schulze) and his would be successors (in particular, Reinhold and Fichte). It then discusses Schelling's early attempts to establish a first principle of human knowledge as the means for fortifying that knowledge against skepticism. Schelling

argues that this first principle must transcend consciousness, which naturally raises the question of how we can know it at all, even if it does exist. After surveying some of the possible theoretical attempts that Schelling makes to establish our knowledge of the absolute, it is argued that Schelling's arguments for intellectual intuition are actually a manifestation of his attempt to grasp that we know the absolute from a practical perspective. Finally, having established that Schelling is operating within a practical perspective, the discussion then turns to Schelling's understanding of the moral condition of human existence. In this context, his treatment of autonomy is brought up in order to show that the Absolute alone is autonomous, but that we strive for autonomy, since we strive to realize the absolute, which is the eternal reality that constitutes our existence. Throughout the chapter it will be argued that the essential point that Schelling spends his entire career attempting to comprehend is this: we live within a reality that we can neither adequately express in words nor satisfactorily determine in theory, but which we nevertheless know to be real.

The Need for a First Principle

By the time Schelling entered onto the philosophical scene, Kant's philosophy had already risen to prominence, and it had generated a significant amount of controversy in philosophical circles. Schelling was therefore influenced not only by Kant himself, but also by the developing response to Kant's thought.² It is not possible within the confines of this chapter to consider these developments in depth, but a brief discussion will help to

² Of course, Schelling was influenced by philosophers outside of this development as well, notably Spinoza, for whom Schelling had a great respect. Jacobi was also an important influence. This chapter cannot pretend to unravel the myriad influences that are evident in Schelling's thought, however.

contextualize Schelling's early essays.³ In particular, something must be said about the debate that arose between Kant's skeptical critics, especially Gottlob Ernst Schulze, and his self-designated defenders, Reinhold and Fichte. This debate was formative for both Fichte and Schelling, and it established the direction of the post-Kantian Idealist movement in which they would be instrumental. The story begins with Reinhold's efforts to elucidate Kant's critical philosophy in response to some early criticisms of it, including complaints concerning its obscurity.⁴

Reinhold sought to make Kant's writings more accessible and he became famous as a popularizer of the Kantian philosophy, but he did not simply paraphrase Kant's words. Instead, Reinhold sought to improve the critical philosophy by organizing it around a single first principle, so as to clarify (and thereby defend) Kant's position. The goal was to create a perfectly autonomous philosophy that would be impervious to skeptical critique. Reinhold thought that he could guarantee the veracity of the critical philosophy if he could show that it all derived from a single fact that could be expressed in a single proposition known with certainty. In taking this path, Reinhold provided the first step toward the systematic attempts of the post-Kantian Idealists, since Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel would all agree with Reinhold that the establishment of a systematic philosophy on the basis of a single first principle was the way forward after Kant. None

³ There are several accounts of this period in the history of philosophy. See: Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. David S. Pacini (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Reinhold's role in the transition from Kant to the post-Kantian Idealists, see especially Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* and Daniel Breazeale, "Between Kant and Fichte: Karl Leonard Reinhold's 'Elementary Philosophy,'" *The Review of Metaphysics*, 35 (4), 1982, 785-821.

of the Idealists would accept Reinhold's own attempt to unify the critical philosophy, however.

Reinhold argued that "representation" (*Vorstellung*) is the basic fact on which our knowledge rests and that it could be encapsulated in what he called the "principle of consciousness" (*Satz des Bewusstseins*).⁵ Essentially, Reinhold's claim was that subject and object met in representation, which thus had to be conceived as a third member in any act of judgment, and that our knowledge was based on the simultaneous relation and distinction of these three elements. According to Reinhold, our knowledge could not go beyond this fact and, therefore, it had to serve as the first principle of all philosophy. The theory quickly won adherents, including Fichte, but its star did not shine for long, since Reinhold failed to overcome some of the severest skeptical attacks on the critical philosophy. As a result, the Idealists, beginning with Fichte, would all agree that Reinhold had not uncovered the most fundamental root of human knowledge.⁶

Reinhold's chief critic, who spurred on the search for a more fundamental first principle, was the skeptical philosopher, Schulze, whose *Aenesidemus*⁷ took aim not only at Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, but also at Kant's critical philosophy in general. It is unnecessary to consider all of Schulze's many arguments here in detail, but two of his most important critiques should be mentioned, since they altered the direction that post-

⁵ The proposition runs as follows: "representation is distinguished in consciousness by the subject from both subject and object, and is referred to both." Cited in George di Giovanni and H.S. Harris, trans. and ed., *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 14. They provide an earlier formulation as well: "Consciousness compels us to agree that to each representation belongs a represented subject and a represented object, and that both must be distinguished from the representation to which they belong." Ibid., 46, n. 29.

⁶ For an extended discussion of Reinhold's influence, see Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*.

⁷ This is the short title by which the work is commonly known. The full title is *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie. Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen dies Anmassungen der Vernunftkritik*. It was published in 1792.

Kantian Idealism would take. First, Schulze showed that Reinhold's principle of consciousness could not be the first principle of all philosophy. He argued that it could not account for all representations (he used as an example the experience of pain) and that it was too ambiguous (he argued, for instance, that Reinhold could have just as easily referred to the object as the form of the representation and the subject as the content, rather than vice versa). More importantly, however, he found that the principle of consciousness presupposed a self-awareness that could not be explained under the principle itself without leading to an infinite regress. Second, Schulze challenged the idea of the things-in-themselves. He argued that no justifiable basis had been established for Kant's and Reinhold's claims that there are things-in-themselves. Furthermore, Schulze argued, Kant's philosophy precluded the possibility of all objective knowledge because it could never guarantee with certainty the correspondence of our representations to the objects as they are in themselves. With these two criticisms in particular, Schulze appeared to tear down the whole edifice of the critical philosophy.

Schulze's *Aenesidemus* had a profound effect on Fichte, who was a self-acknowledged follower of Kant and Reinhold.⁸ Fichte undertook to review Schulze's book, surely expecting to defend Kant and Reinhold, but he ended up conceding (at least in part) several of Schulze's arguments against them, especially those directed against Reinhold's system. Most significantly, although Fichte maintained agreement with Reinhold that Kant's system required a first principle upon which it could be grounded systematically, he agreed with Schulze that Reinhold's principle of consciousness was not

⁸ For an account of Reinhold's influence, see Breazeale, "Between Kant and Fichte," esp. 804-15. For the importance of Fichte's review, see Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte's 'Aenesidemus' Review and the Transformation of German Idealism," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (3), 1981, 545-568.

radical enough to serve as that foundation. Unlike, Schulze, however, Fichte remained dedicated to the critical project and thus began to develop a radically new system of philosophy even as he wrote his *Review of Aenesidemus*. Fichte does not develop the new system in the *Review* itself, but several of his key positions are already hinted at within the text. These are worth a brief review, since they foreshadow Schelling's early idealism, which is in many respects an elaboration of Fichte's early thought.⁹

First, conceding that Reinhold's principle of consciousness cannot serve as the first principle of philosophy, Fichte suggests that Reinhold's "fact" of representation must be replaced by a preconscious "act (*Tathandlung*)"¹⁰ of self-consciousness, in which the I "posits" both itself and the not-I. This absolute I is thus both the formal and the material source of consciousness, and, as such, it can never be contained within consciousness. As Fichte explains:

The absolute subject, the I, is not given by empirical intuition; it is, instead, posited by intellectual intuition. And the absolute subject, the not-I, is that which is posited in opposition to the I. Neither of these occur in empirical consciousness except when a representation is related to them. In empirical consciousness they are both present only indirectly, as the representing subject and as what is represented. One is never conscious of the *absolute* subject (the representing subject which would not be represented) or of the absolute *object* (a thing in itself, independent of all representation) as something empirically given.¹¹

The absolute I is thus inferred as the act prior to all experience that explains the unity of thought and being in our representations.

Second, on the basis of this new principle, Fichte rejects the notion of the thing-

⁹ There is insufficient space within the confines of this chapter to sort out the similarities and differences between the early thought of Fichte and Schelling. The key point here is to show that Fichte helped to form the direction of Schelling's early thought.

¹⁰ Fichte, "Review of Aenesidemus," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 64 (1: 8).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65 (1: 10).

in-itself, claiming that “the thought of a thing possessing existence and specific properties *in itself* and apart from any faculty of representation is a piece of whimsy, a pipe dream, a nonthought.”¹² This is because, according to Fichte, the not-I is only posited along with the I. Thus, he suggests that the notion of a not-I only makes sense in reference to the I:

Suppose that further advances along the path which Reinhold, to his credit, has cleared for us should reveal the following: that the most immediately certain thing of all, “I am,” is also valid only *for* the I; that all that is not-I *is* for the I only; it is only through its relation to an I that the not-I obtains all of the determinations of this a priori being; that, however, all of these determinations, insofar as they can be known a priori, become absolute necessary upon the mere condition of a relation between a not-I and any I at all. From this it would follow that the notion of a thing in itself, to the extent that this is supposed to be a not-I which is not opposed to any I, is self-contradictory, and that the thing is actually constituted in itself in just the way in which it must be thought to be constituted by any conceivable intelligent I (i.e., by any being which thinks in accordance with the principle of identity and contradiction).¹³

Fichte thus removes the thing in itself from the equation, since there is no such thing as an object that does not exist in relation to mind. On this basis, he avoids the skeptical argument that we do not know whether or not our representations correspond to objects as they actually are.

Third, Fichte foreshadows his own development of Kant’s argument for the priority of practical reason. In this instance, he fully rejects Schulze’s arguments. Fichte actually defends the primacy of the practical in two respects. First, as already discussed, he argues that the first principle of philosophy is an act. Second, in response to Schulze’s claim that we must first know what we are capable of doing before determining what we ought to do, Fichte argues that the finite I is constituted by a striving for the absolute I,

¹² Ibid., 71 (1: 17).

¹³ Ibid., 73-4 (1: 20).

regardless of whether or not it can actually reach its goal. As he explains:

If, in intellectual intuition, the I *is because* it is and *is what* it is, then it is, to that extent, *self-positing*, absolute independent and autonomous. The I in empirical consciousness, however, the I as intellect, is only in relation to something intelligible, and is, to that extent, dependent. But the I which is thereby opposed to itself is supposed to be not two, but one—which is impossible, since “dependence” contradicts “independence.” Since, however, the I cannot relinquish its absolute independence, a striving is engendered: the I strives to make what is intelligible dependent upon itself, in order thereby to bring that I which entertains representations of what is intelligible into unity with the self-positing I. This is what it means to say that *reason is practical*. In the pure I, reason is not practical, nor is it practical in the I as intellect. Reason is practical only insofar as it strives to unify these two.¹⁴

Thus, Fichte argues that our reason is inherently practical. In both its theoretical and practical forms, it strives to achieve the ideal of the absolute I.

These points from Fichte’s *Review* provide the bare outlines of the new philosophical system that Fichte would immediately begin to develop. There is insufficient space within the confines of this chapter to fully present or evaluate Fichte’s philosophy, but the passages cited are enough to indicate the degree of influence that Fichte’s early thought had on Schelling (who read the *Review* and some of Fichte’s early presentations of his system while preparing his own early publications). They also indicate the kind of philosophy that Fichte and Schelling wanted to develop, namely, one that was completely autonomous and, therefore, beyond all skeptical doubt. Fichte indicated his intentions by referring to his new system as the *Wissenschaftslehre*, or “Doctrine of Science,” thus suggesting that he would finally achieve Reinhold’s goal of transforming philosophy (the search for wisdom) into a science.¹⁵ Fichte thought he had

¹⁴ Ibid., 75 (1: 22).

¹⁵ Daniel Breazeale, “Fichte and Schelling: The Jena Period,” in Robert C. Solomon & Kathleen M. Higgins, ed., *The Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. VI, *The Age of German Idealism* (London: Routledge, 1993). The early presentations to which Schelling would have had access while writing his

achieved this—or at least pointed the way toward this end—by grounding philosophy in the “absolute existence and autonomy of the I, which is valid only *for the I itself*.”¹⁶

The influence of this intellectual milieu on Schelling’s early thought manifests itself throughout his early essays. Schelling openly acknowledges his debt to Schulze, Reinhold, and Fichte in the opening pages of his first publication, *On the Possibility*. Of Schulze, he claims that his objections concerning the Kantian philosophy are “the most important and the ones that up to now have been most difficult to answer.”¹⁷

Simultaneously acknowledging and critiquing Reinhold’s contribution, Schelling notes his conviction that “Reinhold’s theory of the power of imagination, as he has furnished it so far, is not as yet secure from such criticism but must lead in the end to a philosophy based on deeper, elemental principles, which can no longer be reached by the attacks of the new skeptic.”¹⁸ Schelling insists on having seen the insufficiency of Reinhold’s position for himself, but he admits the influence of Fichte, stating that his (Schelling’s) “opinion...has been strongly confirmed by the newest work of Professor Fichte,” while also acknowledging that Fichte’s work made it “easier...to penetrate into the depth of that investigation by means of the author’s own preconceived ideas,” and that “it was Fichte’s publication that directed the author’s thoughts toward a more complete development of the problem.”¹⁹ Thus, the whole historical development just outlined was clearly very influential for Schelling’s early thought.

early essays include *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* and *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794, parts of which Fichte had sent to Schelling before its publication.

¹⁶ Fichte, “Review,” 71 (1: 16).

¹⁷ Schelling, “On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy,” in F.W.J. Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays* (1794-1796), trans. Fritz Marti (Lewisburg: Bucknell University press, 1980), 38-39 (1: 87). All references to Schelling’s works in parentheses are to F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-1861).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39 (1: 87-88).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39, (1: 88).

More importantly, beyond these open acknowledgements of intellectual lineage is the fact that the young Schelling takes up in his early essays the tasks that Reinhold and Fichte had set for philosophy. Schelling's early works are thus primarily concerned with the same two related problems that concerned Reinhold and Fichte: establishing a first principle for philosophy and fortifying the critical philosophy against skeptical attack. Concerning the first, Schelling, like Reinhold and Fichte, argues that Kant presupposed such a principle, and that, in order to advance the Kantian philosophy, this principle is in need of articulation. As Fichte also wrote, Schelling thus believes that he is advancing the "spirit" of Kant's philosophy, despite not adhering to its "letter."²⁰

Further, like Fichte, Schelling does not believe that Reinhold's principle of consciousness can ground the autonomous and systematic philosophy that they are attempting to design. The principle is not radical enough, since it does not explain both the form and the content of our knowledge (as well as their necessary connection). As Schelling writes,

Reinhold's Elemental Philosophy endeavored to answer only one of the two questions that must precede all philosophical discipline, the separation of which had hitherto hurt philosophy extraordinarily—namely, the question of how the content of a philosophy is possible. The question about the possibility of the very form of philosophy was answered by Reinhold in much the same way as it had already been answered in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that is, without extending the investigation to an

²⁰ Schelling illustrates the point in terms of the Kantian categories and functions of judgment, arguing that they are dependent on a prior unity: "the synthesis contained in the judgment as well as the synthesis expressed in the categories is only a derivative synthesis; both can be understood only through a more basic synthesis shared by both—the synthesis of multiplicity in the unity of consciousness as such—and this synthesis itself can be understood only through a superior absolute unity. Therefore the unity of consciousness is determinable not through the forms of judgments, but on the contrary, the judgments together with the categories are determinable only through the principle of that unity." Schelling, "Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge," in Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, 65 (1: 154). This passage is especially interesting because it highlights one of Schelling's most important insights, namely, that synthesis in consciousness depends on our existence within a preconscious unity.

ultimate principle of all form.²¹

Put more simply, the problem with Reinhold's position is that it remains within consciousness, and, therefore, it cannot explain how or why our conscious experiences are structured as they are. But Schelling believes that Reinhold put philosophy on the right path, and thus he claims that Reinhold's work "must lead in the end to a philosophy based on deeper, elemental principles, which can no longer be reached by the attacks of the new skeptic."²²

This last passage touches on the second problem that Schelling addresses in these early works: the need to develop a system of knowledge that is impervious to skeptical critique. As was noted above, this is the primary motivating factor behind the development of post-Kantian Idealism, and it is no different for Schelling: this second problem is his primary concern, and it is what motivates him to search for an unconditioned first principle in the first place. The centrality of the defense against skepticism is suggested by the opening references to *Aenesidemus* in *On the Possibility* cited above. It is also indicated in *Of the I*, which Schelling begins with a statement of the epistemological problem that needs to be solved if skepticism is finally to be felled: "He who wants to know something, wants to know at the same time that what he knows is real. Knowledge without reality is not knowledge."²³ This is the same problem with

²¹ Schelling, "On the Possibility," 39 (1: 88).

²² Ibid.

²³ Schelling, "Of the I," 71 (1: 162). Both Alan White and Dale E. Snow suggest that Schelling's primary problem shifts between "On the Possibility" and the "Treatises Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge," but there does not seem to be any such development, for Schelling writes in the "Treatises" that "the problem...is...to explain the absolute correspondence of the object and the representation, of being and cognition." F.W.J. Schelling, "Treatises Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge," in F.W. J. Schelling, *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 77 (1: 365). For the positions taken by White and Snow, see: Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

which Schelling begins the *System of Transcendental Idealism*,²⁴ and it is one of the core problems of German Idealism. The goal is to explain how we can be sure that our thoughts correspond to reality, or that mind matches matter.

In his early essays, Schelling is confident that he can develop the certain and systematic account of reality that is necessary to overcome skepticism. Thus he argues, as Fichte does, that “philosophy is a *science* [*Wissenschaft*].”²⁵ Schelling offers an explanation of what this entails, writing that a science is “governed by the form of unity,” which means that all of its “theorems (*Sätze*)” must be “determined” by the same “axiom (*Grundsatz*).”²⁶ He adds that the axiom of a science must serve as its unquestioned foundation, which means that the “axiom of each science...must be unconditional *in*

1983) and Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

²⁴ “All knowledge is founded upon the coincidence of an objective with a subjective.—For we *know* only what is true; but truth is generally taken to consist in the coincidence of presentations with their objects.” F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 5 (3: 334).

²⁵ Schelling, “On the Possibility,” 40 (1: 89).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40 (1: 90). Michelle Kosch has expressed reservations about Schelling’s view. She writes that “Schelling gives no (to my mind) satisfactory account of why the foundation of a unitary system must be a single principle (that is, why there might not be several equally indubitable first principles which jointly provide warrant to the rest of the propositions in a single system, in the way the axioms of an axiomatic system do, but having the status of certainties rather than posits). On its face this is the most implausible of Schelling’s requirements. It is also, for a different reason, the one that makes his systematic ambitions seem most precarious. Why think the multiplicity of claims in various areas of philosophy are such as to be even conceivably derivable from a single first principle?” Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70-71. The unity that Schelling requires appears to be a requirement of reason, however. Schelling explains that for every science “its axiom can be only *one*. For if the science were to be conditioned by several axioms, either there would be *no* ulterior axiom that would connect them, or there would be one. In the first case the multiple axioms would be *different*, thus they would be the conditions of different sciences; in the other case, they would be adjuncts of each other and therefore would alternately depend on an ulterior axiom, so that they would disqualify each other to the effect that none could be a genuine axiom, but each would presuppose an ulterior axiom which conditioned all of them.” Schelling, “On the Possibility,” 41 (1: 91). Consider also the following: “Those who do not understand what has been discussed so far may ask: Why cannot two axioms, one of which is material, the other one formal, be placed as the ultimate condition of all science? The answer is: because science must have unity, i.e., it must be based on a principle that contains an absolute unity. If we were to accept the proposal that there be two axioms, then each of them by itself would lack certainty and would presuppose the other. Also, if there were no principle containing both of them, they would have to be placed not side by side but alternatingly, one in front of the other. Furthermore, if separated from each other, they could not yield *one* science of specific form and specific content but, on the one hand, a science of sheer content and, on the other, a science of sheer form, either of which is impossible.” *Ibid.*, 44 (1: 95).

regard to that science."²⁷ Based on these criteria, Schelling envisions philosophy as a logical chain of deductions that begins from an immediately certain first principle and, on that basis, forms a complete and systematic account of reality. He does not attempt to carry out such a system in his early works, however. Instead, he confines himself to explicating the principles on which it must be built. Later in his career, he will attempt to develop a complete system (he will try several, in fact), but without satisfaction, which will lead him to question the possibility of creating a systematic philosophy much more explicitly than he does as a young man. Still, even in his early work, the seed of that questioning is already present.

This is because some of the problems with this vision of philosophy as a science already appear to be evident to him from the very start. For instance, he argues that the first principle cannot be proven objectively, since it must be a non-objective principle if it is to be unconditioned. This suggests, then, that the first principle of philosophy is beyond philosophy. But if the first principle cannot be proven philosophically, then how can a system built on it overcome skepticism? How can this principle ground philosophy as a science if we cannot even prove that it exists? As will be discussed below, Schelling argues that we do not need to prove the first principle because we know it immediately, but with that solution the notion of an undeniable scientific system of philosophy is already brought into question. Thus, Schelling already seems to recognize that something more than theoretical argumentation is required to overcome skepticism.

Another, related problem is that philosophy has never been realized satisfactorily in scientific form (Schelling is after all only now uncovering the true first principle of

²⁷ Ibid., 41 (1: 91).

philosophy for the first time). Does this mean that philosophy has never actually existed before Schelling? Schelling appears to reject such a consequence of his position, suggesting instead that previous philosophers have been guided by the ideal of philosophy, even though they did not fully grasp it. Thus, noting that philosophy “presents a specific content in a specific form,” Schelling asks: “Did all philosophers arbitrarily unite from the beginning to give this specific (and systematic) form to just this *specific* content? Or does the reason for this connection go deeper, and could there not be some common ground which would simultaneously furnish the form as well as the content?”²⁸ The unspoken suggestion is that there is such a “common ground” and that all philosophers have participated in it, even if they did not fully realize it.²⁹ Therefore, Schelling’s position seems to be that philosophy has existed as a science, if only in an ideal form, since its inception.

These are not necessarily critical problems for Schelling at this early stage. Rather, they point to what may be Schelling’s most important insight, which he attempts to develop over the course of his entire career: the realization that we participate in a universal reality that transcends empirical experience (i.e. consciousness) and eludes theoretical reason, but that is nevertheless revealed to us as real through the course of our existence. This leads to a constant tension in Schelling’s philosophy between the elusive character of reality and the attempt to capture it in a systematic account, and it brings into question the project of designing a systematic philosophy that is impervious to skepticism. Schelling never abandons the systematic urge that undergirds his thought,

²⁸ Ibid., 40 (1: 89).

²⁹ As he writes, “this interdependence of content and form has such an ascendancy over the mind that it must give rise to the thought that there may be a reason for it in man’s mind, but that philosophy has not yet found it.” Ibid., 40 (1: 90).

but his observation of the tension between thought and being will force him to continually reform his position on the relationship between the two. In any event, Schelling's account of this non-objective reality grows out of his search for a first principle of philosophy, so we now turn to a discussion of the latter.

Schelling's First Principle: The Absolute

As was discussed above, Schelling rejects Reinhold's principle of consciousness as the first principle of philosophy because it does not overcome the form-content dualism of Kant's critical philosophy. Having rejected Reinhold's solution, but accepting his claim that philosophy must begin from a single principle, Schelling initially follows Fichte in designating the first principle of philosophy as the absolute I. Fichte's notion of the I represents an advance over Reinhold's principle of consciousness because it is prior to consciousness and explains the correspondence of mind and matter on the basis of a preconscious or pre-reflective unity of the subjective and objective aspects of empirical experience. For Schelling, as for Fichte, the absolute I is thus the self-positing or autonomous first principle that explains the necessary correspondence between the subjective and objective poles of our experience. As did Fichte, Schelling emphasizes that the absolute I cannot be brought into consciousness; thus, two questions arise concerning the absolute I that Schelling will constantly have to address. First, what exactly is the absolute I? Second, how can we know it if it is beyond consciousness? This section will address the first question; the next section will address the second.

Two difficulties confront any attempt to give an account of what Schelling means by the Absolute I. The first is textual. Despite the fact that he appears to follow Fichte

rather closely, Schelling employs a variable terminology to identify the principle: he refers to it as the “unconditioned,” the “transcendental,” “infinite,” or “absolute I,” the “Absolute,” and even “God” (the latter especially in later writings, but from time to time in early ones as well). This leads to important interpretative questions, since it must be asked in each case whether the terminological shift represents a change in Schelling’s understanding of the first principle of his philosophy. In these early essays, this does not seem to be the case. Schelling’s thought undoubtedly develops in this respect at a later stage, but there does not appear to be any significant conceptual shift behind the variety of terms that he employs.

Some scholars, however, argue that such changes do take place, especially in the *Letters*.³⁰ They argue that Schelling appears to move beyond Fichte’s absolute I in the *Letters* because he (Schelling) claims for the first time that theoretical philosophy cannot determine that the first principle is subjective rather than objective. As evidence, they point to the fact that he begins referring to the first principle simply as the Absolute. The first problem with this interpretation, however, as will be further discussed below, is that Schelling in fact does not abandon the view that the first principle of philosophy is the I—he merely claims that this cannot be proven theoretically. The second problem is that, chronologically, there is no straight line of development in Schelling’s terminology: in the *Treatises*, which were published two years after the *Letters*, Schelling reverts to referring to the first principle as the absolute I. Why would Schelling go back to the language of the I if he had truly moved beyond it? It might be suggested that Schelling refers to the absolute I in later works because he is simply elaborating Fichte’s position,

³⁰ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 25-29; White, *Schelling*, 28-37; Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 52.

whereas in the *Letters* he is working out his own, but Schelling does not appear to worry about maintaining such a separation (he quite freely introduces his own positions on other matters in the *Treatises*). Moreover, this would be to suggest that Schelling devoted a considerable amount of effort to elaborating a principle that he thought was inadequate (in both the *Treatises* and the *System of Transcendental Idealism*), which seems unlikely. Finally, there is evidence in Schelling's two earliest essays, *On the Possibility* and *Of the I*, that he was already aware (if only inchoately) that it is problematic to think of the absolute in subjective terms,³¹ so to suggest that such a shift takes place only in the *Letters* seems problematic.

Another possible explanation for Schelling's terminological oscillations is that he realizes that none of the terms adequately represent the Absolute. This is supported by Schelling's claim that the absolute cannot be contained in language. As he writes, "I believe that this absolute in us cannot be captured by a mere word of human language, and that only the self-attained insight into the intellectual in us can come to the rescue of the patchwork of our language."³² This would certainly diminish the importance of choosing one term over another. This interpretation is further supported by a consideration of the second difficulty that arises in the attempt to grasp what Schelling

³¹ For instance, in "On the Possibility" Schelling observes that "an unconditional content can have only an unconditional form and vice versa since, if one were conditional, the other, even if it were unconditional, would have to be conditioned, owing to its fusion with something conditional. Therefore the fusion of form and content of the ultimate axiom can be determined neither arbitrarily nor through a third (an even higher axiom)." Schelling, "On the Possibility," 42 (1: 92). This passage does not employ the language of subject and object, but it presents the logic behind Schelling's recognition that the Absolute can be neither a subject nor an object. This means that the Absolute can be neither a subject nor an object insofar as both are party to the reflexive relationship that characterizes our conscious experience: "the subject is thinkable only in regard to an object, and the object only in regard to a subject" and, therefore, "both are conditioned reciprocally." The Absolute, on the other hand, must be unconditioned, and, therefore it must be beyond the world of empirical experience.

³² Schelling, "Of the I," 109-110 (1: 216).

means by the Absolute, namely, that, it cannot be adequately determined because it is by definition beyond all determination. In seeking to define the Absolute, Schelling is struggling to articulate and communicate a reality that cannot be adequately articulated or communicated. Since Schelling recognizes this, it would be surprising if he were to be overly concerned about shifting back and forth between terms for the Absolute.

The fact that Schelling cannot offer an adequate account of the absolute I points again to the tension between the ideal and the real that was illustrated by Schelling's claim that philosophy is a science. It is the plight of philosophy that it is charged with attempting to define and bring into the sphere of consciousness that which is by definition beyond consciousness. As will be discussed below, Schelling argues that this contradiction necessitates that we move our pursuit of the absolute I into the practical sphere. But, for now, the point is to recognize that we should not be surprised if his accounts of the Absolute leave us somewhat perplexed and theoretically dissatisfied.³³ In fact, it would seem that so long as we look for a theoretical account of the absolute I, we have missed Schelling's point. Schelling could only give a theoretical account of the absolute I if it were an object, but, as he writes in response to an early critic, "The distinguishing feature of my new principle lies in the fact that it ought not to be an objective principle."³⁴ The absolute I cannot be conceptualized (since concepts always

³³ Dale Snow makes this complaint. See: Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 50.

³⁴ Schelling, "Of the I," 66 (1: 155). As Schelling also claims, it is his task is "*to find something that cannot be thought of as a thing at all.*" Ibid., 74 (1: 166). "To be sure, if we had to look at the ultimate in our knowledge as if it were a mute painting outside of us (as Spinoza put it) then we would never know that we know. However, if that ultimate itself is a condition of all knowledge, indeed a condition of its own being known, if it is the only immediacy in our knowledge, then we know precisely through it that we know; we have found the principle of which Spinoza could say that it is the light which illuminates itself and the darkness.", Schelling adds that philosophy's "highest topic must be what is immediate in man and present only to itself, and cannot be what is mediated by concepts and laboriously recapitulated in concepts." Ibid., 67 (1: 156). At this point it can be noted that Schelling's discussion of freedom in *Of the I*

apply to objects), and, therefore, we should not expect a clear concept of the Absolute from Schelling. Schelling does not always help his readers to realize this, since he himself sometimes seems to obscure the point. For instance, even as he argues that the absolute I is not a concept,³⁵ he nevertheless states that its “function is to be the generic concept of all reality.”³⁶ To some extent, such terminological imprecisions cannot be avoided since we cannot think the Absolute without confining it to rules of thought. But this means that we must be all the more vigilant in remaining aware of the nonobjective character of the Absolute and the consequent inadequacy of any attempt to explain it. With this in mind, let us turn to Schelling’s early account of the Absolute.

Despite the difficulties inherent to the project, Schelling makes several attempts to give an account of the Absolute. Some of his criteria have already been mentioned. First, the Absolute must be unconditioned, which is to say that it cannot depend on anything else for either its existence or the fact that it is known. This means that its form must be its content and its content must be its form; otherwise, it would be formally or materially conditioned by something else. Moreover, as Schelling writes in Parmenidean fashion, “the principle of its being and the principle of its being known must coincide,

foreshadows his later position in the *Freiheitsschrift* insofar as it refers to the part of reality that cannot be contained within consciousness. Schelling also foreshadows his discussion of evil in the *Freiheitsschrift* when he writes that “Self-awareness implies the danger of losing the I.” Schelling suggests that “an unfree urge...induces the mutable I, conditioned by the not-I, to strive to maintain its identity and to reassert itself in the undertow of endless change.” Schelling, “Of the I,” 84 (1: 180). The empirical I, aware of the absolute I, strives to fashion itself after the absolute I. But the effort is always impossible. “If you want to attain this freedom as something objective, whether you want to comprehend it or deny it, you will always fail, because freedom consists in the very fact that it excludes all that is not-I absolutely.” Schelling, “Of the I,” 85 (1: 181). This is a freedom that we can never attain because our empirical self is determined by its relationship to the empirical world.

³⁵ “The I cannot be given by a mere concept. Concepts are possible only in the sphere of the conditional; concepts of objects only are possible.” Schelling, “Of the I,” 85 (1: 181). See also the comments at Schelling, “Of the I,” 87 (1: 184).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89 (1: 186).

must be one,”³⁷ which means that the Absolute must be thought simply because it exists and that it must exist simply by virtue of being thought (which explains why Fichte and Schelling turn to self-consciousness, in which the subject and the object are the same). Only such a principle can guarantee that “*the principle of being and thinking is one and the same*,”³⁸ which, as was noted above, is what the Idealists hoped to show.

In the works here under consideration (with the noted exception of the *Letters*), Schelling thus follows Fichte and argues that the first principle of philosophy “can only be I is I.”³⁹ It is only in self-consciousness that both the form and the content of a representation are identical: the I is both the knower and the known. Moreover, in self-consciousness we are certain of the coincidence of being and knowing because self-awareness necessitates the existence of the self. It is important to recognize that Schelling, like Fichte, is not claiming that the empirical I is the basis of all reality and knowledge. Rather, he is referring to a transcendental, self-positing source of reality that makes empirical self-consciousness possible. The absolute I does not correspond to an individual’s ability within consciousness to reflect on himself and thus know himself. Rather, the absolute I is the pre-reflective unity of the self that explains the possibility of this reflective act. The individual is able to reflect back on and know himself as himself because he is always already preconsciously aware of himself. Reflective self-consciousness never fully captures the absolute I, since the latter is “*that which can never*

³⁷ Ibid., 72 (1: 163).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Schelling, “On the Possibility,” 45 (1: 97).

become an object at all.”⁴⁰ For this reason, it cannot be proven theoretically;⁴¹ it is simply evident: “*I am because I am.*”⁴²

Further testing the limits of theoretical philosophy, Schelling attributes a number of qualities to the absolute I, especially in *Of the I*. He describes it as indefinite, “unconditional,”⁴³ “indivisible,”⁴⁴ “immutable.”⁴⁵ He claims that it is “pure identity,”⁴⁶ a “unity,”⁴⁷ that it “contains *all being, all reality*,”⁴⁸ that it is “*the only substance*,”⁴⁹ and that it is “the immanent cause of everything that is.”⁵⁰ He adds that “it must precede all thinking and imagining.”⁵¹ We should be careful to not take these words as predicates of the absolute I. Rather, they are linguistic tools that Schelling uses to point his readers in the right direction (note that most of these descriptions are simply negations of reality as we experience it). Schelling is trying to articulate the absolute I as the background that makes our conscious experience possible, but that is in no way like what we experience in consciousness. Consider, for instance, when he writes that

the conditional cannot be posited as conditional antecedent to the unconditional and unconditionable, but only owing to the latter, by contrast to it. Therefore, whatever is posited as only a conditional thing is conceivable only through that which is no thing at all but is unconditional. The object itself then is originally determinable only in contrast to the absolute I, that is, only as the antithesis to the I or as non-I.⁵²

⁴⁰ Schelling, “Of the I,” 75 (1: 167).

⁴¹ This is a point about the Absolute that Schelling maintain throughout his career. It will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

⁴² Schelling, “Of the I,” 75 (1: 167).

⁴³ Ibid., 83 (1: 179).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93 (1: 192).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 82 (1: 177).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 86 (1: 182).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 89 (1: 186).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93 (1: 192).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 95 (1: 195). As he also writes, “...the I is not only the cause of being but also the cause of the essence of everything that it.” Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 75 (1: 167).

⁵² Ibid., 77 (1: 170). This insight is in fact tied to Schelling *Naturphilosophie*, which is more evident in the

The point that Schelling is trying to make is that we are only able to recognize the objective world because we see it against the background of the absolute I. We recognize the multiplicity characteristic of experience because we participate in the unity of the absolute I. Thus, by attempting to define the absolute I, Schelling is in fact attempting to point his readers' minds to the absolute reality that they know themselves. How this is possible will be discussed in more detail in the next section

For now, it is enough to note that the absolute I can never become an object. This is why Schelling follows Fichte in referring to the Absolute in seemingly subjective terms as the absolute I: Fichte's term has the virtue of emphasizing the nonobjective character of the Absolute. As was noted above, Fichte refers to the absolute I as a *Tathandlung*, a deed-action, arguing that the I posits itself, that it is independently self-realizing. This is an essential move for the development of German Idealism. By characterizing the first principle in this way, Fichte wants to emphasize that the Absolute is not a thing, as it is in Spinoza's system, but an activity (and that it is not outside the I, but within it). Following Fichte, Schelling claims in the *Treatises* that "The spirit [i.e., self-consciousness] is a *primordial will*."⁵³ Schelling thus follows Fichte in arguing against so-called dogmatists such as Spinoza that mind is the primary element of reality rather than substance. As Schelling writes, it is "not that spirit is begotten by matter, but that matter is begotten by spirit."⁵⁴

following passage: "How could anything be posited at all if everything that can be posited were mutable, and if nothing unconditional, nothing immutable, could be acknowledged, in which and through which everything that can be posited would receive stability and immutability? What would it mean to posit something if all positing, all existence, all reality were dispersed constantly." Ibid., 83 (1: 178).

⁵³ Schelling, "Treatises," 98 (1: 395).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83 (1: 373-4).

On the other hand, like Spinoza, Fichte and Schelling argue that the absolute I is the autonomous source of reality. As Schelling writes, “the spirit exists only because it *wills*, and it knows itself only by *determining* itself.”⁵⁵ In his other early essays, Schelling emphasizes the same quality of the absolute I in terms of its freedom: “*The essence (Wesen) of the I is freedom*, that is, it is not thinkable except inasmuch as it posits itself by its own absolute power (*Selbstmacht*).”⁵⁶ According to Schelling, Spinoza conceived of the absolute substance as “an absolute power which acts not according to any laws outside of it but only according to the laws of its own being, through its own being as such.”⁵⁷ The absolute I cannot be affected by anything outside of it because there is nothing outside of it. It is the self-determining source of reality. As will be discussed in further detail below, Schelling argues that the concept of morality cannot apply to the absolute I, since it is “an absolute power that simply acts out of an inner necessity of its own nature (*Wesen*) which is no longer will, nor virtue, nor wisdom, nor bliss, but power as such.”⁵⁸ “What is moral law for the finite I, limited by a not-I, is natural law for the infinite I—that is, is given simultaneously with and in its mere being (*Sein*).”⁵⁹

This is a significant move beyond Kant’s position, since, for him, autonomy was the first principle of practical philosophy alone. But, as has been discussed, Fichte and Schelling want to make autonomy the unifying principle of all philosophy. Schelling

⁵⁵ Ibid., 98 (1: 395). It will be important to remember these lines when we turn to the *Freiheitsschrift*, since they will help us to delineate exactly how Schelling believes he has gone beyond German Idealism.

⁵⁶ Schelling, “Of the I,” 84 (1: 179). Schelling adds the following: “The freedom of the I...can be determined *positively*. For the I, its freedom is neither more nor less than unconditional positing of reality in itself through its own absolute power. It can be determined negatively as complete independence, even as complete incompatibility with all that is not-I.” Ibid., 84 (1: 179).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 96 (1: 196).

⁵⁸ Ibid. Cf. Schelling, “Of the I,” 99 (1: 200-201).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 97 (1: 198). Translation modified.

suggests that this position is intimated in Kant's writings but not fully drawn out,⁶⁰ and he credits Fichte with the innovation of placing autonomy at the center of philosophy as a whole:

Fichte's merit consists precisely in *expanding* the *unique* principle—that with which Kant opens the practical philosophy (i.e., the autonomy of the will)—into the principle of the *entire philosophy*; in doing so he becomes the founder of a philosophy that can be legitimately called a *higher philosophy* because its spirit is *neither theoretical nor practical* alone but *both at once*.⁶¹

Schelling argues that Fichte's move is necessary because the first principle of philosophy must be autonomous, if we are to be certain of our knowledge: "The entirety of our knowledge has no stability if it has nothing to stabilize it, if it does not rest on that which is carried by its own strength. And that is nothing else than that which is real through freedom. The beginning and the end of all philosophy is *freedom!*"⁶² Freedom understood as autonomy stands at the center of not only practical philosophy, but theoretical philosophy as well.

Knowledge of the Absolute

Schelling holds that we know the absolute I in some sense, but, as has already been discussed, he argues that it cannot be proven theoretically because it is beyond the ken of theoretical reason. As he writes, "That there is an absolute I can never be proved objectively, that is, it cannot be proved with regard to that I which can exist as an object,

⁶⁰ With reference to Kant the question has often been raised as to how [his] theoretical and practical philosophy relate to one another; indeed, doubts have been expressed as to whether, in *his* system, they cohere at all. If, however, one had concentrated on the idea of *autonomy*, which Kant himself posited as the principle of his practical philosophy, it would have become readily apparent that in his system this idea constitutes the axis around which both theoretical and practical philosophy revolve, and that this concept already lends the proper expression to the primordial synthesis of theoretical and practical philosophy." Schelling, "Treatises," 99 (1: 396-7).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108 (1: 409).

⁶² Schelling, "Of the I," 82 (1: 177).

because we are supposed to prove precisely that the absolute I can never become an object. The I, if it is to be unconditional, must be outside the sphere of objective proof.”⁶³ But if the absolute I is beyond objective experience, then how can we know it? How can we even be sure that it exists? The only apparent alternative is to suggest that we have some sort of immediate, nonobjective access to the absolute I, and this is the approach that Schelling takes. He claims that “In order to reach the ultimate I need nothing but the ultimate itself. The absolute can be given only by the absolute.”⁶⁴ If this were not the case, then the absolute I would not be absolute, since it would be dependent on some other piece of knowledge. We may become aware of the need for an unconditioned principle through reflection on how we are able to know anything, but we cannot claim to know the unconditioned on the basis of such a chain of reasoning.⁶⁵ Thus, although Schelling appears at times to suggest that we can deduce the absolute I as a necessary terminus to what would otherwise be the infinite regress of conditions that characterizes the world of experience, he in fact argues that we must know the absolute I immediately, and without reference to any other piece of knowledge.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 75 (1: 167). Schelling maintains this position throughout his entire philosophical development. See, for instance, F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (SUNY Press, 2007), 180 (129).

⁶⁴ Schelling, “Of the I,” 72 (1: 163).

⁶⁵ In fact, as will become clear, the relationship must be reversed. We are able to recognize the unsatisfactory nature of the series of conditioned conditions because we are already in touch with the Absolute. It is the Absolute that allows us to make sense of our experiences.

⁶⁶ “Some will ask: How do you prove that? By the archetype [*Urform*] of human knowledge! True, I reach it only by presupposing such an absolute unity of knowledge (that means the archetype itself). This is indeed a circle. However, this circle could be avoided only if there were nothing absolute at all in human knowledge. The absolute can be determined only by the absolute. There is an absolute only because there is an absolute (A=A).” Schelling, “On the Possibility,” 41 (1: 92). “This circle in which we unavoidably find ourselves is precisely the condition of the absolute evidence of the ultimate axiom. That the circle is unavoidable is made clear by the already proved supposition that the ultimate axiom must necessarily receive its content through its form and its form through its content. Of necessity, either there can be no ultimate axiom, or it can exist only by reciprocal determination of content by form and form by content.” Ibid., 45 (1: 97).

Schelling appeals to “intellectual intuition” in order to explain how we can know the absolute I, and he argues that it is this capacity that serves as the foundation for everything we know about the empirical world. As with the absolute I itself, however, Schelling struggles to provide a clear account of intellectual intuition. Indeed, even the term, “intellectual intuition,” is inadequate, since, as Schelling claims, “intellectual intuition must be completely incomprehensible as soon as one tries to liken it to sensuous intuition.”⁶⁷ Yet, Schelling’s employment of the term is not without reason: as he explains, intellectual intuition is an “intuition” because, like sensible intuition, it is immediate, but it is “intellectual” because it has no object.⁶⁸ Thus, intellectual intuition designates our capacity to recognize the nonobjective reality of the absolute I, and, therefore, like the absolute I, it cannot be demonstrated by means of a theoretical proof. This means that the only way to truly understand what Schelling means by intellectual intuition is to grasp one’s own capacity for it.⁶⁹ Schelling does make an effort to point the reader in the right direction, however.

Most usefully, Schelling compares intellectual intuition to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis. In Plato’s thought, anamnesis, or remembrance, refers to the capacity of the eternal soul, once embodied in the finite world, to “remember” aspects of reality that it once knew when it existed in the eternal realm of the forms.⁷⁰ The essential point that

⁶⁷ Schelling, “Of the I,” 85 (1: 181). “only in an intuition which grasps no object at all and is in no way a sensation, in short, in an *intellectual* intuition.” Ibid., 85 (1: 181).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85 (1: 181).

⁶⁹ “This intuition is the innermost and in the strictest sense our own experience, upon which depends everything we know and believe of a supersensuous world.” Schelling, “Letters,” 180 (1: 318).

⁷⁰ Cf. “A thinking which does not think [*ein nicht denkendes Denken*] will, though, not be far from an intuiting thinking, and, as such, a thinking which has an intellectual intuition as its *ground*, goes through the whole of this philosophy, as it does through geometry, in which the external intuition of the figure which is drawn on the blackboard or wherever is always only the bearer of an inner and spiritual intuition. This, then, is said in relation to a philosophy without intuition.” Ibid., 180 (1: 318).

Schelling takes from the Platonic doctrine is the idea that we are able to make sense of our experiences in the empirical world because we are already in touch with the absolute reality from which they issue forth. This is suggested, for instance, when Schelling writes that “a complete aesthetics (this word taken in its old meaning) will show forth empirical acts which are explicable only as imitations of that intellectual act, and which would not be intelligible at all if we had not at some time—to speak with Plato—seen their prototype in the intellectual world.”⁷¹ Intellectual intuition is thus the preconscious awareness of the unity of thought and being that enables us to “anamnetically” comprehend our experiences. Yet, even to speak of intellectual intuition as an “awareness” is not quite adequate, since awareness is always of something, which suggests the sort of subject-object relationship that intellectual intuition precedes. Intellectual intuition is simply the reality of our existence within the absolute I that makes all of our knowledge possible.

It must always be kept in mind that Schelling is referring to a nonobjective capacity to recognize the absolute unity that precedes consciousness. As Schelling writes, “intellectual intuition takes place whenever I cease to be an object for myself, when—withdrawn into itself—the intuiting subject is identical with the intuited.”⁷² Like Fichte, Schelling is not referring to a reflective ability to recognize oneself, but the pre-reflective unity that makes that reflective recognition possible. Thus, intellectual intuition refers to the fact that by virtue of our existence within the absolute I, we are able to recognize the unity that holds the empirical world together. Intellectual intuition is therefore not a theoretical, but a practical capacity. As Schelling writes, “This intuition is

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 181 (1: 319).

distinguished from every sensuous intuition by the fact that it is produced from freedom alone.”⁷³ The theoretical always remains caught in the empirical world of subjects and objects, but intellectual intuition transcends that world. Thus, the theoretical cannot reach as far as intellectual intuition, and, as Schelling argues, philosophy must necessarily transition into the practical sphere in order to complete its search for the Absolute. It is to a consideration of this transition that we must now turn.

Schelling’s Turn to the Practical

With the exception of *On the Possibility*, Schelling discusses the transition from theoretical to practical philosophy in each of the essays here under consideration. The discussions are distinctive, but, taken together, they complement rather than contradict one another. Schelling argues in each case that we must move into the sphere of the practical because theoretical reason fails to achieve its goal, which is to prove the absolute correspondence of the subjective and objective by grasping the Absolute within consciousness. In the face of this failure, reason demands that we nevertheless ought to realize the Absolute. As Schelling writes, “because theoretical reasoning ends in contradictions, practical reason enters in order to cut the knot by means of absolute demands.”⁷⁴ Since theoretical reason fails, “practical reason must reestablish the absolute I.”⁷⁵ This becomes Schelling’s version of the categorical imperative and it leads him into a discussion of ethics.

According to Schelling, morality only comes into play in the finite world. As was

⁷³ Ibid., 180 (1: 318).

⁷⁴ Schelling, “Of the I,” 82 (1: 176).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 88-89 (1: 186).

mentioned above, the Absolute is not subject to the moral condition, since it is a self-determining and autonomous absolute causality. On account of this combination, its nature is always fully realized, and freedom and necessity are always unified in it. In this sense, the Absolute is always already what it ought to be, although even this formulation is not quite accurate as a representation of Schelling's view, since the concept of "ought" simply does not apply to the Absolute.⁷⁶ The empirical I, on the other hand, is subject to the condition of morality on account of its finitude. It is aware of the contradiction between itself and the absolute I, and, therefore, as we saw was also the case in Fichte's thought, the empirical I strives to realize the absolute I in both its theoretical and practical modes of existence. As will be discussed in further detail below, this striving to realize the absolute I is thus, for Schelling, not only the essence of morality, but of the human condition in general. As finite beings, we are caught up in the movement of reason toward the absolute I.

As noted above, the demand that the empirical I strive to realize the absolute I is Schelling's version of the Kantian categorical imperative. As Schelling formulates it, "the supreme law for the finite being is: *Be absolutely identical with yourself*,"⁷⁷ by which he means that we should strive to make our empirical I identical with the absolute I.⁷⁸ This means that the empirical I should strive to overcome all aspects of its finitude: "the absolute I demands that the finite I should become equal to it, that is, that it should

⁷⁶ As Schelling writes, "no imperative at all occurs in the absolute I, because whatever is practical *command* for the finite I must be *constitutive* law in the nonfinite, a law which expresses neither possibility, nor actuality, nor necessity, but only absolute being, and the expression is not *imperative* but *categorical*." Ibid., 121 (1: 233-234).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 98, (1: 199).

⁷⁸ This ethical law demands that we strive to realize the core aim of German Idealism, i.e., to prove the unity of the ideal and the real: "the ultimate goal of the I is to turn the laws of freedom into laws of nature, and the laws of nature into laws of freedom, to bring about *nature* in the I and *I* in nature." Ibid., 98 (1: 198).

destroy in itself all multiplicity and all mutability.”⁷⁹ Thus, at this stage in his development, Schelling believes that this entails the eradication of all personality, since personality can only arise as a result of the reflective structure of the objective world. As will be discussed in the next chapter, however, Schelling will change his position on this issue by the time he writes the *Freiheitsschrift*, and he will come to argue that personality is in fact the highest form of being. Pointing again to the tension between system and reality, this crucial issue highlights an important reason for Schelling’s break with Idealism in the *Freiheitsschrift*: it cannot account for the significance or purpose of finite existence.⁸⁰

Returning to Schelling’s early ethical thought, Schelling notes that the goal of becoming identical with the absolute I stands in direct contrast to the finitude of the empirical I. As he writes, “the basic moral law of the finite I...is confronted by the natural law of the same finite I, according to which it is multiplicity and therefore not identical.”⁸¹ This engenders the striving of the finite I to realize the absolute I, but it also indicates that the finite I cannot become absolute. Schelling suggests that morality must therefore be understood “through a new schema, that of production in time, so that the law which aims as a demand of *being* becomes a law of *becoming*. The basic moral law, expressed in its fullest sensuous form, says: *become* identical, *elevate* (in time) the subjective forms of your being to the form of the absolute.”⁸² In other words, the moral law commands us to continually strive towards the universal and eternal, even though

⁷⁹ Ibid., 97 (1: 198).

⁸⁰ The seeds of this later development are in fact already present in Schelling’s mind, insofar as he already wonders why there is a finite world at all, if it is only to be overcome. Further reflection on this issue will have to wait until we turn to the *Freiheitsschrift*, however.

⁸¹ Schelling, “Of the I,” 98 (1: 199).

⁸² Ibid., 98 (1: 199).

success is beyond our finite nature.⁸³ This, according to Schelling, sets up the idea of “moral *progress*, of progress in infinity.”⁸⁴ In other words, the moral condition permanently governs our existence as finite beings because we can only set up the ultimate goal of morality—the realization of the Absolute—as an ought. Although we can never live up to the absolute I, we always remain charged with the task of attempting to do so.

Schelling’s moral philosophy is not usually treated as central to his thought as a whole. Having examined his conception of morality, however, it is evident that it represents the primary perspective from which Schelling is operating. Schelling’s theoretical philosophy aspires to the same end as his practical philosophy: theoretical and practical philosophy are united in their pursuit of the absolute I as the idea that governs our existence. For Schelling, this pursuit is a moral enterprise: we are called to it by the striving of our reason. We cannot avoid this condition: we live in tension toward the Absolute as the autonomous source of reality. For Schelling, our whole existence is constituted by the practical and it is in this sense that he maintains and develops Kant’s insight into the primacy of the practical.

The Primacy of the Practical

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the core insight contained in Kant’s turn

⁸³ In a footnote, Schelling writes: “Thus the law can also be expressed as: Become a *necessary* being, a being which endures *in all time*.” Ibid., 98 (1: 200). Nevertheless, Schelling still writes that “In the finite I there is unity of consciousness, that is, personality. The infinite I, however, knows no object at all and therefore no consciousness and no unity of consciousness, no personality. Consequently, the ultimate goal of all striving can also be represented as an expansion of personality to infinity, that is, as its own destruction. The last goal of the finite I as well as that of the not-I, that is, the last goal of the world is its destruction as a world, that is, as an embodiment of finiteness.” Ibid., 99 (1: 200-201).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 99 (1: 200).

to the practical is his recognition that we participate in a reality that escapes the grasp of theoretical reason but that we nevertheless know as real. He acknowledges this in the *Critique of Pure Reason* when he writes that he “found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*.”⁸⁵ Yet, having come to the realization that the practical is primary, Kant neither unfolded all of the consequences of this insight, nor fully embraced it as the fundamental perspective from which to philosophize. Schelling, on the other hand, embraces this insight and his philosophy—even in these early essays—should be read as a concerted attempt to develop Kant’s insight into the primacy of the practical. Thus, as has already been discussed, Schelling argues that we exist within an absolute reality that transcends the theoretical, and he attempts to give an account of how we are aware of that fact. Having argued that we have an intellectual intuition of the Absolute, a non-objective awareness of our participation in the realm of freedom, Schelling then turns to the practical as the mode of existence from which our understanding of this reality unfolds.

The primacy of the practical actually has several meanings or implications in Schelling’s early works. First, since human existence is above all constituted by the practical, philosophy is therefore ultimately motivated by practical or existential concerns. Second, and closely related to the first point, practical reason is primary because theoretical reason itself is practical. Third, the practical is primary because it offers insight into the structure of reality that cannot be obtained theoretically. Finally, it means that we can only verify philosophical accounts practically, since the practical is the ultimate test of the veracity of a philosophical system. Each of these senses of the

⁸⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 29 (B, xxx).

primacy of the practical will be discussed in turn.

Philosophy and the Practical

As his reflections on morality demonstrate, Schelling thinks that human existence is above all practical existence. These early essays also reveal a belief that human history is constituted by a progressive march toward the collective realization of our moral end. For instance, in *On the Possibility*, Schelling speaks of “the great feeling of necessity evoked by the hope of an ultimate unity of knowledge, of faith, and of will, which is the ultimate heritage of mankind and which mankind will soon claim more loudly than ever.”⁸⁶ Or again, in *Of the I*, he exclaims that

It is difficult not to be enthusiastic about the great thought that, while all sciences, the empirical ones not excluded, rush more and more toward the point of perfect unity, mankind itself will finally realize, as the constitutive law, the principle of unity which from the beginning was the regulating basis of the history of mankind. As the ray’s of man’s knowledge and the experiences of many centuries will finally converge in one focus of truth and will transform into reality the idea which has been in many great men’s minds, the idea that the different sciences must become one in the end—just so the different ways and by-ways which humans have followed till now will converge in one point wherein mankind will find itself again and, as one complete person, will obey the law of freedom.⁸⁷

At this stage, Schelling believes that humankind is on the verge of realizing its moral end in history. Whatever the merits of Schelling’s vision of the future (he will come to doubt it himself⁸⁸), these passages point to the prominence of ethics in Schelling’s mind: for Schelling, the story of history is the story of the moral development of humankind.

Schelling’s sense of historical epoch—his feeling that humankind is about to

⁸⁶ Schelling, “On the Possibility,” 55 (1: 112). “It is the very goal of man that the unity of volition and action should become as natural to him as the mechanism of his body and the unity of his consciousness.” Schelling, “Of the I,” 68 (1: 157).

⁸⁷ Schelling, “Of the I,” 68 (1: 158).

⁸⁸ See, for instance, F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), xl (206).

realize its moral end—is the practical motivation for his philosophy. It indicates that he does not think of philosophy as a purely disinterested pursuit; rather, he views it as caught up in the historical progress of humankind toward its moral end. In fact, he believes that philosophy must play a leading role in that progress. Thus he claims that, since “all ideas must first be realized in the domain of knowledge before they find their realization in history,”⁸⁹ human beings “must be good theoretically in order to become so practically.”⁹⁰ Philosophy derives its value from its role in the moral progression of human kind in history. The first sense of the primacy of the practical in Schelling’s thought is therefore that the ethical is the motivation for and the source of the value of philosophy. As Schelling writes, “man was born to act, not to speculate.”⁹¹

The Theoretical is Practical

Schelling also argues that the practical is primary because the theoretical is itself practical. This is so in two senses, both of which are encapsulated in Schelling’s oft-quoted claim that “The beginning and the end of all philosophy is *freedom!*”⁹² First, theoretical reason is practical insofar as it is made possible by that fact that we are practical beings. If we were not free (i.e., practical), we could not wrest ourselves away from our representations in order to reflect on them. Thus, the very questions we ask in theoretical philosophy point to our practical nature: “Theoretical philosophy mandates that the origins of representation be explained. Yet where did this need to explain originate for it, and does not the act of this explanation itself already presuppose that we have become independent of our representations, that is, that we have become *practical*?”

⁸⁹ Schelling, “Of the I,” 68 (1: 159).

⁹⁰ Ibid., 67 (1: 157).

⁹¹ Ibid., 128 (1: 243).

⁹² Ibid., 82 (1: 177).

Hence theoretical philosophy already presupposes practical philosophy in its very first principles.”⁹³ Likewise, as was argued above, our capacity for intellectual intuition, which allows us to step back and reflect upon the objective world, is not a theoretical faculty. It is therefore the practical that serves as the ground of possibility for the theoretical. Therefore, “It is a fundamental mistake to attempt a theoretical grounding of theoretical philosophy.”⁹⁴ At its roots, the theoretical is made possible by the practical.

Second, as has already been touched on, the theoretical is practical because even theoretical reason is governed by the task of reconstituting the Absolute that is its source. As Schelling explains, if there were no absolute I, our reason would not be driven towards it:

the ultimate synthesis of theoretical reason, which is nothing else than the last attempt to reconcile the contrast between I and not-I, becomes for us the most perfect guarantor of the absolute reality of the absolute I, even though it seems to dissolve it. The I could never be in need of reconciling that contrast through the idea of an *objective* concept of all reality had this contrast not first become possible owing to a positing of the I as the all-embracing concept of reality, an original positing antecedent to all not-I.⁹⁵

Schelling speaks of practical reason in similar terms: “without the premise that the absolute I is the concept of all reality, no practical philosophy can be thought whose aim must be the end of all not-I and the recovery of the absolute I in its ultimate identity, that is, as the connotative concept of all reality.”⁹⁶ Thus, both theoretical and practical philosophy are united in a single effort: “the whole task of theoretical and practical philosophy is nothing else than the solution of the contradiction between the pure and the

⁹³ Schelling, “Treatises,” 101 (1: 399).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 101 (1: 399-400).

⁹⁵ Schelling, “Of the I,” 91-92 (1: 190). Translation modified.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 92 (1: 191).

empirically conditioned I.”⁹⁷ Theoretical reason is therefore itself practical also in the sense that it strives to realize the absolute I. In this sense, then, Schelling overcomes the duality of reason in Kant’s philosophy, while advancing his insight into the primacy of the practical at the same time.

The Practical Illumination of Reality

Most importantly, the practical is primary because our participation in the absolute I as free beings is the source of all our knowledge. This topic has already been broached to some degree in the above discussions of intellectual intuition and the practical foundation of theoretical philosophy. It was argued there that intellectual intuition serves as the foundation for theoretical philosophy, but that it itself is not a theoretical faculty. Rather, intellectual intuition refers to our ability to recognize the unity of thought and being, or subject and object on the basis of our existence as free beings within the absolute I. As such, Schelling argues, intellectual intuition is the foundation of all our knowledge, and, therefore, it is the practical foundation of theoretical philosophy. In terms of the argument for the primacy of the practical, this has two implications, each of which will be discussed in turn.

First, it indicates that we know the absolute I non-objectively in a way that cannot be achieved in objective thought. In other words, intellectual intuition enables us to understand reality with a depth that cannot be contained in thought. On account of our

⁹⁷ Ibid., 81 (1: 176). Earlier in “Of the I,” Schelling critiques Kant’s philosophy because the “theoretical philosophy is not connected with the practical by a common principle. His practical philosophy does not seem to be one-and-the-same structure with the theoretical; instead it seems to be a mere annex to his philosophy as a whole and, what is more, an annex wide open to attacks from the main building. Yet, inasmuch as the first principle of philosophy is also the last, since all philosophy, the theoretical in particular, starts from the final result of the practical in which all knowledge ends, the whole science must be possible, in its highest perfection and unity” Ibid., 66 (1: 154). Now we see how Schelling overcomes this problem by placing the absolute I at the source of both theoretical and practical philosophy.

freedom, we have an elusive awareness of our existence within a reality that transcends consciousness. We know that our knowledge is not limited to what can be contained within consciousness, and we know that our existence is not confined to the empirical, objective world. As was suggested earlier, this is perhaps the most essential point to grasp in Schelling's early philosophy. From the beginning, he argues that freedom is the centerpiece of philosophy, and, in so arguing, he is driving at the insight that we live within a reality that transcends empirical consciousness, but that we nevertheless know as real.

The second point is that it is our existence within the absolute I that illuminates our conscious experience and not vice versa. Philosophy is the struggle to bring the absolute I to consciousness, but it can only succeed insofar as our participation in the absolute I confirms its results. For Schelling, the objective world is a reified manifestation of the absolute reality that constitutes existence, and it is our participation in the Absolute that enables us to comprehend the contents of that manifestation.

This second point is illustrated especially well in his discussion of the concept of a postulate at the end of the *Treatises*, in which Schelling argues that a postulate is a proposition that represents in consciousness what is in fact a nonobjective reality. Schelling uses the example of the straight line in geometry to illustrate the point. He observes that everyone knows what a straight line is even though there is no actual example of a straight line in the empirical world. This is possible because we are the ones who supply the idea of a straight line when we see a manifest approximation of one in the empirical world. As Schelling writes, "You cannot develop an understanding of the straight line by means of the mark on the blackboard but, on the contrary, you understand

this mark by means of the straight line.”⁹⁸ For Schelling, this insight applies broadly to our ability to comprehend the external world. Thus he immediately goes on to claim that the same applies to our ability to understand what it means to be a self: “...you do not learn what the self is by way of the proposition but, conversely, the self in you must reveal for you the significance of the proposition.”⁹⁹ Thus, it is our existence within the absolute that illuminates for us our experience of reality. This is the key sense in which Schelling carries forward Kant’s insight into the primacy of practical reason: on account of our practical nature, we have the capacity to know realities that cannot be contained within conscious experience or the theoretical perspective.

A similar account can be given of the postulates of practical reason (although Schelling suggests that they should not be referred to postulates since they point to tasks rather than objects). Contrary to Kant’s own account, the postulates should be understood, like the postulate of a straight line, as propositional symbols of non-objective realities. We are able to understand those symbols only because we are already in touch with the realities that they symbolize. A postulate is an attempt to represent in consciousness a reality that can never enter into consciousness. Thus, following Kant, Schelling is suggesting that there are certain aspects of reality of which we are aware, even though we can have no conscious experience of those realities as objects. We may represent these realities as objects due to the limitations of thought itself, but we must maintain the recognition that these realities are nonobjective. For instance, Schelling suggests that, from the perspective of the finite I, we represent God as an object, but we must not consider Him to be an absolute object: “in practical philosophy God can indeed

⁹⁸ Schelling, “Treatises,” 137 (1: 450).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

be represented as *outside the finite I* (schematically) however only as identical with the infinite.”¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Schelling argues that we must be careful not to understand the goal of our moral strivings as some object to be achieved. This is why he argues that happiness, understood empirically, cannot be the true goal of our moral strivings—for we seek the absolute I, which is beyond empirical happiness just as it is beyond the moral condition. As Schelling writes in sum, “since we enter the supersensuous world only through the reestablishment of the absolute I, what can we expect to find there other than the I? therefore, no God as an object, no not-I at all, no empirical happiness, etcetera, but only pure, absolute I!”¹⁰¹ Our goal is to realize the nonobjective autonomous reality that forms the ever-receding horizon of our existence.

It is in terms of these insights that Schelling advances Kant’s notion of the primacy of the practical most decisively. Schelling’s development of Kant’s insight into the primacy of the practical enables him to render the practical metaphysics that Kant attempted to construct more coherent and less ambiguous as to its status as knowledge. As we saw in the last chapter, having denied theoretical reason access to the realm of metaphysics, Kant attempts to bring metaphysics back in through his practical philosophy. His attempt is mired in ambiguity, however, since he cannot reconcile the practical with the theoretical. Kant still seems at times to assume that we would need to obtain theoretical knowledge of any metaphysical reality in order to be certain of its existence. The postulates, for instance, are theoretical objects that we do not experience but nevertheless postulate on account of their necessity for morality. Schelling, on the other hand, sees that the logic of Kant’s turn to the practical calls for a metaphysics that

¹⁰⁰ Schelling, “Of the I,” 99 (1: 201).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 100 (1: 202).

in no way falls back on the theoretical or objective mode of thought. The metaphysical realities that constitute our existence are not objects; rather, they are revealed to us as the ideas that we live within. Therefore, our inability to account for freedom, or God, or the immortality of the soul in theoretical terms is unproblematic: they simply exist beyond the jurisdiction of the theoretical.

Thus, whereas Kant's formulations suggest that there are in fact objects beyond our mental capacities, and that we cannot know them simply on account of the weakness of our powers of cognition, Schelling argues that the true thrust of the critical philosophy is to show that the Absolute simply cannot be objectified. Thus Schelling writes in the *Letters* that "the fight against dogmatism is waged with weak weapons if criticism rests its whole system merely upon the state of our cognitive faculty, and not upon our genuine essence."¹⁰² In contrast to Kant, Schelling wants to show that it is not merely our limited reason which prevents us from establishing an objective Absolute, but the very nature of reality itself. In other words, it is not just that the Absolute is an object that we are incapable of thinking, but that the Absolute is simply not an object. Schelling argues that this was Kant's goal too, to show that "criticism means to do more than merely deduce the weakness of reason, and prove only this much, that dogmatism cannot be proved."¹⁰³ But Kant fails to make this clear because he suggests that the supersensible reality of the Absolute is a realm of things-in-themselves when this reality must be precisely that which is beyond all things. The notion of a thing-in-itself is a product of applying the theoretical mode of thinking to a reality that is beyond its grasp. "Has it never occurred to you, ever so dimly, that it is not the weakness of your reason but the absolute freedom

¹⁰² Schelling, "Letters," 292 (1: 162).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

in you which makes the intellectual world inaccessible to every *objective* power; that it is not the limitation of your knowledge but your unlimited freedom which has relegated the objects of cognition to the confines of mere appearances?”¹⁰⁴ What Schelling embraces that Kant did not is that we live in a reality that is in essence free and can therefore never be objectified. This leads to the fourth sense of the primacy of the practical in Schelling’s early thought.

The Practical Realization of Truth

Finally, as Schelling argues at length in the *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, the practical is primary because philosophical accounts of reality can only be tested practically. Theoretical philosophy on its own cannot determine the validity of a philosophical position, since it does not contain the measure of truth.¹⁰⁵ Instead, we must live according to the philosophical systems we create in order to determine whether or not (or to what extent) they accurately reflect reality. Schelling notes that this explains the endurance of philosophy as the search for wisdom: since the truth of reality cannot be pinned down in a theoretical account, universal consensus cannot be reached.¹⁰⁶ Yet, Schelling argues that there is a universal consensus to be reached—our existence is structured by that possibility—and, therefore, we must continue to strive for that consensus. Thus, Schelling maintains the universality of truth, while also explaining the endless absence of consensus.

The theme of the *Letters* is that one cannot decide between criticism (idealism) or dogmatism (realism) without turning to the practical. As was discussed above, scholars

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 340 (1: 195).

¹⁰⁵ In this way, the “Letters” presage Schelling’s later thought, especially the distinction between the negative and positive branches of philosophy.

¹⁰⁶ Note that Schelling is already breaking with his and Fichte’s claim that philosophy is a science.

believe that the *Letters* evince a realization on Schelling's part that theoretical reason cannot determine whether or not the Absolute is an I. Contrary to this contention, however, Schelling does not appear to waiver in his commitment to idealism over dogmatism in the *Letters*. While he concedes that a decision between the two philosophies cannot be made on theoretical grounds, he fully expects that idealism will be vindicated on practical grounds: "philosophy proceeds to the realm of *demands*, that is, to the domain of *practical* philosophy, and only there can the decisive victory be gained."¹⁰⁷ The change in the *Letters* does not concern rival versions of the Absolute, but only the method of ascertaining the Absolute.

This is a change that is effected by Schelling's realization that Kant's critical philosophy cannot establish the superiority of criticism to dogmatism. As he writes, "the *Critique of Pure Reason*, like every other purely theoretical system, could not get beyond utter indecision, that is, it could go only as far as to demonstrate the theoretical *indemonstrability* of dogmatism."¹⁰⁸ Kant's theoretical philosophy could not have anything to say about the unconditioned or the Absolute, which is the issue of contention between the two systems, since "a critique concerned only with the cognitive faculty does not rise to the absolute unity."¹⁰⁹ These arguments would probably not be anathema to Kant, since he himself places the unconditioned beyond the reach of theoretical reason. They do have important implications for the Idealist goal of establishing an absolutely

¹⁰⁷ Schelling, "Letters," 167 (1: 299). Bowie confuses theoretical indecision for total indecision on Schelling's part.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 164 (1: 295). "I am firmly convinced that even the consummate system of criticism cannot confute dogmatism theoretically." Ibid., 165 (1: 296). "The *Critique of Pure Reason* is not destined to establish any one *system* exclusively... On the contrary, as I understand it, the *Critique* is destined to deduce from the essence of reason the very possibility of two exactly opposed systems; it destined to establish a system of criticism (conceived as complete), or, more precisely, a system of idealism as well as and in exact opposition to it, a system of dogmatism or of realism." Ibid., 169 (1: 301-2).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 166 (1: 297).

autonomous philosophy, however, since they suggest the impossibility of a theoretically certain science of knowledge.

Having explained that the contest between criticism and dogmatism cannot be decided on theoretical grounds, Schelling argues that we must decide between the two systems on a practical basis. This means that each of us must attempt to realize one of the systems within ourselves, and it is only by such a method that we can test the veracity of each system. As Schelling claims, “We must be what we call ourselves theoretically. And nothing can convince us of being that, except our very striving to be just that.”¹¹⁰ According to Schelling, Spinoza also realized this: “Why did Spinoza present his philosophy in a system of *ethics*?” The answer, he suggests, is that Spinoza “lived in his system.”¹¹¹ Schelling argues that “either a *system* of knowledge is an artifice, a mental play...or the system must *obtain* reality, not by a theoretical but by a practical faculty; not by a cognitive faculty but by a *productive* realization; not by *knowledge* but by *action*.”¹¹² It is our practical existence that illuminates the reality in which we exist.

The need to practically realize the truth of reality does not, however, imply some sort of moral relativism, as some of Schelling’s formulations suggest. Quite the opposite: Schelling casts the choice between systems as a moral one. Thus, when he suggests that “Which of the two we choose depends on the freedom of spirit which we have ourselves acquired,”¹¹³ Schelling is not suggesting that we could just as well choose one or the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 307-8, (1: 173). Translation modified.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 305 (1: 171). Schelling’s answer is in quotation marks, but it is not clear what the reference is to, if anything.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 307-8, (1: 173). Translation modified.

other, depending on our personal fancy.¹¹⁴ Rather, what he means to say is that only those who have realized that freedom is highest aspect of human existence will be prepared to choose idealism over dogmatism. In other words, Schelling argues that idealism is the only practically defensible system. Dogmatism remains “irrefutable for him who is able to realize it practically, for him who can bear the thought of working at his own annihilation, of doing away with all free causality in himself, and of being the modification of an object in whose infinity he will find, sooner or later, his own (moral) extinction.”¹¹⁵ The clear implication of Schelling’s words is that he thinks that criticism should be chosen over dogmatism.

In another instance, Schelling claims that “no system can be completed otherwise than practically, that is, subjectively. The more closely a philosophy approaches its system, the more essentially freedom and individuality partake of it, and the less it can claim universal validity.”¹¹⁶ Schelling is not denying that we all exist within the same absolute reality in this passage; rather, he is following through on one of the implications of the primacy of practical reason: if the truth of our existence emerges in the practical sphere, then it can neither be captured within a theory, nor simply communicated to other human beings. This is clearer in the following passage, which makes a similar point: “The highest dignity of philosophy is precisely to expect everything of human freedom. Hence, nothing can be more detrimental to philosophy than the attempt to confine it in

¹¹⁴ As he writes, “there must be two systems directly opposed to each other as long as there are any finite beings, and...no man can convince himself of any system except *pragmatically*, that is, by realizing either system *in himself*.” Ibid., 306 (1: 172).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 339 (1: 194).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 170-1 (1: 304).

the cage of a system universally valid by theory.”¹¹⁷ To complete a theoretical system of philosophy and prove it with absolute certainty would be to close the space of freedom in which our existence takes place. Thus, Schelling is not denying that we all partake of a universal reality, but he is pointing out that we can never fully grasp that reality objectively. In order to know it, we must live within it for ourselves.

Given this situation, Schelling expects that both criticism and dogmatism will continue to compete for adherents into the indefinite future. “Either of the two absolutely opposed systems, dogmatism and criticism, is just as possible as the other, and both will coexist as long as finite beings do not all stand on the same level of freedom.”¹¹⁸ Neither system can prove its account of the Absolute or disprove the alternative view theoretically: “both systems have the same problem, and this problem cannot be solved theoretically, but only practically.”¹¹⁹ This is the cause of the ever renewed disputes between philosophers over the nature of reality. We all live within the same order of reality, but since we can only understand it subjectively, i.e., practically, and can never reach objective agreement (as can be done in mathematics, for instance), we can never reach universal and certain agreement on the nature of that reality. Nevertheless, our existence does reveal the nature of reality to us in a way that theoretical philosophy cannot.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 306-7 (1: 172). At this point, Schelling expresses his appreciation for the meaning of the term philosophy, noting that “The whole sublimity of this science has consisted in just this, that it would never be complete.” Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 307-8, (1: 173).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Autonomy within the Absolute

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that the philosophical movement in which Schelling participates as a young man could be described as an attempt to ground philosophy in an autonomous first principle. We can now see why Schelling maintains an ambiguous relationship to that effort. On the one hand, Schelling supports Fichte's move to make autonomy the first principle of a single philosophy that would include the theoretical and the practical, and Schelling attempts to advance Fichte's position himself. On the other hand, Schelling's account of the Absolute denies the possibility of our ever reaching a fully cognizant understanding of the Absolute, which is in effect a denial of our autonomy as finite beings. Thus, as in Kant's philosophy, we find in Schelling's early thought the position that autonomy is not a description of our finite state. As finite beings, we simply cannot be defined as autonomous in an objective sense. From an ideal or practical standpoint, however, the position is different. As beings whose existence is constituted by the Absolute, we can also say that our existence is constituted by autonomy. As was discussed above, Schelling argues that the Absolute is the autonomous source of reality. The Absolute is therefore the horizon of autonomy in which we participate as finite beings. This means that although we do not realize autonomy as finite beings, it is our task to do so. Autonomy is the eternal or ideal reality that constitutes our existence, and the moral demand that we move toward autonomy governs our entire existence.

Schelling expresses this view in the *Treatises* in a discussion of the debate between Reinhold and Kant concerning the relationship between will and reason in moral philosophy. Schelling notes that Kant argues "that the will and practical, i.e., legislating,

reason are the same,” but that Reinhold claims “that the morality and moral competence of our actions is conceivable only if we postulate a *freedom of the will* that differs from both, the autonomy of *reason* and the striving of *desire*.”¹²⁰ In order to solve the debate, Schelling has recourse to Kant’s distinction between will [*Wille*] and spontaneity [*Willkür*], the former being absolute and the latter empirical. In the Absolute, will and reason are identical because the Absolute is perfectly autonomous. For the Absolute, “the primordial law (which becomes a moral law only in consciousness) is not directed at, but *originates* in a will *that is its own law* and, to that extent, is neither *free* nor *unfree* (in the moral sense) but is free in an *absolute* sense.”¹²¹ In the empirical I, by contrast, spontaneity and reason are separated: “we do not become *conscious* of freedom in any other way than through *spontaneity*” and “The law of the absolute will, to the extent that it is to become a maxim, reaches spontaneity through reason. Reason is not the supersensible itself but its expression in us.”¹²² On this basis, Schelling claims that both philosophers are correct insofar as Kant is looking at the question from the perspective of the absolute I, whereas Reinhold is looking at it from the perspective of consciousness. As absolute, we are autonomous; as empirical, we exercise spontaneity for or against the moral law as expressed in practical reason.

Schelling will not remain satisfied with this solution to the problem of the apparent contradiction between absolute and empirical freedom, since it relegates empirical freedom to the status of a mere appearance, and, thereby, does not go beyond the position that Kant developed in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In

¹²⁰ Schelling, “Treatises,” 123 (1: 430-431).

¹²¹ Ibid., 128 (1: 438).

¹²² Ibid., 130 (1: 441-442).

the *Freiheitsschrift*, as we will see in the coming chapters, Schelling attempts to account for human freedom as an absolute reality. But, in terms of autonomy, Schelling's reflections in the *Treatises* indicate that he understands autonomy as an absolute reality that we live within and not as a theoretical account of the finite self. But what does it mean to say that we participate in or live within autonomy if we are not actually autonomous as individual selves? The fact that we cannot define what it means to be autonomous—that we cannot objectify it—is what makes our autonomy possible. If we were to define autonomy, then we would eradicate it, since the historical process of its realization would be obviated by our already possessing it as realized. As Schelling points out with especial clarity in the *Letters*, “criticism must regard the ultimate goal [of morality, i.e., the realization of autonomy] merely as the object of an endless task. *Criticism itself necessarily turns into dogmatism as soon as it sets up the ultimate goal as realized (in an object), or as realizable (at any particular time).*”¹²³ “The absolute, if represented as realized (as existing), becomes objective; it becomes an object of *knowledge* and therewith ceases to be an object of *freedom*.”¹²⁴

Above all this means that our autonomy is what enables us to recognize the moral, which transcends the grasp of theoretical reason. We discover the moral law that governs our existence through the practical, i.e., through our free participation in the absolute: “the [spirit] becomes aware of the *material of the moral law* or of *what* is being postulated by the moral only through volition and only to the extent that *volition is the source of the moral law*.”¹²⁵ This means that existence is never closed off within as

¹²³ Ibid., 189 (1: 331).

¹²⁴ Ibid., 189 (1: 331-332).

¹²⁵ Ibid., 122, (1: 429).

abstract of morality that imposes itself upon us from the outside. Rather, “The object of volition...shall always be demonstrable only through the act of volition. If, then, I strive for nothing but the absolute Good, i.e., pure volition itself, this latter, being the material of my volition, shall always be demonstrable only through an act of the will, i.e., through a positive act whereby it has become the object of volition.”¹²⁶ Our autonomy points to our practical realization of the moral law from within:

the primordial autonomy of the will finds its expression in the moral law. The moral law, however, is far from being a lifeless proposition that *rests* within us a priori, not [is it] a proposition that can be established *theoretically*; it exists within us only to the extent that the will *expresses* it in us (empirically). It becomes manifest in *act* and *deed*, and it is only to that extent that we *know* of it.... Its source is the will. For the [law] constitutes a state of which we cannot become conscious except through the *act of will itself*.¹²⁷

The fact that we exist within autonomy is what holds open the necessary space for our existence as free individuals. The moral law issues forth from the absolute will and, therefore, like everything else that is absolute, it cannot be contained within a theoretical account. Thus, although we can encapsulate in reason some sense of what the moral law requires, we must actually turn to existence in order to determine it exactly.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of Schelling’s early philosophical position as found in his four earliest publications. These essays reveal the influence of both Kant and the post-Kantian developments initiated by Reinhold and Fichte on Schelling’s thought. Schelling is essentially writing within the Kantian context, but, like Reinhold and Fichte, he strives to overcome the dualism that afflicts Kant’s philosophy by unifying

¹²⁶ Ibid., 122 (1: 429-430).

¹²⁷ Ibid., 124 (1: 432).

the form and content of philosophy (i.e., mind and world) in a single, autonomous first principle, which is essentially the project of German Idealism. What Schelling discovers is that we can never complete this project within the realm of the theoretical because we are seeking the condition that makes the theoretical possible. Therefore, we must seek the answer in the practical. As we saw in chapter one, Kant also saw this, but Schelling takes Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical deeper by arguing that it represents our existence within the Absolute. In this context, Schelling argues that the Absolute is the autonomous source of reality that we live within, and that it is the autonomy of the Absolute that we strive to achieve in our finite lives, both theoretically and practically. The movement of existence towards the Absolute—towards autonomy—is the reality that constitutes our existence, and it is on account of our participation within this movement that we are able to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves. Thus, for Schelling, autonomy is not a property that we as human beings possess; instead, it is the reality that constitutes our existence. It is a goal that we should strive to achieve, even if we can never realize it on account of our finitude.

Schelling does not rest where this chapter ends. In fact, while Schelling was writing the *Treatises*, he had already begun to formulate his *Naturphilosophie*, which would make him famous. He would then attempt to couple the realism of the *Naturphilosophie* with the idealism of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, arguing that the whole of reality—including both thought and being—could be explained from either perspective. Finally, he would attempt to build one all-inclusive system, which is commonly referred to as the *Identitätsphilosophie*. Schelling never seems to have been really satisfied with any of his systematic projects, however. The analysis of his early

essays suggest why: from the very start of his career, Schelling already glimpsed that the whole of reality could not be resolved into a theoretical system. The actuality of existence always escaped the confines of systematization. More to the point, the abstract systems could never account for the meaning or significance of finite existence. For Schelling, Kant's question of how synthetic a priori judgments are possible becomes the famous question of why there is a world at all. As Schelling puts it, "How do I ever come to egress from the absolute, and to progress toward an opposite?"¹²⁸ This is the question that German Idealism leaves unanswered: if the whole of existence is nothing but a striving to realize the Absolute, then why does the Absolute not just realize itself? Why is it not simply always realized? As we will see in the next two chapters, this is one of the key problems that Schelling tries to overcome in the *Freiheitsschrift*.

¹²⁸ Schelling, "Letters," 164 (1: 294).

Chapter III

The Primacy of Existence in Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*

A system that contradicts the most holy feelings, the mind, and moral consciousness can never be called, at least in this respect, a system of reason, but rather only one of non-reason [*Unvernunft*].¹

Introduction

Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* marks a turning point in the history of modern philosophy. It effects the beginning of the transition from the abstract rational systems of German Idealism to the practically or existentially oriented philosophies of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche. The basis for this transition is Schelling's recognition that being is prior to thinking. Emphasizing that there is more to the world than reason alone, Schelling argues that thought cannot fully explain being and that consciousness cannot contain the whole of reality. In other words, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, he acknowledges that we can never achieve the kind of absolute knowledge that Hegel believed he had obtained. This does not mean, however, that we can only know reality insofar as it can be described according to the subject-object model of knowledge that constitutes the theoretical perspective. On the contrary, Schelling maintains that we know the deeper reality of which we are a part existentially, which is to say that we are aware of it (and understand something about it) because our existence as free beings is a

¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 74 (7: 413). Translation modified. All references to Schelling's works in parentheses are to F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-1861).

participation in the absolute freedom that constitutes reality. At its core, reality is characterized by freedom and not the abstract necessity of reason, and, therefore, it is only through freedom that we can truly understand the nature and meaning of existence. Thus, insofar as we hope to understand the system of reality, we must seek to do so from within, since we do not have access to the whole of reality as an object against which we stand as subjects. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling realizes that this means that we must turn to the moral life as the most fundamental perspective from which to understand our existence: since human freedom is moral freedom, and since to say that the world is constituted by freedom is to say that it is constituted by morality, it is only in the context of our moral condition that we gain this inward perspective on reality. Thus, Schelling's epistemological-metaphysical recognition of the priority of being (i.e., freedom) to thought is tied to his turn from the abstract systematizing of idealism to the moral-existential analysis of the *Freiheitsschrift*.

This being the project of the *Freiheitsschrift*, it both stands in continuity and breaks with Schelling's early philosophy. As was detailed in chapter two, Schelling held an uneasy relationship to the project of German Idealism as it was set by Reinhold and Fichte from the beginning. By insisting that the first principle of philosophy is an Absolute that we can only know intuitively, he already undermines the possibility of developing a fully rational, transparent, and systematic philosophy. Inchoately realizing this even in these early essays, Schelling turns to Kant's claim for the primacy of the practical as a means for securing the preference of idealism over dogmatism. Yet Schelling remains committed to the attempt to develop a systematic philosophy, as is

demonstrated in the years between his early essays and the *Freiheitsschrift* by his repeated attempts to develop such a system in his *Naturphilosophie*, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and *Identitätsphilosophie*. Moreover, even in his early essays, Schelling is troubled by the problem that finitude presents for philosophy. If the whole world can be explained according to reason, then why does it not simply reflect reason from the start? Why are we trapped in the imperfection of our finitude? What purpose does our empirical existence serve? As Schelling repeatedly asked, why is there something and not nothing? The abstract systems of German Idealism cannot give meaning to our existence as we actually know it. Thus, it is in the effort to achieve such meaning that Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* represents a break with his earlier thought.

Although Schelling scholars have recognized the moral turn that takes place in Schelling's thought in the *Freiheitsschrift*, little attention has been devoted to the intellectual source of this shift in Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason.¹ As was discussed in chapter one, Kant argues both that the interests of practical reason are

¹ An important exception is David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 38-9, on the other hand, claims that Schelling rejects the primacy of the practical approach to the unification of philosophy, since he seeks to unify the theoretical and the practical according to the suggested path of the *Critique of Judgment*. This is to some degree a false dichotomy, however, since even the solution suggested in the third *Critique* depends on teleology, which is derived from the moral perspective. In addition to Walsh and Kosch, for general discussions of the *Freiheitsschrift*, see: Hans Michael Baumgartner and Wilhelm G. Jacobs, ed., *Schellings Weg zur Freiheitsschrift: Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996); Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Bernard Freydenberg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay: Provocative Philosophy Then and Now* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009); Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985); Otfried Höffe and Annemarie Pieper, ed., *F.W.J. Schelling: Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995); Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

superior to those of theoretical reason, and that practical reason reveals aspects of reality to us that cannot be accounted for theoretically. Thus, theoretical and practical reason are unified insofar as the former is subordinated to the interests of the latter, and the moral law as a fact of reason dictates to us, for instance, that we are free even though we cannot prove our freedom theoretically.² It is the argument of this chapter that Schelling's new mode of philosophizing in the *Freiheitsschrift* is an extension of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason. Like Kant, Schelling argues that morality is sovereign, and that, by virtue of our existence as free moral beings, we know reality on a level that is more fundamental than the theoretical. The difference is that it is no longer simply practical reason that illuminates a world beyond theoretical reason, but our existence as spirit or personality that offers us insight into the structure of reality that transcends thought. For Schelling, to be moral is to be personal, and, therefore, it is our existence as personal beings that enables us to know the nature and meaning of reality insofar as we are able to from within our perspective as parts within the whole.

By extending and developing Kant's insight into the primacy of the practical, Schelling is able to overcome some of the deficiencies of both Kantianism and German Idealism. First, he is able to overcome a key difficulty with Kant's concept of autonomy, namely, that by tying freedom to reason and vice versa, Kant is unable to account for evil as something for which human beings are morally culpable. If to act freely is to act rationally, then how can we be said to act freely when we act irrationally?³ As was discussed in chapter one, Kant makes a worthy effort to deal with the problem of evil in

² Or we postulate God and immortality as realities necessary to our moral experience even though we cannot prove their existence theoretically.

³ Kosch, *Freedom and Reason* provides a very good outline of this critique.

Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, but he cannot incorporate his doctrine of radical evil into his ethical theory.⁴ As will be discussed in the next chapter, Schelling is able to overcome this difficulty by looking at autonomy from a practical rather than theoretical perspective. Second, as was just suggested, Schelling is able to offer a better account of the meaning of the process of existence. By considering human existence from the moral perspective, Schelling is able to show that the purpose of existence—to realize our autonomy in its fullness—can only be achieved by going through the struggle between good and evil that constitutes history. This means that our finitude serves as the basis for our realization of the good, and, therefore, as will also be discussed in the next chapter, Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* offers a better explanation of the transition from the infinite to the finite than what is found in his early work. In a sense, our finitude is what guarantees our freedom.

As these comments suggest, the discussion of the *Freiheitsschrift* is divided between this chapter and the next one. The present chapter focuses on Schelling's evaluation and critique of modern philosophy in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and it provides an account of his shift from the systematic rationalism typical of German Idealism to the existential or moral mode of reflection that characterizes his later thought. The next chapter provides a more substantive account of Schelling's new views on the human moral condition and its place within the whole of reality as they are found in the *Freiheitsschrift*. The present chapter thus prepares the way for that presentation by

⁴ The problem is that, for Kant, practical reason and freedom are synonymous. We either act according to practical reason, in which case we act autonomously (i.e., freely), or we act according to our inclinations, in which case we act heteronomously. For this reason, although Kant attempts to account for the reality of evil in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he cannot systematically incorporate it into his philosophical system.

introducing the existential perspective that Schelling develops in the *Freiheitsschrift*, since it is only from within this perspective that Schelling's new position can be understood.

In terms of content, this chapter primarily provides an overview of the introductory portion of the *Freiheitsschrift*, which is essentially a critical review of modern philosophy. Schelling opens the *Freiheitsschrift* with a discussion of the tension between freedom and system, which, as was demonstrated in the last chapter, is a constant theme in Schelling's thought from the outset. Schelling wants to understand not only the nature of human freedom, but also how it relates to the whole of reality. In this context, Schelling discusses and critiques three positions in the history of modern philosophy: the anti-rationalist thought of F. H. Jacobi, the pantheism of Spinoza, and the idealism of Kant, Fichte and Schelling's own early work. As will be discussed, Schelling finds each of these philosophical stances insufficient: Jacobi's because it mischaracterizes the source of the determinism in Spinoza's thought; Spinoza's because he treats reality from an objective or theoretical perspective; and, idealism's because it does not adequately specify what is distinctive about human freedom. Schelling develops his new philosophical approach in response to these deficiencies. He argues that the fundamental problem that each of these position suffers is its abstraction from the living nature that is the basis of all reality, and, on this basis, he attempts to develop an existential perspective that accounts for the living reality of existence. Schelling argues that there is a primal unity that pervades all of existence and underlies the diversity of existence. In order to encapsulate this insight, he argues that all of existence is structured by the relationship

between two principles, which he refers to as ground and existence. This chapter concludes by explaining how these principles serve as the basis for his existential analysis of human existence, which is discussed in its substantive details in the next chapter.

The Tension Between System and Freedom

The core issue with which the *Freiheitsschrift* begins is the tension between system and freedom, expressed originally by Kant as the tension between nature and freedom, but now understood, according to Schelling, as the tension between “necessity and freedom.”⁵ This is not a new topic for Schelling. As was discussed in chapter two, Schelling already demonstrates awareness of the tension in his earliest publications, and he therefore plays an ambiguous role in the systematic efforts of the German Idealist movement: on the one hand, he contributes to the attempt to develop a systematic philosophy that could unite freedom and necessity; on the other, he recognizes that the project cannot be completed because freedom always escapes systematization. Thus, in these early essays, Schelling’s account of the Absolute as that which is beyond consciousness means that the task of philosophy—to give an objective account of the Absolute—is endless, both as a theoretical and as a practical undertaking. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling reaffirms this position and recognizes it as the vital source of philosophy as an ongoing endeavor. Thus he contends that explaining the

connection of the concept of freedom with the whole of a worldview will likely

⁵ “It is time that the higher or, rather, the genuine opposition emerge, that of necessity and freedom, with which the innermost centerpoint of philosophy first comes into consideration.” Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 4 (7: 333).

always remain the object of a necessary task without whose resolution the concept of freedom would teeter while philosophy would be fully without value. For this great task alone is the unconscious and invisible driving force [*Triebfeder*] of all striving for knowledge, from the lowest to the highest; without the contradiction of necessity and freedom not only philosophy but each higher willing of the spirit would sink into the death that is proper to those sciences in which this contradiction has no application.⁶

This is essentially a restatement of the practical striving to realize the Absolute that can be found in Schelling's early philosophy. Thus, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling maintains the view of philosophy that he developed as a young man: he continues to think of it as the attempt to develop a systematic account of reality that would include the reality of freedom. However, as will be discussed below, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling emphasizes that fidelity to the reality of freedom must trump the drive toward systematization.

As the remarks quoted above suggest, the tension between system and freedom is not for Schelling the "isolated and independent" issue that Hegel suggested it was in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.⁷ On the contrary, for Schelling, it is the principal philosophical problem of the modern age. The connection between freedom and system has always been a source of fundamental difficulty because a complete system would seem to eradicate the possibility of freedom. As Schelling recounts, "According to an old but in no way forgotten legend, the concept of freedom is in fact said to be completely incompatible with system, and every philosophy making claim to unity and wholeness should end up with the denial of freedom."⁸ Yet, Schelling also notes that, if neither

⁶ Ibid., 10-11 (7: 338).

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3: *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 514.

⁸ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 9 (7: 336).

freedom nor the unity of reality is to be denied, then freedom and system must somehow coincide: “since individual freedom is surely connected in some way with the world as a whole...some kind of system must be present, at least in the divine understanding, with which freedom coexists.”⁹ Thus, on the one hand, there is the claim that freedom and system are mutually exclusive, while, on the other, there is the demand that they must somehow coexist. This is, in essence, the problem that Schelling attempts to solve in the *Freiheitsschrift*. The introductory portion of the *Freiheitsschrift* serves as a critical-historical assessment of the philosophical course that this problem has taken in modernity.

Schelling’s Critique of Jacobi

Schelling begins with a discussion F. H. Jacobi’s critique of the philosophical developments that took place during Schelling’s youth. It was Jacobi in particular who pointed to the problem of the compatibility of freedom and system that played a pivotal role in Schelling’s contemporary philosophical scene. Chapter two provided a summary account of the situation. Schelling and the other Idealists sought to develop a philosophy that would be both systematic and inclusive of freedom. They wanted to overcome the dualism that had afflicted modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant, while at the same time maintaining Kant’s defense of freedom. Kant’s division of reason into the theoretical and the practical was unacceptable to Schelling and the other post-Kantian Idealists, however, because it rendered our moral existence theoretically inexplicable and left our scientific and practical understandings of the world hopelessly divided. Thus,

⁹ Ibid., 9 (7: 337).

Reinhold, and following him, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel attempted to ground the Kantian philosophy on a single principle that would still allow for freedom.¹⁰ In fact, they wanted to maintain that freedom itself is the first principle of the system of reality.

The attempt to develop a rational, certain, and systematic philosophy was a source of great tension among Schelling's contemporaries, however, and Jacobi was eager to point out the problem. The problem became particularly acute in 1798 when a dispute between Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn concerning the alleged Spinozism of Gottfried Lessing became public. Known as the pantheism controversy, it began when Jacobi published some letters of Lessing's in which Lessing confessed to being a Spinozist. At the time, this was tantamount to admitting that he was a fatalist, since, at least publicly, Spinoza's philosophy was considered to be the epitome of fatalism.¹¹ The details of the debate and the question of Lessing's ostensible pantheism are not important for present purposes, but the event is significant because it explains Schelling's extended discussion of pantheism in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Essentially, it was argued by Jacobi and others that any systematic and rational system would have to be pantheistic, which amounted to a denial of freedom, since pantheism, so it was claimed by Jacobi, entailed determinism.

These historical circumstances explain why Schelling addresses the question of the compatibility of freedom and system in terms of pantheism, and it is Jacobi to whom he is referring when he notes that the claim that freedom and system are incompatible "has been more decisively expressed in the phrase: the only possible system of reason is

¹⁰ Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹¹ For a more detailed account of the pantheism controversy, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially chapter 2.

pantheism, but this is inevitably fatalism.”¹² Schelling is highly critical of this claim because it merely throws a label at various philosophical systems without examining more subtly what the label actually means. As will become evident, Schelling rejects the notion that pantheism must entail determinism and he argues that Spinoza’s determinism must therefore result from some other aspect of his thought. In order to vindicate systematic philosophy, Schelling discusses three possible definitions of pantheism, and, in each case, he shows that the pantheistic claim is not what undermines the possibility of freedom.

This first interpretation of pantheism holds that it is “a complete identification of God with things; a blending of creator and created being [*Geschöpf*].”¹³ Defending Spinoza on this point, Schelling argues that this cannot be the true meaning of pantheism because it is clear that “things are obviously not different from God simply in degree or through their limitedness...but *toto genere*.”¹⁴ Not even Spinoza maintains that God and things are the identical in every respect, since, for instance, God is infinite and things are finite. Schelling adds that “all individual things together cannot amount to God, as commonly maintained, in so far as no sort of combination can transform what is by nature derivative into what is by nature original, just as little as the individual points on a circumference when taken together can amount to that circumference, since as a whole, and according to its concept, it must necessarily precede them.”¹⁵ Even if all things are in God, God is still more than all things. He, like any other whole, is more than the some of

¹² Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 11 (7: 338).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12 (7: 340).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13 (7: 340-1).

His parts. Thus, pantheism cannot mean the identity of God with things.

Second, Schelling rejects the view that “in Spinoza even the individual thing is equivalent to God.”¹⁶ Schelling argues that once a thing is considered to be a modification of God it is derivative and therefore cannot be God. He claims that the “reason [*Grund*] for such misinterpretations...lies in the general misunderstanding of the law of identity or the meaning of the copula in judgment.”¹⁷ To say that God is all things is not to assert the absolute identity of God and each existing thing. Schelling argues that both subject and predicate point to a deeper identity behind the copula. He provides as an example the statement “This body is blue.”¹⁸ Schelling claims that what we really mean when we make this statement is “that the same thing which is this body is also blue, although not in the same respect.”¹⁹ He provides several further examples, two of which anticipate the argument for the reality of evil that Schelling offers in the *Freiheitsschrift*. The first is that “good is evil, which means to say roughly that evil does not have the power to exist through itself; that within evil which has being is (considered in and for itself) the good.”²⁰ The second claim is that “necessary and free things are explained as One, the meaning of which is that the same thing (in the final judgment) which is the essence of the moral world is also the essence of nature.”²¹ These statements do not conflate the terms of the proposition, or reduce one term to the other; rather, they point to an underlying unity from which both emerge. As Schelling explains, “The ancients’

¹⁶ Ibid., 13 (7: 341).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 13-14 (7: 342).

profoundly meaningful logic differentiated subject and predicate as what precedes and what follows (*antecedens et consequens*) and thereby expressed the real meaning of the law of identity.”²² Understanding the copula in this way even allows us to make sense of tautological claims, such as “The body is body.”²³ In this sentence, according to Schelling, the subject expresses the unity of the body, while the predicate attributes the properties of a body to it. In any case, the copula does not express absolute identity, and, therefore, pantheism need not suggest that each existing thing is identical to God.

The third possible interpretation of pantheism that Schelling considers is that in pantheism “things are nothing, that this system abolishes all individuality.”²⁴ But Schelling quickly dismisses this view as falling into self-contradiction, since, if there is nothing other than God, then there is no point in saying that everything is in God. The concept of pantheism itself “seems therefore to dissolve and vanish into nothingness.”²⁵ From this discussion, Schelling concludes that no real philosophical purpose is served by “raising such labels [as pantheism] from the dead.”²⁶ Jacobi’s charge of pantheism is rendered either misguided or meaningless.

In the wake of these reflections, Schelling denies that the pantheistic principle (however understood) is incompatible with freedom: “the denial or assertion of freedom in general is based on something completely other than the assumption or non-assumption of pantheism (the immanence of things in God).”²⁷ In fact, Schelling thinks

²² Ibid., 14 (7: 342).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 15 (7: 343).

²⁵ Ibid., 16 (7: 344).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 17 (7: 345).

that human freedom is in some sense dependent on immanence in God, since our freedom cannot exist in contrast to God's freedom. "Absolute causality in One Being leaves only unconditional passivity to all others."²⁸ Foreshadowing his own position, Schelling asks, "Is there any other way out of this argument than to save personal freedom within the divine being itself, since it is unthinkable in opposition to omnipotence; to say that man is not outside of, but rather in, God and that his activity itself belongs to the life of God?"²⁹ The answer is that "the belief in the unity of man with God...seems to accord with the deepest feeling as much as, if not more than, with reason and speculation."³⁰ Human freedom must be a participation in the freedom that is the source of the whole, or else our freedom would be in conflict with God's omnipotence. Pantheism, "the immanence of things in God," is the only system that can simultaneously account for human freedom and the omnipotence of God. Therefore, Schelling argues, "every rational viewpoint in some sense must be drawn into this doctrine."³¹

But again, it is important to understand in what sense Schelling means "the immanence of things in God." To understand it as a strict identity, according to Schelling, would be incorrect: "This principle [the "law of identity"] does not express a unity which, turning itself in the circle of seamless sameness [*Einerleiheit*], would not be progressive and, thus, insensate or lifeless. The unity of this law is an immediately creative one."³² Referring back to the discussion of the law of identity mentioned above, Schelling argues that, since subject is to predicate as ground is to consequence, it shows

²⁸ Ibid., 11 (7: 339).

²⁹ Ibid., 12 (7: 339).

³⁰ Ibid., 12 (7: 339-40).

³¹ Ibid., 11 (7: 339).

³² Ibid., 17 (7: 345).

that the “law of sufficient reason [*Gesetz des Grundes*] is...just as original as the law of identity.”³³ Subject and predicate are identical in one sense, but, in another, the subject is also the ground of the predicate. Thus, Schelling argues, “the eternal must also be a ground immediately and as it is in itself.”³⁴ In this sense, God must be the ground of being as well as identical to it. Things exist “in God” insofar as He is the ground for their existence, but, as created beings, they are also independent of God.

Schelling thus argues that the created world is dependent on God, but (offering an initial glimpse of his intention to maintain something of Kant’s concept of autonomy³⁵) he adds that genetic dependence on God does not negate independence in another sense. As he writes, in terms of its creation, the world is “dependent and, from the point of view of immanence, also something contained within the eternal. But dependence does not abolish independence, it does not even abolish freedom.”³⁶ Schelling explains his point using the biological model: “Every organic individual exists, as something that has become, only through another, and in this respect is dependent according to its becoming but by no means according to its Being.”³⁷ Schelling is thinking in terms of procreation,³⁸ and, on this basis, he argues that it is unproblematic to recognize the identity between ground and consequence, while also maintaining their mutual independence. In fact, he notes, it is the reverse that cannot be held: “it would be far

³³ Ibid., 17 (7: 346).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ It will be argued in the next chapter that, although Schelling rejects autonomy as a theoretical description of human beings, he continues to adhere to the view that autonomy is the end to which we aspire as moral beings.

³⁶ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 17 (7: 346).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Which, he argues, as opposed to the fashioning of an object, is a more apt way to think about God’s method of creation.

more contradictory, if the dependent or consequent were not independent. That would be a dependency without a dependent, a consequence without a consequent.”³⁹ As he also explains, this applies to the concept of immanence as well: “The same is valid for the containment of one thing within another. [...] Were that which is contained in another not itself alive, then there would be containment without some thing being contained....”⁴⁰

Even though things are dependent on God for their existence, they must also be independent of God in the sense that they must be distinguishable from him. The metaphor of procreation indicates that, for Schelling, “immanence in God” means that things participate in God’s essence/being [*Wesen*]. This does not mean, however, that they are wholly determined by God, since they are free to direct themselves.

Schelling argues that it does not make sense from an existential point of view to think of pantheism in any other way. God would not create an inanimate world, since “God is not a god of the dead but of the living.”⁴¹ A lifeless world would not effect the self-revelation of God that is contained in the process of creation: “The procession of things from God is a self-revelation of God. But God can only reveal himself to himself in what is like him, in free beings acting on their own, for whose Being there is no ground other than God but who are as God is.”⁴² A world that did not participate in God’s freedom would not be a revelation of God. Freedom would be wholly alien to it. As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, these claims anticipate the new understanding of the moral condition of existence that Schelling develops in the

³⁹ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 17 (7: 346).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18 (7: 346).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 18 (7: 347).

Freiheitsschrift. For now, their significance is that, for Schelling, pantheism properly understood (i.e., as participation in God's nature) is not a threat to freedom; in fact, it is the only way to account for it: "Only the eternal is in itself, based on itself, will, freedom. The concept of a derived absoluteness or divinity is so little contradictory that it is rather the central concept of philosophy as a whole. [...] So little does immanence in God contradict freedom that precisely only what is free is in God to the extent it is free, and what is not free is necessarily outside of God to the extent that it is not free."⁴³ In short, all freedom comes from God.

This should be understood as a defense of the Idealist position against the pantheistic charge that Jacobi leveled against it as a form of rationalism. As was demonstrated in the last chapter, Schelling's early position on freedom was that it is a participation in the freedom of the Absolute. Schelling changes his understanding of freedom in the *Freiheitsschrift*, but this aspect of his older positions remains in tact. Up to this point, Schelling has not really added anything new. He has only explained how Jacobi has missed the mark in his critique of Spinoza and Idealism. Next, Schelling explains what he takes to be the true problem with Spinoza's thought.

Schelling's Critique of Spinoza: "The Mechanistic Way of Thinking"

If the "the denial of formal freedom is not necessarily connected with pantheism,"⁴⁴ then what is the true source of the alleged conflict between freedom and system? According to Schelling, the problem actually arises as a result of a particular

⁴³ Ibid., 18-19 (7: 347). Translation modified.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19 (7: 347).

mode of thought, which he refers to as “the mechanistic way of thinking.”⁴⁵ Essentially, Schelling is referring to the attempt to include everything within a theoretical or objective account of reality. It is the tendency to explain reality as if we could step outside of it and treat it as a thing. According to Schelling, this tendency, which he refers to as realism or materialism, and not pantheism is the problem with Spinoza’s thought. As Schelling writes, the source of fatalism in Spinoza’s “system lies by no means in his placing things *in God* but in the fact that they are *things*—in the abstract concept of beings in the world, indeed of infinite substance itself, which for him is exactly also a thing.”⁴⁶ Schelling argues that Spinoza created a “one-sidedly realist system,”⁴⁷ and that “his arguments against freedom are entirely deterministic, [and] in no way pantheistic.”⁴⁸ There is no spirit or life in Spinoza’s system because he reduces everything to a reified matrix of cause and effect. The discussions of the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason mentioned above are meant to counter this view. This is also the purpose behind Schelling’s turn to the model of procreation as a means for explaining how things are created by God, but not mechanistically determined by Him. In Schelling’s language, we are “consequences” of God, but not “effects” of his causality. He is our “ground,” but not our “cause.” Schelling’s point is that we must account for the living reality of our existence, and this requires that we recognize that our creation does not determine us; instead, it sets us free to determine ourselves.

Schelling argues that this “mechanistic way of thinking” has dominated modern

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19 (7: 348).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20 (7: 349).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21 (7: 350).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20 (7: 349).

philosophy for a long time, but that it was recognized primarily in “its (supposedly) highest expression,” Spinoza’s philosophy, which, Schelling argues, explains the claim (made by Jacobi, for example) that “all philosophy—absolutely all—that is purely rational is or becomes Spinozism!”⁴⁹ Without naming him, Schelling is almost certainly chastising Jacobi for making this misguided claim, as well as for his concomitant attempt to “frighten Germans away from the corrupting philosophy and lead them back to the heart, to inner feeling and belief.”⁵⁰ Schelling has always admitted the difficulties that accompany the attempt to offer a systematic account of the world, but, unlike Jacobi, he is not prepared to abandon reason. Rather, Schelling thinks that what is needed is a wholly new mode of thinking, one which recognizes that existence cannot be contained with an abstract mode of thinking that seeks to explain reality in terms of a web of cause and effect relations between static entities. Thus, Schelling rejects Jacobi’s critique of Spinoza, but Schelling’s own critique serves as a basis for his search for a new kind of philosophy.

The Contribution of Idealism

According to Schelling, Idealism provided such a new way of thinking by introducing the will or freedom as the first principle of philosophy. In so doing, Idealism offered a “purely rational” philosophy that did not fall into the trap of attempting to account for everything in mechanistic or objective terms.⁵¹ He appears to include his

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19 (7: 348).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Idealism places freedom at the center of philosophy, yet it remains rational. This should counter the belief that Schelling turns to voluntarism.

own early *Naturphilosophie* in this category, since it was guided by the principle of Idealism, and, briefly referring to his own early writings,⁵² Schelling notes that he had already identified the “mechanistic way of thinking” as the problem with Spinoza’s system long ago.⁵³ He recounts that his own efforts were already directed at solving this problem by developing “a mutual saturation of realism and idealism.” As many commentators have noted, this meant for Schelling somehow melding the philosophies of Fichte and Spinoza into one.⁵⁴ This was in fact already suggested in *Of the I*, where Schelling announced that he hoped to create “a counterpart to Spinoza’s ethics” on the basis of Idealism.⁵⁵ Now, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling argues that “Spinoza’s basic concept, when infused by spirit (and, in one essential point, changed) by the principle of idealism” formed the basis of his own *Naturphilosophie*, in which he had argued against a mechanistic concept of nature such as Newton’s and in favor of an organic model. The *Naturphilosophie*, in turn, could only offer a complete system of philosophy once it was coupled with the ideal part of the system, which would then reveal that “In the final and highest judgment, there is no other Being than will. Will is primal Being to which alone all predicates of Being apply: groundlessness, eternality, Independence from time, self-affirmation. All of philosophy strives only to find this highest expression.”⁵⁶

Much has been made of these remarks in the literature on Schelling’s *Freiheitsschrift*. Heidegger, for instance, claims that this is the insight that makes the *Freiheitsschrift* “the treatise which shatters Hegel’s *Logic before* it was even

⁵² Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 21 (7: 350).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*; White, *Schelling*.

⁵⁵ This is how White, *Schelling*, interprets Schelling’s project.

⁵⁶ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 21 (7: 350).

published!”⁵⁷ Dale Snow claims that “this is a radical departure for the former student of Kant.”⁵⁸ The most recent translators of the *Freiheitsschrift* refer to Schelling’s claim as an “extremely radical and enigmatic statement.”⁵⁹ Yet, after these words, Schelling immediately remarks that “philosophy has been raised up to this point by idealism.”⁶⁰ In other words, this point of view is already to be found in the early work of Fichte and Schelling, and the analysis in chapter two confirms this. As was noted, for instance, Schelling writes in the *Treatises* that “the spirit exists only because it *wills*, and it knows itself only by *determining itself*. We cannot move beyond this activity, and thus it is the legitimate *principle* of our philosophy. The spirit is a *primordial* will.”⁶¹ The Absolute as spirit is the free or autonomous first principle of philosophy, and, as such, it served as the basis for the philosophy of idealism. Thus, contrary to what many scholars have claimed, the novelty of the *Freiheitsschrift* is not to be found in the fact that the will is placed at the center of reality. This is a move that goes back to Fichte’s and Schelling’s early works, if not Kant’s critical philosophy.

It should also be noted that these remarks do not signal Schelling’s turn to a philosophy of the irrational or his embracing of a voluntarism without reason as some scholars have suggested. Such a reading is anathema to the spirit of Schelling’s philosophy, which is characterized from its beginning to its end by the search for unity, order, and intelligibility in reality. Even when Schelling admits that thought cannot

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, 97.

⁵⁸ Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 152, although she goes on to write that “the ground had been prepared for it years ago in the philosophy of nature.”

⁵⁹ See their note in Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 143, n. 24.

⁶⁰ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 21 (7: 350-1).

⁶¹ Schelling, “Treatises,” 98 (1: 395). Buchheim references the “Treatises” in his notes, but he does not point to this passage in particular; see F.W.J. Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, ed. Thomas Buchheim (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1997), 105.

penetrate into the depths of being, he never abandons the attempt to systematically understand all of reality as the goal of philosophy. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling makes clear that his position is that the living reality of existence cannot be contained by logical or abstract thought, but this does not mean that our existence is unintelligible or arbitrary, or that there is not an overarching order within which we exist. Rather, Schelling understands that his task is to explain phenomena in an intelligible fashion without reducing them to a deterministic account. It is true that Schelling speaks of that which lacks understanding (*verstandlos*) (and later he will speak of the “unprethinkable,” (*unvordenklich*) i.e., that which cannot be thought before it exists), but such statements must not be confused as representing some kind of anti-rationalism on Schelling’s part.

Idealism places freedom at the center of philosophy. In Schelling’s early essays he even goes so far as to suggest the consequences that this has for a purely rational (i.e., theoretical) philosophy. But idealism does not go far enough and it remains devoted to the task of developing a systematic account of the whole of reality. It becomes difficult to sort out what is already present in Schelling’s early essays and what is different. But this difficulty itself testifies to the continuity in Schelling’s thought. From the beginning, Schelling was concerned to elaborate an understanding of a reality that transcends the understanding. The main difference in the *Freiheitsschrift* seems to be Schelling’s recognition of the need to turn to the moral life as the deepest source of insight into reality that is afforded to us. This is indicated by the fact that Schelling turns to the basis of all morality, freedom, and finds there the inadequacies of idealism that he seeks to overcome in his late philosophy.

Schelling's Critique of Idealism: The Problem of Evil

Schelling's critique of Idealism is not an attempt to reverse its contribution to the history of modern philosophy. Rather, it is an effort to build on its accomplishments by going beyond it in those respects in which it is inadequate. In the latter regard, Schelling focuses in particular on the idealist account of freedom. He argues that, although Idealism is responsible for placing freedom or the will at the center of philosophy, it nevertheless remains inadequate as a philosophical system because its account of freedom is incomplete: "idealism itself, no matter how high it has taken us in this respect, and as certain as it is that we have it to thank for the first complete concept of formal freedom, is yet nothing less than a completed system for itself, and it leaves us no guidance in the doctrine of freedom as soon as we wish to enter into what is more exact and decisive."⁶² Schelling argues that, in a completed idealist system, it is not enough to claim that "'activity, life and freedom alone are the truly real' with which even Fichte's subjective idealism (which misunderstands itself) can coexist. Rather, it is required that the reverse also be shown, that everything real (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground or, in Fichte's expression, that not only is I-hood all, but also the reverse, that all is I-hood."⁶³ Schelling explains that this is in fact the implication of Kant's account of freedom. "It will always remain odd" he writes,

that Kant, after having first distinguished things-in-themselves from appearances only negatively through their independence from time and later treating independence from time and freedom as correlate concepts in the metaphysical discussions of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, did not go further toward the

⁶² Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 22 (7: 351).

⁶³ Ibid. Translation modified.

thought of transferring this only possible positive concept of the in-itself also to things; thereby he would immediately have raised himself to a higher standpoint of reflection and above the negativity that is the character of his theoretical philosophy.⁶⁴

For Schelling, freedom designates the whole of reality insofar as it is not contained within the theoretical perspective. If Kant had recognized that freedom was the character of everything not contained in the theoretical perspective, then he would have realized that the logical conclusion of his position is that everything is in some sense free. This is problematic, however, because it leaves open the question of how human freedom is different from the general freedom in which all things partake.

The problem with Idealism, then, is that it offers, “on the one hand, only the most general concept of freedom and, on the other hand, a merely formal one.”⁶⁵ If freedom as it is understood in Idealism applies as a general characteristic to all of reality insofar as it transcends the theoretical perspective, then Idealism only provides a general concept of freedom. Thus, Schelling argues, it cannot offer an account of what is specific to human freedom: “Mere idealism does not reach far enough, therefore, in order to show the specific difference, that is, precisely what is the distinctiveness of human freedom.”⁶⁶ Most importantly, Idealism cannot account for the fact that human freedom is moral freedom, but this is necessary because “the real and vital concept is that freedom is the capacity for good and evil.”⁶⁷ As will become evident, it is this claim (and not the claim regarding the primordially of will) that indicates a decisive change in Schelling’s thought. Schelling is unsatisfied with the account of morality and freedom that idealism

⁶⁴ Ibid., 22 (7: 351-2).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 23 (7: 352).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 22 (7: 352).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 23 (7: 352).

offers because it does not explain how human beings can freely choose evil in a morally culpable way. If freedom and rationality are synonymous as they appear to be in Kant's concept of autonomy, then how could one freely choose the irrational? As Michelle Kosch has argued,⁶⁸ this issue is a crucial factor in Schelling's break with the German Idealist project as he seemed to understand it in his early works, and it will receive more detailed attention in the next chapter. For now, a brief overview will suffice to show how the problem of evil contributes to Schelling's shift in philosophical direction.

The problem of evil holds such a prominent role in the *Freiheitsschrift* because it is a fundamental aspect of the human moral condition that idealism fails to explain. This does mean that the question of evil went completely unaddressed in Schelling's early works, however. As was discussed in chapter two, in the *Treatises*, Schelling deals with the question of evil, although he argues that our capacity to choose evil exists only on the level of appearances. He bases his claim on Kant's distinction between *Wille* (the rational will) and *Willkür* (choice or spontaneity), arguing that freedom of the will appears as choice or spontaneity only within consciousness, but that in the absolute I, by contrast, the will and reason are one, and, therefore, "the will is inherently neither free nor unfree, hence neither good nor evil."⁶⁹ Schelling's treatment of evil in the *Treatises* does not demonstrate a serious engagement with the issue, however. In fact, his position is essentially a reaffirmation of Kant's position in the *Metaphysics of Morals*,⁷⁰ and Schelling offers little evidence of his having considered the significant problems that Kant's reflections on evil in the *Religion* book pose for the view of evil that he offers in

⁶⁸ Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*.

⁶⁹ Schelling, "Treatises," 126 (1: X).

⁷⁰ As Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 92, n. also notes.

his ethical works.⁷¹

In the *Freiheitsschrift*, however, Schelling rejects the view found in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* because it does not offer an account of evil that is morally or intellectually satisfying. Schelling does not explicitly say why he has changed his mind, but it is clear that he is now prepared to take evil more seriously than he has in the past. Whereas in the *Treatises*, he dismissed it as appearance, now he thinks that any such dismissal amounts to a denial of human freedom. Since idealism could not offer an intellectually acceptable account of evil, Schelling turns to the moral life as we actually experience it and attempts to develop a philosophy that would account for that experience.

The problem of evil does not assume such a prominent role in the *Freiheitsschrift* merely on moral grounds, however. The problem of evil is much more than an isolated topic in philosophical ethics for Schelling. It is a central concern because it represents the greatest challenge to the possibility of developing a systematic philosophy. In the face of our experience of the reality of evil in the world (and in ourselves), we are forced to ask ourselves: How is evil possible if the world is an ordered and systematic whole? Schelling contends that evil "is the point of most profound difficulty in the entire doctrine of freedom" and that it challenges all philosophical systems, not just Idealism. Yet, it is especially problematic for "the concept of immanence; for either real evil is admitted and, hence, it is inevitable that evil be posited within infinite substance or the primal will itself, whereby the concept of a most perfect being is utterly destroyed, or the reality of

⁷¹ Schelling more or less maintains this position in other texts as well, including the *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

evil must in some way be denied, whereby, however, at the same time the real concept of freedom vanishes.”⁷² In either case, Schelling argues, the explanation does not satisfactorily explain our moral experience. In solutions of the former type, “God appears undeniably to share responsibility for evil.”⁷³ No matter how far things are placed from God, if evil is admitted, God appears to share in it at least insofar as he continues to hold things in being. The alternative is to deny the reality of evil, and this, according to Schelling is the path that was taken by Kant and the Idealism that he and Fichte expounded in their early years. But now Schelling argues that this result, like the alternative of making God responsible for evil, is not true to our moral and intellectual experience, and he needs to come up with a new way of thinking that will allow him to account for that.

Schelling’s Solution: Ground and Existence

Reflection on the problem of evil suggests that evil must stem from a source other than God, since, as Schelling writes, “it is not comprehensible how a capacity for evil can result from God who is regarded as pure goodness. ...if freedom is a capacity for evil, then it must have a root independent of God.”⁷⁴ But this suggests a dualism designed around “two absolutely different and mutually independent principles,” which, according to Schelling, is not a legitimate option, since it undermines the ultimate rationality (and goodness) of creation. Such a system would be “a system of the self-destruction and

⁷² Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 23 (7: 353).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 24 (7: 354).

despair of reason.”⁷⁵ Schelling thus maintains in a sense the position he already held in *On the Possibility*: all of reality must be united at some point in a single principle. The problem now, however, is to account for the evident irrationality of the presence of evil in the world, since idealism proved unable to offer an acceptable solution to this problem.

Schelling argues that idealism’s inability to solve this problem is due to a common deficiency that it shares with other modern philosophical systems. He claims the general problem with all previous attempts to explain evil is that they remain entirely conceptual or abstract, and, therefore, they do not take into account the living reality of existence. The source of their difficulties is that by attempting to conceptualize human freedom they are attempting to reduce our existence to thought, but this is impossible because existence is always more than what can be thought. Even though idealism sought to make freedom the center of all reality, it did not fully grasp the implications of this move for philosophy. Any attempt to capture our existence in thought must fail because reality is always more than that which has been caught. Instead of recognizing this inherent deficiency, however, previous philosophers tried to overcome it. Thus, they tried to separate God from the reality of evil by explaining him as the “*actus purissimus* [purest actuality]” or, in Fichte’s thought, as a “moral world order,”⁷⁶ but Schelling thinks that neither is adequate as an explanation of evil. They fail to explain the ultimate origin of evil and they fail to attend to the living reality of the God who is the source of all existence.

Thus, Schelling argues that neither Spinozism nor idealism has been able to solve

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 26 (7: 356).

the problem of evil,⁷⁷ since they both suffer from the problem of abstraction. Whether modern philosophers begin from substance or will, the inadequacies of their systems derive from the same source, which is the abstraction from nature as a living reality: “The entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes) has the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground.”⁷⁸ Only a philosophy that unites idealism and realism, mind and nature can account for the living reality of existence, and only a philosophy that can account for a diversity within the unity of existence can account for the living movement at the heart of all that exists. “Idealism is the soul of philosophy; realism is the body; only both together can constitute a living whole. The latter can never provide the principle but must be the ground and medium in which the former makes itself real and takes on flesh and blood.”⁷⁹ Schelling thus calls for an idealist-realist philosophy that can do justice to the living reality of existence. Philosophy must account for the fact that the ideal is grounded in a reality that it does not contain.

Schelling’s critical stance toward the mistreatment of nature in modern philosophy is of course not introduced for the first time in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Schelling’s discontent with the status (or non-status) of nature in modern philosophy led to the development of his *Naturphilosophie*, of which traces are already evident in the *Treatises*. Schelling’s development of a *Naturphilosophie* was a conscious break with Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* because of the latter’s inability to account for the reality of

⁷⁷ As Schelling writes, “...it just does not seem appropriate to throw the entire burden of this difficulty on a single system, especially since the supposedly higher one opposed to it affords so little satisfaction.” Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 26 (7: 356).

nature.⁸⁰ Yet, the *Naturphilosophie* remains an essentially idealist system, since it still expects to account for all of reality in terms of a rational blueprint. What is new in the *Freiheitsschrift*, then, is that Schelling now recognizes that developing an ideal-real philosophy means taking into account the fact that all of reality cannot be reduced to thought. Still, he argues that the *Naturphilosophie* offers the only path beyond the deficiencies of modern philosophy, including idealism: “the point of view which is fully adequate to the task to be undertaken here can only be developed from the fundamental principles of a true *Naturphilosophie*.”⁸¹

In particular, Schelling argues that philosophy must be grounded in what he refers to as the distinction “between being [*Wesen*] in so far as it exists [*existiert*] and being [*Wesen*] in so far as it is merely the ground of existence [*Grund von Existenz*].”⁸² With this distinction Schelling means to identify a pattern of relation that inheres within every aspect of reality, including God (although, as will be discussed below, God is a special case). The basic idea is that every manifestation of existence must take place against a background of non-existence. Just as the black letters on this page can only appear against the whiteness of the page itself, so the beings that exist can only become manifest against the background of that which they are not. Schelling uses the contrast of “gravity” and “light” to explain the relationship: “Gravity precedes light as its ever dark ground, which itself is not *actu*, and flees into the night as the light (that which exists)

⁸⁰ For Fichte, nature is nothing other than the not-I that the self posits as a realm in which it can realize itself a moral being.

⁸¹ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 26-27 (7: 357). Modified.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 27 (7: 357).

dawns.”⁸³ Gravity, or the contractive force of pervasive darkness gives way to the expansive force of the light as creation becomes manifest. Thus, everything in creation ultimately rests on a dark ground of existence that it transcends. This dark ground is for Schelling the necessary basis for existence that remain impenetrable to thought.

Schelling argues that this distinction between ground and existence must be found even within God, since even God must exist as God on the basis of that which is not God. God presents a special case, however, insofar as he cannot be grounded in something outside of himself: “Since nothing is prior to, or outside of God, he must have the ground of his existence in himself.”⁸⁴ According to Schelling, the claim that God grounds his own existence is nothing new, although previous accounts are inadequate because they “speak of this ground as of a mere concept without making it into something real [*reell*] and actual [*wirklich*].”⁸⁵ Schelling, on the other hand, thinks of the ground as the brute fact of reality that is the basis for God’s existence. It is not God himself, but it is in him: “It is nature—in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him.”⁸⁶ Schelling further explains that “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.”⁸⁷ The ground is the real basis for the existence of God, but, at the same time, it is only possible for it to be as ground in relation to God as existence. Thus, Schelling stresses that the ground of God and his existence are coeval: “Here there is no

⁸³ Ibid., 27 (7: 358).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 27 (7: 357).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27 (7: 358).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

first and last because all things mutually presuppose each other.”⁸⁸ In other words, Schelling imagines that even God is constituted by a living, dialectical relationship insofar as he is the unity of the opposition between ground and existence.⁸⁹

Having explained the relation of ground and existence in God, Schelling turns to explain it in relation to the world of things. Noting that he rejects the “concept of immanence” understood as “a dead containment of things in God,” Schelling argues that “the concept of becoming is the only one appropriate to the nature of things.”⁹⁰ The problem is that things “cannot become in God...since they are different from him *toto genere* or infinitely,” yet, at the same time, “nothing...can be outside God.” How can things both be distinct and contained within God? Schelling argues that “this contradiction can only be resolved by things having their ground in that which in God himself is not *He Himself*, that is, in that which is the ground of his existence.”⁹¹ Thus, the distinction between ground and existence allows Schelling to maintain the unity of things with God, without asserting that they are identical. Moreover, by introducing a dialectical movement into the basic principle of reality, Schelling is able to explain how life and movement inhere in all that is.

In an effort to further explain the principle of the ground, Schelling suggests that

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28 (7: 358).

⁸⁹ Part of the difficulty is that Schelling uses the term “God” in two senses here: on the one hand, He is the totality of which ground and existence are manifestations; on the other, He is the existence that manifests itself on the basis of the ground. Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 98. In other words, before there is a world, God is simply a totality corresponding to the Absolute of the Identity philosophy, but, subsequent to creation, God is revealed as existing beyond the world (i.e., nature or the ground). Creation provides the space for God’s self-revelation, or, in less theological terms, opens a space in which meaning can occur. Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*; and Högrefe, *Prädikation und Genesis: Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings ‘Die Weltalter’* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) are especially good on this point.

⁹⁰ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 28 (7: 358-9).

⁹¹ Ibid., 28 (7: 359).

“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.”⁹² To help explain this, Schelling tries to explain how human beings experience the ground. It is will, the sense of anarchy, the sense of nothingness: “only from the obscurity of that which is without understanding (from feeling, yearning, the sovereign mother of knowledge) grow luminous thoughts.”⁹³ “Because the original understanding raises the soul up as something inner out of a ground that is independent of it, the soul thereby remains independent of the original understanding as a particular and self-sufficient being.”⁹⁴

Essentially, Schelling is attempting to show that all of being is characterized by an opposition between the real and the ideal, between being and thought. But this opposition is contained within the unity of being. Schelling thus asserts a duality within unity as the principle of his system: “This is the only correct dualism, namely that which at the same time permits a unity.”⁹⁵ Thinking and being are distinct yet unified, and, as such, being can never be contained within thought. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, this living basis of reality that can never be resolved into a purely abstract and logical account is symbolized as the ground. Thus, Schelling’s distinction between ground and existence allows him to maintain the unity of being, while also recognizing the interplay between mind and nature that cannot be contained in thought. The next chapter will address how Schelling employs the ground-existence distinction to develop new concepts of freedom,

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 29 (7: 360).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31 (7: 362).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 30, note (7: 361).

evil, and system in the *Freiheitsschrift*. The remainder of this chapter will offer an overview of Schelling's new philosophical stance.

The Primacy of Existence

As his critique of idealism suggests, Schelling's new philosophical perspective in the *Freiheitsschrift* is marked by a moral or existential turn. For Schelling, the problem with idealist systems is that they do not adequately explain the moral condition of human existence, since they exclude fundamental aspects of reality in the effort to offer a systematic conception of it. For this reason, Schelling rejects the philosophical approach of idealism in the *Freiheitsschrift*, instead subjugating the systematic ambitions of philosophy to the reality of existence. For the Schelling of the *Freiheitsschrift*, philosophy becomes an existential meditation—a reflection from within—on a reality that cannot be fully contained within a theoretical perspective, and this meditation is above all a moral one.⁹⁶ This is because Schelling comes to think that reflection on the moral life offers the most illuminating view of the reality in which we exist. It is in this sense that the shift in Schelling's mode of thought marked by the *Freiheitsschrift* is a development of the core insight contained in Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason: for Schelling, our moral existence affords us deeper knowledge of reality than what can be achieved in thought.

To some extent, this development is an outgrowth of Schelling's recognition of

⁹⁶ Kosch recognizes the moral turn, although she denies that it is a development of Kant's claim for the primacy of the practical. Bowie, on the other hand, while offering a first-rate treatment of Schelling's thought in terms of epistemology and metaphysics, all but ignores the moral dimension of Schelling's thought.

the primacy of the practical in his early writings, but it is only with the *Freiheitsschrift* that the ultimate theoretical incomprehensibility of reality becomes a starting point for Schelling rather than a caveat. In Schelling's early works, the overwhelming tendency is still to offer a systematic philosophy, and it is not always clear that Schelling recognizes the implications for that project of beginning from an Absolute that cannot be contained in reflective consciousness. If Schelling's goal is to develop an autonomous and systematic philosophy, he gives the game away by beginning from a principle that can only be known intuitively, for this is effectively to admit that philosophy must begin from a point that it itself does not prescribe. Schelling's endorsement of the project of German Idealism is thus in conflict with his own insights into the nature of our knowledge of reality. Ultimately, philosophy is contained by a reality that it cannot fully penetrate, and, therefore, it is impossible to unfold an autonomous system in thought. Although Schelling recognized this in his early works, he did so only inchoately. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, on the other hand, Schelling finally turns his attention to the consequences of this fundamental insight.

As Schelling's distinction between ground and existence indicates, this primarily means that he now embraces the fact that the world cannot be reduced to reason. There is always the dark ground of existence that can never be resolved into thought:

After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. 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.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 29 (7: 359-60).

Everything that exists has as its foundation a dark ground that can never be fully brought into the light of understanding. This is the great insight behind the shift in Schelling's mode of thought in the *Freiheitsschrift*. There is more to the world than reason alone, and philosophy must find away to account for this without attempting to reduce everything to reason.

There is more than an epistemological or metaphysical point here for Schelling, however. There is also a moral one. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, Schelling holds that the moral condition of human beings is defined by the tension between the principles of ground and existence that constitute our existence. Schelling also speaks of the principle of the ground as self-will and the principle of existence as a will to the universal, and he defines evil as the elevation of the former over the latter when it should be the reverse. For Schelling, it is the fact that our moral existence is structured by the same dynamic that runs through all of reality that allows us to understand the structure of reality and our place within it. It is through our freedom—as constituted by the tension between self and the universal—that we know reality on a level that can never be fully explained in theory. In this sense, for Schelling, Kant's primacy of practical reason becomes the primacy of existence because it is no longer simply practical reason, but our very existence within freedom that offers the deepest insight into reality. Thus, Schelling's insight into the primacy of existence manifests itself in a variety of ways: in the claim that being is before thinking; in the moral turn that his thinking takes in the *Freiheitsschrift*; and in how attention to the realm of experience replaces the priority of systematization. Contained in all of these formulations is the

recognition that there is more to the world than reason alone, and that we come to know the world not just through reason but through the fact that our existence reveals to us more about the order of reality than we could ever grasp in thought.

But how does Schelling know this? What is the epistemological principle that allows him to make such claims? At some point, every reader of Schelling will ask how Schelling can know that his claims are true. In one sense, such questions must be asked, but, in another, they miss the meaning of Schelling's philosophical shift. This is because Schelling's whole point is that one could not offer the kind of answer that such a question seems to demand. For Schelling, there can be no theoretical proof that the ground-existence distinction exists and that it pervades all of reality. All he can do is lead his readers into the existential perspective that he adopts in the *Freiheitsschrift* and allow them to judge for themselves. We can only know the truth of existence from within the perspective of existence itself. It is only from within this perspective that we can test Schelling's claims.

This does not mean that Schelling gives no indication of his epistemological perspective, however. Schelling appeals to the "ancient doctrine that like is known to like," by which is meant that "the philosopher claims such a (divine) understanding because, holding his understanding clear and undimmed by malice, he alone grasps the god outside through the god in himself."⁹⁸ Schelling's words are a paraphrase of Sextus Empiricus, but their meaning can be tied to Schelling's own earlier claims for intellectual intuition. As was argued in chapter two, the basic meaning of intellectual intuition for Schelling is that we "know" the Absolute because we exist within it, but this is not a

⁹⁸ Ibid., 10 (7: 337).

knowledge that be explicated in reflective consciousness. This remains the essential basis for Schelling's claims in the *Freiheitsschrift*. It is our existence within the structure of reality that enables us to understand it insofar as we are able. As he will claim in the *Ages of the World*, human existence is a microcosm of the broader existence in which it takes place, and by virtue of this fact, we are able to understand the meaning of that existence from within.⁹⁹

Put differently, the principle of our access to the order of reality is our freedom. It is our status as free moral beings that reveals the structure of existence to us because our freedom is a participation in the freedom of God that constitutes the whole. Indeed, it is the tension between our freedom and the understanding that leads to philosophy in the first place, according to Schelling: "without the contradiction of necessity and freedom not only philosophy but each higher willing of the spirit would sink into the death that is proper to those science in which this contradiction has no application."¹⁰⁰ In other words, it is the struggle to understand what it means to be free (and how it is possible that we are free) that drives our desire to know. We sense that we participate in a reality that is greater than what can be contained in consciousness, and philosophy is thus the attempt to bring that greater reality into focus.

Thus, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, as has been suggested above, Schelling starts from the perspective of our moral existence. This is the basis of his whole modification of the Kantian-Idealist tradition, for, to Schelling's mind, idealism excludes essential aspects of reality in the effort to offer a systematic account of that reality. The most egregious

⁹⁹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 3 (207).

¹⁰⁰ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 10-11 (7: 338).

example is the reality of evil. Evil is an undeniable reality and yet Kant and the early idealist systems are unable to offer a morally and intellectually satisfactory account of it. Schelling thus abandons the attempt to develop a complete philosophy from the perspective of a first principle. Instead, he begins from existence as we actually know it and asks how reality must be structured in order to make our existence possible. By prioritizing existence over theory, Schelling loses the pretension of completeness that characterizes German Idealism, and he gains a fuller and more truthful account of the reality in which we participate.

In light of these reflections, it does not seem correct to claim, as Michelle Kosch does, that Schelling rejects Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, Schelling's late philosophy, beginning with the *Freiheitsschrift* in particular, appears to be a development of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason. As was discussed in chapter one, Kant argued that practical reason held priority over theoretical reason because its interests are paramount and because it offers insights into our existence as moral beings that cannot be confirmed by theoretical reason but which nevertheless must be held as true for practical purposes. The core meaning of this claim for the primacy of practical reason that Schelling carries forward is the recognition that we know more about reality than what we know via thought or consciousness, and that it is our moral existence that is most definite of what and who we are. But Schelling goes beyond Kant in this regard because he drops the caveat that our existential knowledge is not real knowledge. Kant always maintains a prejudice for the theoretical, and, therefore, there is something less than convincing in his account of the postulates. What is the status of a

¹⁰¹ Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 38-9.

God who we cannot know but must assume to exist? For Schelling, by contrast, our existential knowledge is real, even if it does not take on the form of a theoretical proof. In Schelling's thought, there is no longer the lingering tentativeness that comes with Kant's postulates. We cannot "prove" God's existence theoretically, but this is no problem for Schelling because he recognizes that God is beyond all proofs, which does not mean, however, that we are completely without awareness of his existence.

Thus, for Schelling, the ultimate inability of theoretical reason to contain all of being is not a defeat for philosophy, however, but rather a cause for reorientation. Schelling does not abandon the idea that a rational understanding of reality is the ultimate goal of philosophy: "we are of the opinion that a clear, rational view must be possible precisely from the highest concepts in so far as only in this way can they really be our own, accepted in ourselves and eternally grounded. Indeed, we go even further and hold, with Lessing himself, that the development of revealed truths into truths of reason is simply necessary, if the human race is to be helped thereby."¹⁰² But now Schelling recognizes that philosophy is always on the way to its goal of offering a rational account. Again, as he writes in the *Ages of the World*,

Perhaps the one is still coming who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, what will be. But this time has not yet come. We must not misjudge our time. Heralds of this time, we do not want to pick its fruit before it is ripe nor do we want to misjudge what is ours. It is still a time of struggle. The goal of this investigation

¹⁰² Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 74 (7: 412). In this light, we can examine how Schelling proceeds in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He begins by accepting the reality of freedom, although he notes that our sense of freedom does not entitle us to claim that we know precisely what it means to be free. He then accepts the reality of evil and argues that we must somehow account for evil as a possible determination of human freedom. Schelling thus begins from our moral experience. He then argues that we must attempt to understand how human freedom understood as the capacity for good and evil fits within the structure of reality as a whole. Without the latter, we cannot be sure that our understanding of what it means to be free is correct.

has still not been reached. We cannot be narrators, only explorers, weighing the pros and cons of all views until the right one has been settled, indubitably rooted forever.¹⁰³

To give a complete account of the whole remains the goal of philosophy, but now Schelling recognizes that this *telos* might lie permanently in the future. Philosophy must thus become an illumination of reality from within the perspective of the struggle that constitutes our existence.

Conclusion

Schelling opens the *Freiheitsschrift* with a discussion of the tension between system and freedom. The German Idealists were committed to developing a systematic philosophy, but there was a contrary belief (held by Jacobi and others) that system was inimical to freedom. This was the motivating factor behind the pantheism controversy to which Schelling is in part responding in the introductory portion of the *Freiheitsschrift*. As we have seen, Schelling argues that it is not pantheism but determinism that eliminates the possibility of freedom in a philosophical system, and he argues that Idealism attempted to move beyond this problem by making freedom rather than objectivity the starting point for philosophy. In so doing, however, idealism also abstracted from the true nature of reality and left itself unable to account for the moral condition of human existence in its fullness, which includes within human freedom the possibility of evil.

The next chapter presents an analysis of Schelling's account of the human moral condition in the *Freiheitsschrift*, while this chapter has paved the way for that discussion

¹⁰³ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, xl (206).

with an analysis of the new philosophical perspective that Schelling brings to bear on the problem of human freedom and its relation to the whole. For the Schelling of the *Freiheitsschrift*, completing a systematic account of reality remains the ultimate goal of philosophy, but now that goal is recognized as endlessly elusive for human reason. The world is not reducible to reason and therefore it cannot be contained within it. Embracing this insight, Schelling turns to a meditation on the human moral condition as the most illuminating perspective on the nature of reality as a whole. He is able to do this because he recognizes that our existence itself reveals the structure of reality to us in a way that cannot be contained in thought. By virtue of our existential participation in reality, we are able to make sense of what manifests itself to us in consciousness. But this has an inextricable moral component, since it is the moral that unveils the nature and meaning of reality with a depth that cannot be proven or explained theoretically.

Chapter IV

Freedom, Evil, and the Autonomy in Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*

Those who defend freedom are ordinarily concerned only with demonstrating man's independence from nature, which is indeed an easy matter. However, they fail to consider man's inner independence from God and his freedom, relative to God, which is most difficult to demonstrate.¹

Introduction

Chapter three described Schelling's turn to a new philosophical approach in the *Freiheitsschrift*. This chapter discusses the system of freedom that Schelling begins to develop in the essay, focusing in particular on the implications of Schelling's arguments for Kant's ethics of autonomy. The majority of the discussion is divided into two separate but related topics: Schelling's account of human freedom as the capacity for good and evil (along with his critique of Kant's concept of autonomy and his analysis of the problem of freedom of the will), and his account of the historical and metaphysical context in which human beings exercise their freedom. It is appropriate to address these topics together for two reasons: first, one of Schelling's main points in the *Freiheitsschrift* is that human freedom can only be understood within the context of the whole of which it is a part; second, as discussed in the last chapter, Schelling's moral turn becomes the basis for his account of the whole in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and, therefore, the

¹ Schelling, "Stuttgart Seminars," in F.W. J. Schelling, *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 225 (7: 458). All references to Schelling's works in parentheses are to F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-1861).

first part of this chapter (the discussion of Schelling's account of human freedom) feeds into the second part (the discussion of the metaphysics that he develops on that basis). After developing these two lines of discussion, the chapter evaluates the status of the concept of autonomy in Schelling's thought as it is presented in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Finally, it analyzes Schelling's concluding discussion of how his new position in the *Freiheitsschrift* relates to his previous attempts to develop a systematic philosophy, especially in his *Identitätsphilosophie*.

The first part of the chapter focuses in particular on the consequences of Schelling's attention to the possibility and reality of evil for Kant's ethics of autonomy. As Michelle Kosch has argued, Schelling comes to admit that the reality of evil as something for which human beings are morally culpable is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the claim that human beings are free insofar as they are rationally self-determining. This is because autonomy understood as rational self-determination equates freedom with rationality and vice versa. Thus, according to Kant's ethics, we are free only when we act rationally and we are rational only when act freely. This seems to leave no room for evil as a meaningful moral category, however, since it is not clear how, on such terms, a free agent could act irrationally (i.e., evilly) in a morally culpable way: under Kant's theory, to act irrationally is to forgo one's freedom. In response to this problem, Schelling argues that our freedom is not attached to our rationality only, but to our personality, which is constituted by the tension between self-will and reason. This way, Schelling can account for the possibility and reality of evil in moral and spiritual terms, since each human being must freely decide whether or not he will place himself in the service of reason rather than vice versa. In this sense, Schelling argues, human

freedom must be understood as the capacity for good and evil.

The second half of the chapter then turns to Schelling's accounts of history and the order of existence as they appear from within the perspective of the moral condition that will have just been outlined. Schelling briefly sketches an outline of a philosophy of history (one that he would develop in much more detail in his lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation) in an effort to indicate how human freedom as the capacity for good and evil fits within the broader context of the reality of which it is a part.

Schelling understands history as the story of the relationship between God and human beings, as God progressively reveals himself to human beings, and they in turn respond by seeking greater union with God or turning away from him, which a choice that corresponds to the choice between good and evil. Having briefly outlined his view of history, Schelling then turns to the question of the coherence of reality, only now it is the question of its moral (rather than its theoretical) coherence. In other words, the question of system is now pursued from within the perspective of our moral existence and Schelling seeks to explain how God's creation of the world is justified and why God decided to create the world knowing that evil would arise within it. Ultimately, Schelling argues, the answer is that God freely chose to create the world out of love and that he created the only kind of world that would allow that love to become manifest.

Finally, in the wake of his existential reflection on freedom, Schelling turns in the concluding section of the *Freiheitsschrift* to a discussion of how his new position relates to his previous *Identitätsphilosophie* and how he envisions philosophy going forward. His remarks indicate the degree to which Schelling still hopes to develop a rational and systematic understanding of reality. Despite all of his argument against this possibility in

the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling still maintains that the goal of philosophy must be a rational account of the whole. As he emphasizes in later works, however, the completion of that account lies always in the future from the human perspective. Thus, it is argued that our struggle toward that goal yields fruits other than the completion of the system. In order to discover these fruits, we must turn to the existential perspective in which we exist.

As will become clear, Schelling's arguments in the *Freiheitsschrift* indicate that human beings are not descriptively autonomous, but Schelling's reflection on human freedom and the nature of the whole indicate that he does not completely reject Kant's concept of autonomy either.¹ Instead, even as he calls into question the idea that to be free is to be rationally self-determining, Schelling more precisely identifies the essential meaning at the core of Kant's concept of autonomy. For the Schelling of the *Freiheitsschrift*, the world is still ultimately constituted by autonomy because it is freely created by God who is autonomous. In contrast to God, however, human beings are only imperfectly autonomous. Our freedom is not perfectly tied to reason, and thus we are not descriptively autonomous, yet we live within the possibility of becoming so. Moreover, Schelling also maintains that, although the moral condition of our existence is constituted by forces that transcend the self, we nevertheless know the moral law from within ourselves because we are constituted by those forces. Thus, in Schelling's account, as in Kant's, morality does not stand over us as an external force because the structure of our own existence reveals the moral law to us. Schelling maintains that we can only

¹ Thus, I partially disagree with Michelle Kosch, who argues that autonomy and moral responsibility for evil are fundamentally incompatible and that Schelling's later thought forces him to abandon the concept of autonomy. Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). This problem will be discussed in the next section.

understand the moral condition from within because we are always already within it, and, as will be shown, this is, for Schelling, the true insight contained in Kant's concept of autonomy.

Autonomy and the Problem of Evil

As noted, Schelling's turn to the problem of evil is representative of his critique of the modern worldview. Schelling grew up in the time of the French Revolution, which he initially celebrated (along with his friends Hölderlin and Hegel) as a triumph of reason and human freedom. His was an age that believed in an all-powerful reason that would unlock the secrets of existence and lead to the reorganization of the social world on the basis of freedom and rationality. The optimism of the age did not leave room for serious consideration of evil as a perpetual force in the world. Whatever evil there was in the world would soon be undermined by the progress of the human mind. This was the worldview that Schelling learned and embraced as a young man; thus, Schelling's decision to investigate the problem of evil must have been a sobering step back for him: it amounts to nothing less than putting into question the entire self-understanding of his age.

Schelling's analysis of evil is thus a critical reaction to the philosophy of his time, which, he claims, "pushes its philanthropism [*Philanthropismus*] to the brink of denying evil."² While Schelling critiques a range of thinkers in the *Freiheitsschrift*, including Plotinus, Augustine, and Leibniz, his primary targets are Kant's moral philosophy and the idealism that develops out of it (including Schelling's own early thought). Essentially,

² Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 39 (7: 371).

Schelling's critique is that Kantianism and idealism do not take evil seriously as a spiritual reality, and that, in so doing, they deny the reality of evil—whether they intend to or not.³ According to Schelling, this is the logical result of trying to blame evil on the finite or natural aspect of human existence, which, as he notes, is the stance that his contemporaries tend to take: “they do not oppose heaven with hell, as is fitting, but with the earth. This notion is a natural consequence of the doctrine according to which freedom consists in the mere rule of the intelligent principle over sensual desires and tendencies, and the good comes from pure reason; accordingly, it is understandable that there is no freedom for evil (insofar as sensual tendencies predominate)—to speak more correctly, however, evil is completely abolished.”⁴ Schelling argues that this account of evil actually denies it, since there is no moral responsibility or subjective guilt, which is a necessary criterion for evil, if evil is merely the result of “weakness or ineffectualness of the principle of understanding.”⁵ Evil must be either the result of a free decision in favor of evil or moral culpability must be denied: “For why does the rational principle then not exercise its power? If it wants to be inactive, the ground of evil lies in this volition and not in sensuality. Or if it cannot overcome the resisting power of sensuality in any way, then here is merely weakness and inadequacy but nowhere evil.”⁶ Moral evil must be a wholly spiritual phenomena if it exists at all, since only under this condition can moral responsibility for evil be maintained.

As Michelle Kosch has argued, evil understood in this way presents a particular

³ As Michelle Kosch explains (and as Schelling knew), Kant attempted to deal with evil as a spiritual reality in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, but he could not incorporate his views therein into his ethical theory as a whole. Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 57-65.

⁴ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 39 (7: 371).

⁵ Ibid, 39 (7: 371).

⁶ Ibid, 39 (7: 372).

challenge for a Kantian ethics of autonomy, and, perhaps even more so, for a systematic philosophy based on an autonomous first principle of the sort advanced by Fichte and Schelling in their early careers.⁷ It is not clear how rationally self-determining beings could transgress the moral law in a way for which they could be held morally responsible.⁸ It would seem that either we are rationally self-determining or we are capable of evil, but we cannot be both. This is because, according to Kant's theory, freedom and rationality are essentially synonymous: to be free is to be rational and to be rational is to be free. As Kosch writes, however, "if one is free only in virtue of being a rationally self-determining participant in this moral world order, then it follows that the immoral individual is not free. There is no place for moral evil as an imputable failure to abide by the moral law."⁹ If moral culpability for evil is to be maintained, our freedom must somehow include the possibility of choosing evil over the good without blaming the decision on weakness of will or intellectual error. It must be possible for us to know that a particular action is evil and to do it anyway.

Kosch is almost certainly correct to point to these fundamental problems with the concept of autonomy as a motivating factor behind the transition in Schelling's thought that manifests itself in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Yet, as will be discussed in further detail below, these problems do not cause Schelling to abandon Kant's concept of autonomy altogether. The problem just outlined applies to the concept of autonomy only insofar as it is understood as a theoretical description of all human beings. As was shown in chapter

⁷ Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 2, 6, 16, 43, 65.

⁸ "The claim that the will is able freely and intentionally to choose the immoral over the moral (a claim that seems to be required if moral wrong is to be imputable) stands in tension with the identification of morality and rationality upon which Kant's argument for the objective validity of the moral laws, and hence the validity of the attribution of freedom to human agents, rests." Ibid., 16.

⁹ Ibid., 43.

one, however, for Kant, it is not the individual that is autonomous, but reason itself, and he holds that we are autonomous insofar as we follow the call of the reason that we recognize within ourselves. Thus, one of the key insights contained in Kant's concept of autonomy is that we internally recognize the moral law as binding on us because we are embedded within it by virtue of our reason. We give ourselves the law in the sense that we are able to recognize the moral law from within due to the fact that we partake of the reason that issues the law. The difference in the *Freiheitsschrift* is that Schelling replaces reason with the structure of our existence, which is constituted by the struggle between evil and the good. Schelling holds that human beings are microcosms of reality, participating in the full spectrum of existence from the nonbeing from which it is culled to the divine which brings it forth. As such, our very existence is structured by the tension of existence that opens up the possibilities of good and evil. We are embedded in the same structures of existence that constitute all of reality, and, therefore, we are able to grasp the cosmic moral struggle in which we partake by virtue of the presence of the struggle within ourselves. Moreover, as will also be discussed, Schelling maintains that autonomy understood as the unity of freedom and rectitude remains the *telos* of human existence. Before fully addressing these issues, however, we must first turn to a discussion of Schelling's understanding of the moral condition of human existence.

Human Beings as Spirit or Personality

The basis for Schelling's account of spirit (*Geist*) in the *Freiheitsschrift* (and also, therefore, for his analysis of evil) is the triad of ground, existence, and the unity of ground and existence. As in his writings on *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling imagines that

this triad repeats itself “exponentially” throughout all of being, leading to increasingly complex forms of life. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, however, Schelling does not offer an account of the unfolding of the triadic process in nature. That would be the “task of a comprehensive *Naturphilosophie*,” whereas the *Freiheitsschrift* is primarily concerned with outlining a philosophy of spirit. Schelling does note, however, that human beings represent the consummation of the process in nature, since it is only in human beings that both principles (ground and existence) are raised out of nature to the point where they become fully manifest for what they are:

If through advancing mutation and division of all forces, the deepest and most inner point of initial darkness in a being is finally transfigured wholly into the light, then the will of this same being is indeed, to the extent that it is individual, also a truly particular will, yet, in itself or as the *centrum* of all other particular wills, one with the primal will of understanding, so that now from both a single whole comes into being. This raising of the deepest *centrum* into light occurs in none of the creatures visible to us other than man. In man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light. In him there is the deepest abyss and the loftiest sky or both *centra*.¹⁰

In all of creation, it is only in human beings that the interplay between the will of the ground and the will to existence is consciously recognized in its fullness as the tension between the will to self and the will to the universal. In other words, as human beings, we are consciously aware of ourselves as being constituted by the tension between ourselves as particular individuals and our participation in a movement of existence that transcends the self. According to Schelling, it is our self-consciousness within this tension that defines us as spirit: “Because he emerges from the Ground (is creaturely), man has in relation to God a relatively independent principle in himself; but because precisely this principle—without it ceasing for that reason to be dark in accordance with

¹⁰ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 32 (7: 363).

its ground—is transfigured in light, there arises in him something higher, *spirit*.”¹¹

Schelling argues that spiritual existence is personal existence. Our personhood is a product of the combination of the two principles of ground and existence within us:

“The principle raised up from the ground of nature whereby man is separate from God is the selfhood in him which, however, through its unity with the ideal principle, becomes *spirit*. Selfhood *as* such is spirit; or man is spirit as a selfish, particular being (separated from God)—precisely this connection constitutes personality.”¹² Thus, it is by virtue of

our personality that we are free. As spiritual or personal, we are not only independent of God; we also exist on a plane of existence above the necessity that rules over nature:

“Since selfhood is spirit, however, it is at the same time raised from the creaturely into what is above the creaturely; it is will that beholds itself in complete freedom, being no longer an instrument of the productive universal will in nature, but rather above and outside of all nature.”¹³ Human beings are created in nature, but as spirit we also transcend it; we are above the law of necessity that rules over nature, and we thus freely decide what will become of us as individuals, i.e., we freely decide the relation of the two principles that constitutes our existence as spirit.

Schelling argues that as spirit we are like God. According to his argument, we represent the most divine aspect of creation: “The human will is the seed—hidden in eternal yearning—of the God who is present still in the ground only; it is the divine panorama of life, locked up within the depths, which God beheld as he fashioned the will

¹¹ Ibid., 32 (7: 363).

¹² Ibid., 33 (7: 364).

¹³ Ibid.

to nature.”¹⁴ Raised to the level of spirit, human beings participate in all the levels of being just as God contains the whole spectrum of being within himself. But it is primarily on account of our existence as spirit, as morally free individuals, that we are an image of God in the world, and this means that we participate in the life of God: “spirit, that is, God as existing *actu*, reveals itself in the proclaimed word [i.e., in man as spirit culled from nature]. Insofar as the soul is now the living identity of both principles, it is spirit; and spirit is in God.”¹⁵ Thus, insofar as we are like God, we exist within the movement of his existence.

As will be discussed below, this is the point of connection between autonomy and Schelling’s later thought: whereas for Kant, impersonal reason is the autonomous source of the moral law, for Schelling it is the person or life of God that is the autonomous source of all that is. Thus, although we are not perfectly autonomous, we live within a world constituted by God’s autonomy, and we are called to strive toward that autonomy ourselves. We do not create the moral law, but we know it from within and we are called to embrace it as our own law. It is in this sense that Schelling maintains a version of intellectual intuition in his appeal to the ancient doctrine that “the philosopher...grasps the god outside through the god in himself.”¹⁶ For Schelling, we participate in God’s autonomy because we live within it. But Schelling also realizes that our freedom is due to our personality and not only our reason, which means that, as free beings, we are capable of turning away from the universal will. As will be shown in the next section, in Schelling’s account, this is the possibility of evil.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32 (7: 363).

¹⁵ Ibid., 32 (7: 364).

¹⁶ Ibid., 10 (7: 337).

Human Freedom and the Possibility of Evil

Schelling holds that the freedom that constitutes human existence is both the source of our dignity and the basis for the possibility of our committing evil. As free personal beings, we are like God, but there is a crucial difference: we are capable of upsetting the balance of the principles that constitute our existence as spirit. In God, the principle of the ground is always subordinated to the principle of existence. He is always already completely decided in favor of the good. Human beings, by contrast, can attempt to subordinate the principle of existence to the principle of the ground: “self-will can strive to be as a particular will that which it only is through identity with the universal will.”¹⁷ Thus, what is always perfectly ordered in God can become disordered in the human soul. This capacity for rebellion against the right order of the principles is Schelling’s definition of evil, and it is our capacity for evil that distinguishes us from God: “Were now the identity of both principles in the spirit of man exactly as indissoluble as in God, then there would be no distinction, that is, God as spirit would not be revealed. The same unity that is inseverable in God must therefore be severable in man—and this is the possibility of good and evil.”¹⁸ We must decide for ourselves which path we will take, but the mere possibility of evil opens up a space for God to reveal Himself to us as the “divine relation of the principles,” in which the “spirit of love prevails” and “the will is in divine form and order.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 33 (7: 365). “For this reason there thus emerges in the will of man a separation of selfhood having become animated by spirit (since spirit is above the light) from the light, that is, a dissolution of the principles which are indissoluble in God.”

¹⁸ Ibid., 33 (7: 364).

¹⁹ Ibid., 34 (7: 365).

Thus, we see how the distinction between ground and existence sets the stage for Schelling's concept of evil in the *Freiheitsschrift*, since he argues that evil is "a positive perversion or reversal of the principles"²⁰ that constitute human nature as spirit. The proper role of the ground is to be "a carrier and, as it were, receptacle of the higher principle of light."²¹ The principle of the ground is supposed to act as the basis for the principle of existence, or, in terms of the human spirit, our individuality is supposed to act as a vehicle for the realization of the universal-will. In evil, however, our self-will is exalted above the universal-will and the attempt is made to establish our self-will as the purpose (rather than the basis) of existence: "The general possibility of evil consists...in the fact that man, instead of making his selfhood into the basis, the instrument, can strive to elevate it into the ruling and total will and, conversely, to make the spiritual within himself into a means."²² As mentioned above, this results in the severing of the principles that remain united in God. Whereas the principle of existence forever rules over the principle of the ground in God, in human beings, the principle of the ground can rend itself away from the principle of existence and attempt to stand on its own.

Thus, from the perspective of the whole of reality, evil is possible because individual parts of the whole (i.e., human beings) can attempt to become the centering principle of the whole (i.e., God). In other words, evil is not just a passivity or a negation in Schelling account, but a positive attempt to reverse the right order of the principles that constitute human nature. This does not mean, however, that Schelling thinks that evil exists on its own as an essential being. Rather, he maintains that, although it is a positive

²⁰ Ibid., 35 (7: 366).

²¹ Ibid., 33 (7: 364).

²² Ibid., 54 (7: 389).

force in existence, evil is nevertheless a nonbeing. This is in part the reason for idealism's inability to account for evil: as a purely rational system of philosophy, it could not account for the reality of evil because evil only emerges in the movement of existence. Evil cannot be identified as a part of the whole in the abstract because it does not have its own essential reality. Evil is not in the blueprints of reality. This also means that, since it is ultimately a nonbeing, evil is inherently self-defeating: "In evil there is the self-consuming and always annihilating contradiction that it strives to become creaturely just by annihilating the bond of creaturely existence and, out of overweening pride [*Übermut*] to be all things, falls into non-Being."²³ Although evil is clearly effective in the world, the end toward which it works is ultimately fruitless.

To illustrate his concept of evil, Schelling follows Franz von Baader,²⁴ who points to disease as an analogy for evil. Schelling claims that "particular disease emerges only because that which has its freedom or life only so that it may remain in the whole strives to be for itself."²⁵ The key point here is that, like disease, evil cannot exist on its own, yet it is in some sense a positive or real force in the world. Thus, on the basis of this analogy, Schelling argues that the advantage of this concept of evil is that it can account for evil as a positive force, while also maintaining that it has no essential being. "As disease is admittedly nothing having inherent being [*nichts Wesenhaftes*], really only an apparent picture of life and merely a meteoric appearance of it—an oscillation between

²³ Ibid., 55 (7: 390-1).

²⁴ This connection cannot be pursued in detail here, but Schelling's new view of evil is clearly influenced by Baader.

²⁵ Ibid., 35 (7: 366). "An individual body part, like the eye, is only possible within the whole of an organism; nonetheless, it has its own life for itself, indeed, its own kind of freedom, which it obviously proves through the disease of which it is capable." Ibid., 18 (7: 346).

Being and non-Being—yet announces itself nevertheless as something very real to feeling, so it is with evil.”²⁶

Schelling claims that his concept of evil is an advance over previous accounts because it does not undermine the power of evil by reducing it to a privation or a product of human finitude. As he writes, “All other explanations of evil leave the understanding and moral consciousness equally dissatisfied. They all rest fundamentally on the annihilation of evil as a positive opposite and on the reduction of evil to the so-called *malum metaphysicum* or the negating concept of the imperfection of creatures.”²⁷ Here Schelling has Leibniz in mind in particular, although he refers to St. Augustine as well. Contrary to Leibniz’s argument that evil is the result of necessary imperfections in creatures, Schelling argues that such a view is

in complete conflict with the actual nature of evil. For the simple reflection that only man, the most complete of all visible creatures, is capable of evil, shows already that the ground of evil could not in any way lie in lack or deprivation. The devil, according to the Christian point of view, was not the most limited creature, but rather the least limited one. Imperfection in the general metaphysical sense is not the common character of evil, since evil often shows itself united with an excellence of individual forces, which far more rarely accompanies the good. The ground of evil must lie, therefore, not only in something generally positive but rather in that which is most positive in what nature contains, as is actually the case in our view, since it lies in the revealed *centrum* or primal will of the first ground.²⁸

Schelling argues that Leibniz, on the other hand, cannot account for the “positive that nevertheless must be assumed to exist in evil” because he understands evil as a metaphysical deficiency. In other words, for Leibniz, finitude itself is the cause of evil. Schelling rejects this view, however, because it does not explain the spiritual nature of

²⁶ Ibid., 35 (7: 366).

²⁷ Ibid., 36 (7: 367).

²⁸ Ibid., 36-37 (7: 368-9).

evil: “evil does not come from finitude in itself but from finitude raised up to Being as a self.”²⁹

Drawing on the existential perceptive that he adopts in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling explains that Leibniz’s “manner of explanation arises generally from the lifeless concept of the positive according to which only privation can oppose it.”³⁰

Schelling presents his own view as the vital alternative. The true opposition to the good “arises from the relation of the whole to the individual, from unity to multiplicity, or however one wants to express it. The positive is always the whole or unity; that which opposes unity is severing of the whole, disharmony, ataxia of forces.”³¹ Thus, as suggested above, evil cannot be accounted for in an abstract explanation of reality because it only emerges in the movement of existence. “The same elements are in the severed whole that were in the cohesive whole; that which is material in both is the same (from this perspective, evil is not more limited or worse than the good), but the formal aspect of the two is totally different.”³² Schelling argues that “dogmatic philosophy” cannot understand this perspective “because it has no concept of personality, that is, of self-hood raised to spirit, but rather only the abstract concepts of finite and infinite.”³³ The positive aspect of evil can only be grasped from within the perspective of existence because it is only in the movement of existence that the reality of evil can become manifest. To those who might suggest that Schelling still relies on privation (namely, the privation of proper harmony between the two principles), Schelling responds that evil is

²⁹ Ibid., 38, n. (7: 370).

³⁰ Ibid., 38 (7: 370).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 38 (7: 370-1).

not a privation in his account because “it is not the division of forces that is in itself disharmony, but rather their false unity that can be called a division only in relation to true unity.”³⁴ Thus, “to explain this false unity requires something positive that must thus necessarily be assumed in evil but will remain inexplicable as long as no root of freedom is recognized in the independent ground of nature.”³⁵

As Kant attempted to do in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Schelling thus accounts for evil as a purely spiritual reality. The possibility of evil lies in the fact that we can decide to make ourselves into the center of existence. We are morally responsible for our disposition because it is our choice. But, as Schelling notes, his analysis so far deals only with the possibility of evil. It has established the “concept and possibility of evil,” but not its actuality, which “is in fact the main object in question.”³⁶ The question that he has yet to address is: how does evil become actual? How is it possible for us to choose evil over the good? It is one thing to determine what evil would be; it is another to account for how it ever comes to actually exist in the world. This is the question to which Schelling now turns.

The Temptation to Evil

As was discussed above, explaining evil is particularly problematic in the context of a Kantian ethics of autonomy because it is not clear how a rationally self-determining being could transgress the moral law. As the preceding has shown, Schelling believes that evil as something for which we are morally responsible must be the result of a free

³⁴ Ibid., 38 (7: 371).

³⁵ Ibid., 39 (7: 371).

³⁶ Ibid., 40 (7: 373).

(or spiritual) choice, and yet to choose evil would be irrational and, therefore, contradict autonomy understood as rational self-determination. This is the problem that Schelling must address in order to account for the reality of evil. How does evil as a purely spiritual phenomenon, i.e., as something that we can be held responsible for, come into existence? As the analysis that follows will show, Schelling ultimately cannot explain how or why one individual chooses to be good and another chooses to be evil. He can only maintain that, from the perspective of existence, it is evident that we are responsible for who are. This inability to explain the choice for evil is not a failure on Schelling's part, however, since it actually confirms our freedom: if we were able to explain why some individuals choose evil, then their choice would not be free. Moreover, Schelling's meditation unfolds the structure of the moral condition in which we live. We cannot fully understand that condition theoretically, but, as Schelling shows, we know it practically from within.

Before considering how particular individuals choose to commit evil, Schelling investigates the more fundamental question of how it is that evil emerges within the world in the first place: "what needs to be explained is not, for instance, how evil becomes actual in individuals, but rather its universal activity or how it was able to break out of creation as an unmistakably general principle everywhere locked in struggle with the good."³⁷ Evil is not a principle of being in the same way that the good is, but it is nevertheless present as a force at work in the world. How did it come to be so? According to Schelling, these questions must be answered before turning to the question of how particular individuals come to choose evil over good: only after we grasp how

³⁷ Ibid.

evil emerges in the world as an actual choice can we attempt to understand why individual human beings sometimes choose it over the good.

Schelling claims that in order for evil to ever emerge in the world, “there must be a general ground of solicitation, of temptation to evil,”³⁸ and he argues that such a temptation arises with the process of creation itself. As he writes, “there is a *general* evil which, if not exactly of the beginning, is first awoken in the original revelation of God by the reaction of the ground; a general evil which, though it never becomes real, yet continually strives toward that end.”³⁹ This general evil results from the will of the ground, which by its very nature resists the universal-will of God. “God’s will is to universalize everything, to raise everything up toward unity with the light or keep it there; the will of the ground, however, is to particularize everything or make it creaturely.”⁴⁰ Although the will of the ground inherently strives to maintain itself against the universal will, however, Schelling denies that this temptation to evil comes from an “evil fundamental being [Grundwesen].”⁴¹ Referring to the distinction between the principles of ground and existence, Schelling claims that “The preceding reflections clarify in which sense, nonetheless, one could say of the irrational principle that it resists the understanding or unity and order without supposing it to be an *evil* fundamental being on that account.”⁴² The principle of the ground is by nature the self-will in which the universal-will manifests itself. Thus, the principle of the ground “resists” the principle of the universal, but it is not therefore evil in itself, for evil is the positive reversal of the two

³⁸ Ibid., 41 (7: 374).

³⁹ Ibid., 47 (7: 380-1).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47 (7: 381).

⁴¹ Ibid., 41 (7: 374).

⁴² Ibid.

principles. “The initial fundamental being [i.e., the principle of the ground] can never be evil in itself because there is no duality of principles in it.”⁴³ Self-will in itself is not evil, for evil only emerges when self-will is elevated above its proper place in the whole.

Nevertheless, Schelling claims that the very structure of our existence creates a temptation to evil. We are created to choose the good, but we are born into a situation in which evil is already a possibility for us because the ground—our individuality—necessarily carries with it the temptation to make oneself into the center of existence. As Schelling explains, “If...evil already has been aroused in the first creation, and through the ground’s being-active-for-itself was developed finally into a general principle, then a natural propensity [*Hang*] of man to do evil seems to be explicable on that basis because the disorder of forces engaged by awakening of self-will in creatures already communicates itself to them at birth.”⁴⁴ Our very existence in a sense beckons us to evil. Our personal existence, that is, our existence as individuals, seems to be threatened by the unity of the universal will: “The connection of the general will with a particular will in man seems already in itself a contradiction, the unification of which is difficult if not impossible.”⁴⁵ As Schelling explains: “the will reacts necessarily against freedom as that which is above the creaturely and awakes in freedom the appetite for what is creaturely just as he who is seized by dizziness on a high and steep summit seems to be beckoned to plunge downward by a hidden voice; or, according to the ancient legend, the irresistible song of the sirens reverberates from the depths in order to drag the passing sailor into the

⁴³ Ibid., 42 (7: 375).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47 (7: 381).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

maelstrom.”⁴⁶ In other words, from the moment of our creation, we feel the temptation to evil; we are by our very essence caught in a moral struggle between good and evil.

Thus, there is no evil principle in itself, but our existence is so constituted that we cannot avoid the choice between good and evil. The process of existence is always in motion, and we cannot sit on the sidelines. We have no choice but to decide which side we are on. Indecision is itself a decision. If we do not choose to move beyond ourselves and pursue the universal-will, then we choose by default to make ourselves the center of existence. As Schelling writes, “Man is placed on that summit where he has in himself the source of self-movement toward good or evil in equal portions: the bond of principles in him is not a necessary but rather a free one. Man stands on the threshold [*Scheidepunkt*]; whatever he chooses, it will be his act: but he cannot remain undecided because God must necessarily reveal himself and because nothing at all can remain ambiguous in creation.”⁴⁷ But how do we choose? Why do some individuals give into the temptation to evil, while others do not?

Freedom as the Choice Between Good and Evil

Freedom as choice must be accounted for because moral responsibility depends on our ability to choose between good and evil. Schelling argues, however, that understanding freedom as choice is problematic, since, as it is commonly understood, choice appears to be either arbitrary or compelled. On the one hand, if freedom means the ability to choose between two alternatives, but without any motivating reason, then it

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

is simply reduced to arbitrariness. Schelling rejects this option because it is not consistent with a rational view of the world: “contingency is impossible; it contests reason as well as the necessary unity of the whole; and, if freedom is to be saved by nothing other than the complete contingency of actions, then it is not to be saved at all.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, if our choices are compelled by external forces, then we are subject to determinism and there is no freedom. Here Schelling is following Kant, who Schelling believes has already shown “with complete justification” that any empirical account of freedom must in fact be deterministic, for “all actions” are “determined by representations or other causes that lie in the past and that no longer remain within our power during the action itself.”⁴⁹ Is there a way to understand the formal aspect of freedom without suggesting that our choices are either arbitrary or compelled? Staying true to moral experience, Schelling holds that our freedom must somehow overcome this dilemma, so that moral responsibility is maintained.

Schelling argues that the answer is to see that an account of freedom must transcend the level of empirical choice. Freedom is precisely that which cannot be contained within the empirical world, and, therefore, it cannot be reduced to empirical choice. Thus, both of the explanations of choice just outlined are insufficient because they remain within the empirical (or theoretical) perspective. They fail to recognize that we are free because we act according to an internal law that transcends the causal matrix of the empirical world. “For both, that higher necessity remains unknown which is equidistant from contingency and from compulsion or external determination, which is,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 48-49 (7: 382). This statement offers an example of how far Schelling remains in the *Freiheitsschrift* from the sort of irrationalism that is sometimes attributed to his later thought.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49 (7: 383).

rather, an inner necessity springing from the essence of the acting individual itself.”⁵⁰

This “inner necessity,” Schelling argues, is the essence of our character that becomes manifest to us via the choices we make during the course of our finite existence. Our freedom is in our “intelligible being,” which is “an absolute unity that must always already exist fully and complete so that particular action or determination may be possible in it.”⁵¹ It is not the empirical choices we make that define who we are, but, rather, it is who we are that determines the empirical choices we make. One could say that our empirical existence is the temporal acting out of who we are in eternity, and it is this eternal character that is the source of our freedom. As Schelling puts it, “free action follows immediately from the intelligible aspect of man.”⁵² Thus, our freedom is the fact that in the empirical world we act only according to our intelligible being, and not according to the forces around us that determine the natural world. “For free is what acts only in accord with the laws of its own being and is determined by nothing else either in or outside itself.”⁵³

Schelling notes that thus far he is still following the position discovered by Kant and elaborated in the early idealism of Fichte and Schelling himself: “Idealism actually first raised the doctrine of freedom to that very region where it is alone 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.”⁵⁴ As has already been mentioned, however, Schelling realizes in the *Freiheitsschrift* that the idealist concept of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 49 (7: 384).

⁵¹ Ibid., 49 (7: 383).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 50 (7: 384).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 49 (7: 383).

freedom is incomplete because it cannot account for moral evil. At this stage, the problem manifests itself as the question of how we acquire our intelligible being. Do we choose it or is it given to us? The first option reintroduces the problems that accompany arbitrary choice: to argue that “the intelligible being should determine itself out of pure, utter indeterminacy without any reason leads back to the system of equilibrium of free will.”⁵⁵ The second option, however, compromises our moral responsibility: if we do not choose to be who we are, and who we are determines what we do, then we cannot be held responsible for our actions.

In the face of this contraction, Schelling argues that both views are true: as free beings, we are responsible for who we are, and yet we could not be any other way than as we are: “intelligible being can, as certainly as it acts as such 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.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, freedom and necessity are tied, but this does not mean that we are subject to determinism because the necessity with which we act is of a different kind than the mechanistic causality of the empirical world: “individual action results from the inner necessity of a free being and, accordingly, from necessity itself,” but this “must not be confused, as still happens, with empirical necessity based on compulsion.”⁵⁷ Our intelligible being is not governed by a lifeless law that is imposed upon us: “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

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49 (7: 384).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50 (7: 384).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

with necessity, responsibility and all freedom would be abolished.”⁵⁸ Thus, this is one sense in which Schelling maintains something of the Kantian concept of autonomy insofar as he argues that we freely determine ourselves in a positive way. The difference in the *Freiheitsschrift* is that Schelling recognizes that we do not always determine ourselves rationally, or in accordance with the universal-will, and, therefore, he must concede that we are not descriptively autonomous in the fullest sense of the term.

Although he maintains that we freely choose who we are, Schelling also holds that the freedom of each individual can only play out in one way, since our character necessarily determines our empirical actions: “Here lies the point at which necessity and freedom must be unified if they are at all capable of unification.”⁵⁹ This means that even though we must be as we are, we must also be responsible for who we are. Thus, Schelling claims that “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.”⁶⁰ The conflict that this causes in thought is evident. On the one hand, we must be eternally determined as who we are: “In order to be able to determine itself, [an intelligible being] would already have to be determined in itself, admittedly not from outside, which contradicts its nature, also not from inside through some sort of merely contingent or empirical necessity since all this (the psychological as well as the physical) is subordinate to it; but rather it would have to be its determination

⁵⁸ Ibid., 50 (7: 385).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

itself as its essence, that is, as its own nature.”⁶¹ On the other hand, we must understand ourselves as having chosen who we are: “Man is in the initial creation, as shown, an undecided being...only man himself can decide.”⁶² How this mystery is possible is beyond the range of theoretical reason, yet Schelling maintains that we know it to be true from the perspective of our existence.

Indeed, Schelling’s position only makes sense from within the existential perspective that he adopts in the *Freiheitsschrift*. There is no theoretical argument that would prove the unity of freedom and necessity in this eternal act by which each individual determines him- or herself. It is at this point that we reach the true apex of Schelling’s inquiry into the essence of human freedom. Schelling’s whole inquiry arrives at the recognition that the moral condition of human existence reveals more to us about the meaning of reality than what can be grasped theoretically. Thus, we know that there is an “undeniable necessity of all actions,” and that no one is “arbitrarily or by accident good or evil,” yet also that each man’s actions are done “in accordance with and not against his will.”⁶³ We all sense that we could not be other than who we are, and yet we know that we are responsible. Freedom and necessity coincide in us, and yet this is not a restriction of our freedom or the moral responsibility that it confers upon us. We cannot fully grasp the moral condition of our existence, and yet we know it because we live within it. As Schelling explains,

⁶¹ Ibid., 49-50 (7: 384).

⁶² Ibid., 51 (7: 385). There is an interesting parallel between Schelling reflections and the Myth of Er at the end of Plato’s *Republic*, in which Socrates suggests mythically that we are somehow responsible for choosing the lives that we lead in the finite world. Both Plato and Schelling seem to be struggling to articulate an existential reality that cannot be captured in thought and yet cannot be denied.

⁶³ Ibid., 51 (7: 386). Schelling offers Judas as an example: “That Judas became a betrayer of Christ, neither he nor any other creature could change, and nevertheless he betrayed Christ not under compulsion but willingly and with complete freedom.” Ibid.

This sort of free act [i.e., the original act by which we freely will our individual essence], which becomes necessary, admittedly cannot appear in consciousness to the degree the latter is merely self-awareness and only ideal, since it precedes consciousness just as it precedes essence, indeed, first *produces* it; but, for that reason, this is no act of which no consciousness at all remains in man since anyone, for instance, who in order to excuse a wrong action, says ‘that’s just the way I am’ is surely aware that he is like he is through his guilt, as much as he is right that it was impossible for him to act otherwise.⁶⁴

Although we are not conscious of how it is that we are responsible for our characters, we nevertheless are able to sense our responsibility. This means, of course, that ultimately Schelling’s explanation of how evil becomes actual is in the usual sense no explanation at all, for freedom as the possibility of good and evil is precisely that which cannot be explained. Yet this does not render his efforts in the *Freiheitsschrift* futile, for the philosophical pursuit of the question has illuminated the existential reality in which we live. For Schelling, the fruits of philosophy are no longer the capturing of all of reality within a system; rather, they are the meaning that emerges from within the movement of existence itself.

Thus, to think of human beings as undecided between good and evil and to debate how each individual chooses one or the other is to step outside of the existential perspective. It is to think of good and evil as if they were objects external to our existence. But our existence is within the possibilities of good and evil, and, therefore, we always partake of them in some combination. Thus, Schelling speaks of an “eternal act contemporaneous with creation that institutes the being of man itself.”⁶⁵ There is no temporal sequence by which we determine ourselves: “as man acts here so has he acted from eternity and already in the beginning of creation. His action does not *become*, just

⁶⁴ Ibid., 51-52 (7: 386).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 52 (7: 387).

as he himself does not *become* as a moral being, but rather it is eternal by nature.”⁶⁶

We are not beings with a moral nature or a will; rather, we are our moral nature and will. Human character is not a predicate or an attribute; instead it is our essence. We are by our very nature involved in the choice for good or evil; we cannot remain indifferent and each of us has made his or her choice. Thus questions as to why one person seems destined for blessedness and another for damnation need no longer be entertained: “For the question presupposes that man is not initially action and act and that he as a spiritual being has a Being which is prior to, and independent of, his will, which, as has been shown, is impossible.”⁶⁷ As human beings, we are our will: we are what we have chosen, even though we cannot grasp how or why we have chosen to be what we are.

Lacking theoretical arguments to illustrate this point, Schelling turns to the evidence of experience. With these questions we reach the core of Schelling’s attempt to grapple with the problem of freedom in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and, in order to understand his position, we must follow Schelling into the existential perspective that illuminates the problem from within.⁶⁸ This is because the conflict between necessity and freedom is a problem in thought, but it dissolves when viewed from the perspective of existence. Thus the unity of freedom and necessity of which Schelling speaks in these passages does not mean that we are somehow determined or compelled by external forces. Rather, he is simply registering the existential reality that constitutes our existence: “As

⁶⁶ Ibid., 52-53 (7: 387-8). Schelling really only foresees one possible objection to his theory: it seems to leave no possibility for moral conversion. If we transcendently determine ourselves from eternity, then how is it possible for empirical individuals to change their ways? Schelling’s answer is that the idea of a conversion applies to the empirical view of human beings, but to the transcendental view of their nature. In other words, it is possible for an individual to convert from evil to good in the course of his or her life, but this is simply the eventual manifestation of their true transcendental choice for good. Ibid., 53-4 (7: 389).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 53 (7: 388).

⁶⁸ Walsh, *Modern Philosophical Revolution*, 148-49.

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.”⁶⁹ Thus, there is an “undeniable necessity of all actions,” and no one is “arbitrarily or by accident good or evil,” yet each man’s actions are done “in accordance with and not against his will.”⁷⁰ As an example, Schelling suggests that “anyone...who in order to excuse a wrong action, says ‘that’s just the way I am’ is surely aware that he is like he is through his own guilt, as much as he is right that it was impossible for him to act otherwise.”⁷¹ Schelling also raises the example of someone who from childhood on “shows a propensity [*Hang*] to evil,”⁷² and yet is considered free to determine his or her own actions. Each of us experiences himself as free, and yet we have a particular character. Schelling is suggesting that we must be who we are, but also that we are free because we are exactly that.

What is interesting here is that, since Schelling cannot offer a theoretical proof of his position, he appeals to the realm of experience in order to confirm his position. This points to the later distinction that Schelling would draw between negative and positive philosophy. Schelling would come to recognize that since thought cannot explain the whole of reality we must turn to the empirical course of history in order to test a priori (i.e., negative) accounts of reality. Philosophy thus becomes an ongoing proof that will only end when history itself comes to a close. Although these developments in Schelling’s thought did not take place when he wrote the *Freiheitsschrift*, their seed is present in his turn to a philosophy of history as evidence for the coherence of his

⁶⁹ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 51 (7: 386).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 52 (7: 386).

⁷² Ibid.

position. With this move we turn to a consideration of Schelling's attempt to explain his analysis of freedom leads to and fits within his historical and metaphysical accounts of the whole.

Schelling's Philosophy of History

Schelling turns to the philosophy of history in order to show that his account of human freedom is true. He holds that the course of history is defined by the changing relationship between God and human beings.⁷³ This dynamic is a moral-spiritual one: history is constituted by a battle between good and evil, between that which turns toward God and that which turns away from him, of which we partake by necessity. Schelling's account of history arises particularly in the context of his attempt to understand not only why there is the possibility of evil in the world at all, but also how it has become an actual force in reality. This has already been discussed in the section above on the temptation to evil, but Schelling's discussion of the issue also leads to his account of history as being constituted by human participation in the progressive revelation of God in history. In this context, Schelling points out that individual battles between good and evil have cosmic significance: through our choices for good or evil we help or hinder the movement of creation back towards reconciliation with God as the source and *telos* of creation. Thus, by virtue of our freedom, we participate in a movement of existence that is greater than ourselves. As Schelling writes, "given how man is in fact created, it is not he himself but rather the good or evil spirit in him that acts."⁷⁴ In his philosophy of

⁷³ In his later lectures on the philosophy of mythology, Schelling will say that man is by nature the God-positing being.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 54 (7: 389).

history, Schelling attempts to show that the empirical course of history has in fact been determined by the ongoing struggle between good and evil and God's progressive self-revelation of himself to human beings as pure goodness and love.

At the same time, Schelling's philosophy of history is an attempt to illustrate the veracity of his claim that evil (or at least its possibility) must in some sense be a necessary component of creation. As Schelling writes, "Since it [evil] is undeniably real, at least as general opposite, there can indeed be no doubt from the outset that it was necessary for the revelation of God."⁷⁵ Schelling thinks that, in order for God to become manifest to us, he must reveal himself in contrast to that which is unlike him—otherwise he would not be distinguishable from everything else. Thus, as discussed above, Schelling argues that human beings have the capacity to be like God, but we are also not fully decided in favor of the good: "For, if God as spirit is the inseverable unity of both principles, and this same unity is only real in the spirit of man, then, if the principles were just as indissoluble in him as in God, man would not be distinguishable from God at all; he would disappear in God, and there would be no revelation and motility of love. [...]

Were there no severing of principles, unity could not prove its omnipotence; were there no discord, love could not become real [*wirklich*]."⁷⁶ God would not be revealed to us as morally perfect if we did not live in the tension between good and evil. Moreover, it is from within our own struggle against the temptation to evil that we are able to grasp God as the *telos* of our moral striving. Only in contrast to the tension between good and evil in which we exist does God become manifest to us as the source of goodness and love that overcomes all evil.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41 (7: 373).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Schelling argues that the possibility of evil thus opens a space into which God can appear as pure love. All of creation emerges within this tension between the will of the ground and the will of love, and neither can exist without the other. “This letting the ground be active is the only conceivable concept of permission that in the usual reference to man is completely unacceptable.”⁷⁷ The relationship is entirely dialectical: without the ground, there would be no movement and thus no life. God, as pure love, is the permanent overcoming of the will of the ground, but this does not mean that he abolishes it. Without the ground there could be no love because love is by definition the decision to go beyond the ground, the decision to sacrifice one’s selfhood in favor of the universal will beyond it. This is the choice we must make, and to make no choice is to choose evil because we are already caught up in the movement of existence. There is no resting point, no sideline from which to watch the movement of existence. Our existence is our choice, and since we are by nature tempted to evil, that is the direction in which we will unwittingly turn if we do not strive to submit ourselves to the will of God. The temptation to evil, however, creates the opportunity to turn away from it: “That is why the will of the ground already arouses the self-will of creatures in the first creation, so that when spirit now appears as the will of love, the latter finds something resistant in which it can realize itself.”⁷⁸ God as pure love can only manifest himself to beings whose freedom is the capacity for good and evil because it is only in contrast to evil that we can see and understand the significance of God as the purest love.

Schelling’s sketch of a philosophy of history in the *Freiheitsschrift* is designed to show that all of this is in fact underlies the course of history. His account actually builds

⁷⁷ Ibid., 42 (7: 375).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

on his explanation of nature, in which Schelling claims that “The sight of nature as a whole convinces us that this arousal has occurred by which means alone all life first reached the final degree of distinctiveness and definiteness.”⁷⁹ Schelling’s point is that nature too is alive, that it participates in the struggle between ground and existence, and that it is not merely governed by mechanical necessity. As he writes, “The irrational and contingent, which show themselves to be bound to that which is necessary in the formation of beings, especially the organic ones, prove that it is not merely a geometric necessity that has been active here, but rather that freedom, spirit and self-will were also in play.”⁸⁰ The tension between ground and existence, as the principle movement of being, runs all the way up from nature, through man, and to God. All of being is caught up in the same movement of existence, although on different levels.⁸¹ Thus, the reality of evil is evident not only in history, but throughout creation, although it only appears as evil in human beings: “Evil...announces itself in nature only through its effects; it can itself break through only in its immediate appearance at the endpoint [*am Ziel*] of nature.”⁸² Evil emerges as evil only in the realm of history. Nevertheless, the dialectic of ground and existence leads to parallel developments in nature and history, and the course of history is just a further development of what has already happened in nature: “The birth of spirit is the realm of history as the birth of light is the realm of nature. The same periods of creation which are in the latter are also in the former; and one is the likeness and explanation of the other.”

As with his account of nature in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling offers only a few

⁷⁹ Ibid., 42-43 (7: 376).

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43 (7: 376).

⁸¹ This is the insight that Schelling attempts to articulate in his *Potenzenlehre*.

⁸² Ibid., 43-44 (7: 377).

cursory details concerning the course of history, but the outline he provides is enough to indicate how he understands its course. Schelling suggests that history begins in a time before the arousal of evil. Just “as the undivided power of the initial ground comes to be recognized only in man as the inner aspect (basis or *centrum*) of an individual, so in history as well evil at first remains latent in the ground, and an era of innocence or unconsciousness about sin precedes the era of guilt and sin.”⁸³ He then posits an era in which the divine aspect contained in nature rules over history. This corresponds to the period of mythological religion: “the time of the presiding gods and heroes or the omnipotence of nature in which the ground showed what for itself it had the capacity to do. At that time understanding and wisdom came to men only from the depths; the power of oracles flowing forth from the earth led and shaped their lives; all divine forces of the ground dominated the earth and sat as powerful princes on secure thrones.”⁸⁴ According to Schelling, this world reaches its full expression when “the principle active in the ground finally emerged as a world-conquering principle to subordinate everything to itself and establish a stable and enduring world empire.”⁸⁵ This world could not sustain itself, however, because the ground cannot sustain its own existence: “Because, however, the being of the ground can never generate for itself true and complete unity, there comes the time when all this magnificence dissolves and, as if by a terrible sickness, the beautiful body of the previous world collapses and chaos finally emerges once again.”⁸⁶ The mythological era of history is then overcome by a decisive development in which good and evil finally manifest themselves on a completely spiritual level as what they

⁸³ Ibid., 44-45 (7: 378).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 45 (7: 379).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45 (7: 3379).

have been all along: “only in connection with the decisive emergence of the good, does evil also emerge quite decisively and as itself [*als dieses*] (not as if it only first arose then, but rather because the opposition is now first given in which it alone can appear complete and as such).”⁸⁷ Presumably Schelling is here referring to the emergence of human knowledge of the one true God, and only in connection with God’s self-revelation as the purest good does evil finally become manifest as the turning away from God. At this point it becomes clear that the cosmic struggle between good and evil in history is constituted by the innumerable personal struggles of individual human beings. In this context, Christ enters into history as God’s decisive move against the evil that strives to pull creation away from him. As Schelling writes, “in order to counter personal and spiritual evil, the light of the spirit in fact appears likewise in the shape of a human person and as a mediator in order to reestablish the rapport between God and creation at the highest level. For only what is personal can heal what is personal, and God must become man so that man may return to God.”⁸⁸ Christ thus marks the beginning of the path towards the eventual reconciliation of God and creation through human beings.

As noted above, Schelling’s philosophy of history emerges out of his attempt to show the reality of evil. The reality of evil cannot be proven theoretically; it can only be known intuitively and demonstrated empirically, and thus it is our own freedom understood as the capacity for good and evil that enables us to understand that demonstration. Schelling thus traces the course of history through the lens of his account

⁸⁷ Ibid., 46 (7: 379-80).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 46 (7: 380). “For, just as selfhood in evil had made the light or the word its own and for that reason appears precisely as a higher ground of darkness, so must the word spoken in the world in opposition to evil assume humanity or selfhood and become personal itself. This occurs alone through revelation, in the most definitive meaning of the word.” Ibid., 44 (7: 377). Referring to Christ, Schelling claims that “here too the highest summit of revelation is man, but the archetypal [*urbildlich*] and divine man who was with God in the beginning and in whom all other things and man himself are created.” Ibid.

of how evil is possible and attempts to show that history is indeed playing itself out in accordance with the tension between the principles of ground and existence. Although Schelling's account of history in the *Freiheitsschrift* is only very cursory, in later works, beginning with the oft-drafted but never published *Weltalter* (*Ages of the World*) and culminating in his late lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation, Schelling would repeatedly attempt to offer a more detailed account of the historical process. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, however, Schelling offers only this brief sketch and then turns to the question of the coherence of reality. The questions that remains outstanding is: if what Schelling claims is true, how does it make sense that the world is the way it is? As Schelling would continually ask throughout his career, if the world must include evil, then why is there something and not nothing?

The Moral Coherence of the Whole

Schelling's turn to the question of the coherence of the whole indicates that he does not abandon the question of system in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He does, however, reconceptualize it. The question of how human freedom as the capacity for good and evil fits within the whole of reality remains an important one for Schelling, but now, from within the existential perspective that he adopts in the *Freiheitsschrift*, the theoretical gives way to the ethical and the question of the coherence of the whole becomes a question of its moral coherence. This is why the question of system now takes on the form of a theodicy in Schelling's thought. As in Schelling's previous works, the question of system remains the "highest question of this investigation," but, whereas before it was merely a matter of developing a theoretically rational blueprint of reality, now it is the

question of God's relationship to the world "as a moral being."⁸⁹ The question that demands an answer is "how, given the fact of evil [*wegen des Bösen*], is God to be justified?"⁹⁰ In other words, how can we be sure that truth and goodness rule over creation despite the undeniable existence of evil?

The question of system could not take the form of a moral inquiry in a purely rational system (including Schelling's own earlier philosophy) because these philosophical accounts do not understand the existence of the world as a free and creative act on the part of God. They remain within the theoretical mode that treats the system of the world as an object, and they attempt to explain the world from a perspective outside of it. Since they remain on the outside looking in, however, these systems can only explain the creation of the world in terms of cause and effect: "If God were for us a merely logical abstraction, then everything would have to proceed from him with logical necessity as well."⁹¹ From this perspective, there is no moral question, since there is no existential freedom, but only mechanical necessity. Thus, the purely rational does not enable the philosopher to grasp properly the implications of the realization that free action is the source of everything. That is, pure reason in its theoretical mode does not grasp the heart of existence as moral.

But now, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, the moral is recognized as the highest mode of explanation because God (i.e., the Absolute) is recognized as "the highest personality." This means that God is not simply an abstract principle; rather, he is the "living unity of forces" in which ground and existence "completely saturate one another and are but one

⁸⁹ Ibid., 58 (7: 394).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

being.” As such, he is “spirit in the eminent and absolute understanding.”⁹² From the perspective of existence, personality is the highest form of existence, and we cannot think of the system of reality as being governed by anything less. As the perfectly ordered union of the two principles that underlie all of existence, God is the highest manifestation of spirit, and, as such, he is the exemplar of personhood toward which we strive in the struggle between good and evil. Thus, reality does not unfold mechanistically from a merely rational principle as it seemed to in Schelling’s earlier systems. Rather, since God is personal, he rules over existence as a person,⁹³ which means that he freely decides to create the world: “creation is not an occurrence but an act.”⁹⁴ Moreover, Schelling maintains that “the act of self-revelation was free in the sense that all consequences of it were foreseen by God,”⁹⁵ and, therefore, his decision nevertheless to create the world having foreseen its consequences “completes the concept of revelation as a conscious and morally free act.”⁹⁶ God stands in relation to creation as a moral being, since he freely and deliberately chooses to create the world as it is.

This does not mean, however, that God chose to create this world from among an infinite variety of possible worlds. Schelling rejects the “best of all possible worlds” type arguments, since to suggest that God could have created any world that is abstractly possible is beneath God, “in whom disregard for his essence or perfections can likely not

⁹² Ibid., 59 (7: 395).

⁹³ Just as things are not contained within God according to a static concept of immanence, it is also the case that creation does not flow from God according to abstract and necessary laws. The existence of the world cannot be explained by reason, for it is the precondition of the existence of reason. Moreover, as Schelling has repeatedly stressed throughout the *Freiheitsschrift*, there is more to existence than what can be captured within reason. “The whole of nature tells us that it in no way exists by virtue of a merely geometrical necessity; in it there is not simply pure reason but personality and spirit.” Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 59-60 (7: 396-7).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 60 (7: 397).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

be thought.”⁹⁷ Thus, this is an unacceptable view of how God chose to create the world because it suggests that God could have chosen to create another world, whereas “God according to his perfection can only will one thing”⁹⁸ and “there is only one possible world as there is only one God.”⁹⁹ Thus, Schelling denies that God arbitrarily chooses to create the world as it is.

But in what sense can it be said that God, whose essence is freedom, is subject to necessity? At this point Schelling elaborates the core insight of the *Freiheitsschrift* concerning the tension between necessity and freedom: the necessity that rules over creation is not the mechanical necessity of a Newtonian world, but the moral necessity of God’s essence. God is not compelled to do anything because he is not subject to any law or force outside of himself. God is a law unto himself, or, in other words, he is perfectly autonomous. Consequently, insofar as it can be said that something is necessary for God, we must understand it as moral necessity emanating from his person. As Schelling writes, “the action of revelation in God is necessary only morally or in regard to goodness and love.”¹⁰⁰ This is why it cannot be said that God deliberated about what sort of world to create: “just as soon as the closer determination of a moral necessity is added, the proposition is utterly undeniable: that everything proceeds from the divine nature with absolute necessity, that everything which is possible by virtue of this nature must also be actual, and what is not actual also must be morally impossible.”¹⁰¹ God is bound by nothing other than himself, but he is bound by who he is.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 62 (7: 398).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 60 (7: 397).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 61 (7: 398).

This is Schelling's decisive insight into the personal nature of God's relationship to the world. God alone is perfectly autonomous for it is only in God that freedom and necessity cohere absolutely, and it is from the law of God's person that the laws of existence follow: "There are no results from general laws; rather, God, that is, the person of God, is the general law, and everything that happens, happens by virtue of the personality of God, not according to some abstract necessity that *we* in acting would not tolerate, to say nothing of God."¹⁰² The world does not flow forth according to a series of necessary laws, but according to the self-given laws of God's free action.¹⁰³ God's autonomy is not denied by the moral necessity of his actions because God himself is the source of that necessity. Thus, Schelling claims, "Spinozism is by no means in error because of the claim that there is such an unshakable necessity in God, but rather because it takes this necessity to be impersonal and inanimate."¹⁰⁴

This demonstrates why it is therefore not quite adequate to suggest that Schelling has a voluntaristic conception of God.¹⁰⁵ This foments the anxieties and doubts associated with the voluntaristic positions found for instance in medieval nominalism, but this anxiety is nowhere to be found in Schelling's account. Although God is not bound by an abstract or mechanical necessity, he is not therefore arbitrary. There is nothing external to God constraining his action, but we can trust in the order of his personhood,

¹⁰² Ibid., 60 (7: 396).

¹⁰³ Here Schelling cites with approval Leibniz's "recognition of laws of nature as morally, but not geometrically, necessary, and just as little arbitrary." Ibid. Schelling does not countenance the fears associated with the voluntarism of medieval nominalism because he has a moral conception of God. At the core of Schelling's account is a sense of trust in God. The order of the world is held in place by God's personal relationship to the world. "The highest striving of the dynamic mode of explanation is nothing else than this reduction of natural laws to mind, spirit and will." Ibid. That Schelling could still make this statement reveals the degree to which he is still dedicated to the program of idealism in 1809.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 61 (7: 397).

¹⁰⁵ As Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 113 does, for instance.

formed as it is by pure goodness. This is why our relationship to the divine order of the cosmos is explained so well, if only metaphorically, by reference to the relationship of love. Love depends on trust and just as lovers can be consumed by jealousy and anxiety when that trust is threatened or broken, so can we be driven to despair when we have lost trust in God. But, for Schelling, there is no reason not to trust in the divine order of the cosmos. God is the most perfect person and if ever there was a person to be trusted, it is God.¹⁰⁶ As Schelling writes, “if God is essentially love and goodness, then what is morally necessary in him also follows with a truly metaphysical necessity.”¹⁰⁷ There is no arbitrary choice by God when he creates the world. There is no better possible world that he could have created. To suggest either of these possibilities is to deny God’s being who he is.

It is in this way that Schelling’s position points to the resolution of the seemingly endless debate concerning the question of whether the will or reason has priority in Kant’s concept of autonomy. Schelling’s analysis reveals that this is an empty question because it only arises when autonomy is approached from a perspective outside of autonomy. But autonomy is not an object to be approached from the outside, since the whole point of autonomy is that it is a knowing from within. Autonomy can only be known by living it out (which explains the ongoing difficulties associated with attempting to define autonomy theoretically as self-legislation). It is the practical or existential condition in which we live, and, as such, it can only be understood from within. We recognize the autonomy of God because we are like God, although only in a limited way: we give the law of our essence to ourselves but ours is an imperfect autonomy because

¹⁰⁶ Schelling develops this insight in his later work through his critique of the ontological argument.

¹⁰⁷ Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom*, 61 (7: 397).

although we know the law from within, we can determine ourselves against it. Thus, we are autonomous in the sense that, like God, we are not subject to a law that imposes upon the will from the outside, since we know God's law from within by virtue of our participation in his spirit. Unlike God, however, we are not perfectly autonomous because we have the capacity to determine ourselves against the law.

Returning to the question of the order of the whole, as these reflections suggest, Schelling does not reject the quest for system in the *Freiheitsschrift*; rather, he reconceptualizes it. We cannot approach the concept of system objectively as if the system of the world were something outside of us. We exist within the system of reality, and, therefore, we can only search for illumination as to its structure from within the perspective of existence. This means that we can only understand the whole in terms of the fact that it is ultimately constituted by personality—"In the divine understanding there is a system; yet God himself is not a system, but rather a life."¹⁰⁸—and it is from this perspective that we must understand God's moral relationship to the possibility and actuality of evil in the world. God's personhood, like ours, means that he is grounded in that which he is not: "All existence demands a condition so that it may become real, namely personal, existence. Even God's existence could not be personal without such a condition except that he has this condition *within* and not outside himself." The difference, as noted above, is that God has perfectly mastered his own condition, whereas we have not. Yet he must contain such a condition within himself in order to be a life, and this ground opens up the possibility of evil in creation, although neither God nor the ground itself is responsible for it: "What comes from the mere condition or the ground,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 62 (7: 399).

does not come from God, although it is necessary for his existence. But it cannot also be said that evil comes from the ground or that the will of the ground is the originator of evil. For evil can always only arise in the innermost will of our own heart and is never accomplished without our own act.”¹⁰⁹ The ground opens up the possibility of evil, but it does not compel us to it. Moreover,

the arousal of self-will occurs only so that love in man may find a material or opposition in which it may realize itself. To the extent that selfhood is the principle of evil in its breaking away [*Lossagung*], the ground does indeed arouse the possible principle of evil, yet not evil itself and not for the sake of evil. But even this arousal occurs not according to the free will of God, who does not move in the ground according to his will or his heart, but rather only according to his own properties.¹¹⁰

Thus, Schelling concludes, God is not responsible for evil: “The will to creation was therefore immediately only a will to give birth to the light and the good along with it; but evil did not come into consideration in this will, neither as a means nor even, as Leibniz says, as the condition *sine qua non* of the greatest possible perfection of the world. It was neither the object of a divine decision nor, and much less, of a permission.”¹¹¹

Finally, in this context, Schelling addresses the “The question...of why God, since he necessarily foresaw that evil would follow at least as a companion from the self-revelation, did not prefer not to reveal himself at all.”¹¹² He answers that this question “does not in fact deserve any reply. For this would be precisely as much as to say that, in order that there could be no opposition to love, there should be no love itself.”¹¹³

Schelling’s reasoning goes back to his argument that God is bound only by moral

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 63 (7: 399).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 64 (7: 401).

¹¹¹ Ibid., 65 (7: 402).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

necessity. He argues that for God to have decided not to create the world because he foresaw evil would be tantamount to a victory of evil over God. Instead, knowing that evil would arise, God nevertheless went beyond himself to offer the gift of creation. As Schelling writes, “the self-revelation in God would have to be considered not as an unconditionally arbitrary, but rather as a morally necessary, act in which love and goodness overcome absolute inwardness. Thus if God had not revealed himself for the sake of evil, evil would have triumphed over the good and love.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, since God would not allow evil to overcome him, “in order that there be no evil, there would have to be no God himself.”¹¹⁵ Thus, God created that world so that, through the free process of the struggle between good and evil, the good could emerge as manifest. “If the will of the ground were vanquished earlier, the good would remain hidden in it together with evil.”¹¹⁶

Thus, Schelling argues both that God foresaw evil and that he is not responsible for it. Moreover, he claims that while the possibility of evil inheres in the structure of existence communicated to creation by God, God himself nevertheless does not contain evil. Even further, the source of the possibility of evil is not in itself evil. Thus, evil has no essence. It is not a created being. It is, as Schelling argues, nothing, and yet in the motion of creation it emerges as a result of the human failure to live up to the divine freedom that is bestowed upon us.

At this point we can anticipate the deepest existential question of all: what is the purpose of existence? Why must we go through the trial of existence at all? As Schelling

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 66 (7: 403).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 67 (7: 404).

asks, “After all this the question always remains: Will evil end and how? Does creation have a final purpose at all, and, if this is so, why is it not reached immediately, why does what is perfect not exist right from the beginning?”¹¹⁷ As was noted at the end of chapter two, this is the question for which Schelling’s early idealism had no answer. Now, by contrast, Schelling realizes that the answer is that, ultimately, there is no other possibility. Creation is inherently good and thus God freely chose to create. The movement of existence includes of necessity the possibility of evil and the reality of good can only be brought about through its victory over evil in freedom. This is what Schelling means when he writes that “There is no answer to these questions other than that which has already been given: because God is a life, not merely a Being.”¹¹⁸ The only way to achieve the end of creation is to go through its process. Only in the process of existence can its truth become manifest: “Being becomes aware of itself only in becoming.”¹¹⁹ In order to exist as spirit, we must go through the process of personal existence, constituted as it is by the free struggle between good and evil. “For this is the final purpose of creation that, whatever could not be for itself, should be for itself in so far as it is raised out of the darkness into existence as ground that is independent of God. [...] God yields the ideas that were in him without independent life to selfhood and to what does not have Being so that, when called to life from the latter, they may be in him once again as independently existing [beings].”¹²⁰ Moreover, we can be confident that God will be victorious over evil: “the end of revelation is casting out evil from the good,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 66 (7: 403).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 67 (7: 404).

the explanation of evil as complete unreality.”¹²¹ But we can only stand in the end with God by having gone through the trial of existence as free and independent beings. God creates us so that we can stand in unity with His perfect goodness and love as independent beings, but we must choose it for ourselves in order to truly realize it.

The Unity of Existence

All that has been explained so far is taken from the perspective of existence. But finally Schelling addresses the question of the origin from which existence emerges. Schelling argues that the source of existence is God as love before all else (even love itself) existed. “For even the spirit is not yet the highest thing; it is but spirit or breath of love. Yet love is the highest.”¹²² Even personality that is fully decided for the good is not the epitome of what is, for the love that ensures the victory of good over evil is still higher. Thus, God as love in some sense transcends the whole tension of existence; he is “what existed...before the ground and before that which exists (as separate) but not yet as love.”¹²³ “Here,” Schelling reports, “we finally reach the highest point of the entire investigation.”¹²⁴ Confirming that all that has gone before in the *Freiheitsschrift* was approached from the perspective of existence, it is only now that Schelling addresses the question of how the ground-existence distinction relates to the Absolute, or that which is utterly beyond the perspective of existence. Only at the end of the essay does he attempt to explain the purpose of the distinction and respond to the objection that it must result

¹²¹ Ibid., 67 (7: 405).

¹²² Ibid., 68 (7: 405-6).

¹²³ Ibid., 68 (7: 406).

¹²⁴ Ibid.

either in dualism or a self-undermining identity.¹²⁵

In response to the first charge, Schelling maintains that unity is ultimately primary: “there must be a being *before* all ground and before all that exists, thus generally before any duality—how can we call it anything other than the original ground or the *non-ground* [*Ungrund*]?” This is love before it is as love. It is pure potentiality, the absolute freedom to be. It is beyond all oppositions, including the opposition of ground and existence. Thus, Schelling argues, it cannot be understood as identity, but only as indifference: “Since it precedes all opposites, these cannot be distinguishable in it nor can they be present in any way. Therefore, it cannot be described as the identity of opposites; it can only be described as the absolute indifference [*Indifferenz*] of both.”¹²⁶ This point of indifference is prior to all manifestation; it is the unthinkable source from which everything that is emerges: “Indifference is not a product of opposites, nor are they implicitly contained in it, but rather indifference is its own being separate from all opposition, a being against which all opposites ruin themselves, that is nothing else than their very not-Being [*Nichtsein*] and that, for this reason, also has no predicate, except as the very lacking of a predicate, without it being on that account a nothingness or non-thing.”¹²⁷

But if the non-ground, as the most primal reality, is prior to and beyond all oppositions, then whence the ground-existence distinction that runs through all of reality? Schelling responds that, while oppositional principles can never be posited in the non-

¹²⁵ “For there is either no common point of contact for both, in which case we must declare ourselves in favor of absolute dualism, or there is such a point; thus, both coincide once again in the final analysis. We have, then, one being [*ein Wesen*] for all oppositions, and absolute identity of light and darkness, good and evil, and for all the inconsistent results to which any rational system falls prey and which have long been manifest in this system too.” Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 69 (7: 406).

ground, “nothing hinders that they be predicated of it as non-opposites, that is, in disjunction and each for itself whereby, however, precisely duality (the actual two-ness [*Zweiheit*] of principles) is posited.” The non-ground “relates to both [principles] as indifference” and therefore “it is neutral toward both.” Thus the non-ground is not the absolute identity of the principles, since this would contain both as opposites, but it is nevertheless the common bond between them, or the unity that underlies them: “Duality...breaks forth therefore immediately from the Neither-Nor, or indifference, and *without* indifference, that is, *without* a non-ground, there would be no two-ness of principles.”¹²⁸

Schelling explains that everything begins from the non-ground, but that the non-ground posits itself as both ground and existence, so that what is only there potentially can achieve actuality. Everything thus begins from the single and completely ungrounded non-ground: “The being of the ground, as of that which exists, can only be that which comes before all ground, thus, the absolute considered merely in itself, the non-ground.”¹²⁹ But the non-ground posits itself as ground and existence, so that indifference can become opposition and then finally return to a higher unity. As Schelling writes, “the non-ground divides itself into the two exactly equal beginnings, only so that the two, which could not exist simultaneously or be one in it as the non-ground, become one through love, that is, it divides itself only so that there may be life and love and personal existence. For love is neither in indifference nor where opposites

¹²⁸ Ibid., 69 (7: 407). As he also writes, “instead of abolishing this distinction once again, as was thought, the non-ground rather posits and confirms it. Far from the distinction between the ground and that which exists having been merely logical, or one called on as a heuristic aid and again found to be artificial in the end, it has shown itself rather as a very real distinction that from the highest standpoint was first correctly proved and fully grasped.” Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 69-70 (7: 407-8).

are linked which require linkage for [their] Being.”¹³⁰ Love is not as love in the non-ground, but it becomes manifest as such as the unifying power ruling over the personal: “In spirit that which exists is one with the ground for existence; in it both really are present at the same time, or it is the absolute identity of both. Above spirit, however, is the initial non-ground that is no longer indifference (neutrality) and yet not the identity of both principles, but rather a general unity that is the same for all and yet gripped by nothing that is free from all and yet a beneficence acting in all, in a word, love, which is all in all.”¹³¹ In other words, the non-ground is God as absolute freedom, who stands alone before creation.

This leads to Schelling’s response to the second objection, that he simply returns to Spinoza’s problem of reducing everything to a single principle (and thus undermines the ground-existence distinction). Schelling admits that this is in a sense true, although he maintains that the one principle “divides itself in two sorts of being in its two ways of acting, that it is in one merely ground for existence and in the other merely being (and, for that reason only ideal).”¹³² But Schelling denies that this commits him to placing evil within God, since “Evil is, however, not a being, but rather a non-being [*Unwesen*] that has reality only in opposition and not in itself. Precisely for that reason absolute identity is prior to evil as well, because the latter can appear only in opposition to it. Hence, evil also cannot be grasped through absolute identity but is eternally excluded and cast out from it.”¹³³

¹³⁰ Ibid., 70 (7: 408).

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 71 (7: 409). As he also writes, “only God as spirit is the absolute identity of both principles, but only because and to the degree that both are subordinated to his personality.” Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

Thus, Schelling is willing to accept the charges that his system is monistic and pantheistic, for such abstract labels have no significance for him. A system must be understood from within, and only then can one comment on its validity. “Whoever now does not examine the inner core [*das Innere*], but lifts only the most general concepts out of their context—how may he judge the whole correctly?”¹³⁴ Each of the various aspects of Schelling’s system in the *Freiheitsschrift* has its place in the analysis. The non-ground must be understood as one step in the process of reality that Schelling is attempting to grasp from the perspective of existing within that process. The absolute as indifference is only in the beginning. If it is taken to define the absolute as a whole then the charges would be true that Schelling’s “system abolishes the personality of the highest being,” for “in the non-ground or indifference there is admittedly no personality. But is the beginning point really the whole?”¹³⁵ The absolute as non-ground is but one moment in the whole of God’s eternal life. It is that from which God eternally emerges as the manifest love that unifies ground and existence.

Schelling thus rejects the criticism of those who argue that his system eliminates the personality of God. Rather, he argues that he has “established the first clear concept of personality in this treatise.”¹³⁶ By contrast, his critics (presumably Jacobi) simply assert that “the personality of God is incomprehensible.”¹³⁷ For Schelling, however, this amounts to a renunciation of reason, and even with his adoption of the existential perspective in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling refuses to abandon a rational account of the whole as the *telos* of philosophy. Thus he maintains that he is “of the opinion that a clear

¹³⁴ Ibid., 73 (7: 411).

¹³⁵ Ibid., 73 (7: 412).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

rational view must be possible precisely from the highest concepts in so far as only in this way can they really be our own, accepted in ourselves and eternally grounded. Indeed, we go even further and hold, with Lessing himself, that the development of revealed truths into truths of reason is simply necessary, if the human race is to be helped thereby.”¹³⁸

In the end, however, Schelling almost seems to think that the question of the power of reason to explain reality is beside the point, since he readily admits that reason is not the totality of reality: “For, no matter how high we place reason, we do not believe, for example, that anyone may be virtuous or a hero or generally a great human being on the basis of pure reason.”¹³⁹ Reason is only one component of reality, and, therefore, life is composed of more than mere reason: “Only in personality is there life, and all personality rests on a dark ground that indeed must therefore be the ground of cognition as well.”¹⁴⁰ This does not change the fact that “it is only the understanding that develops what is hidden and contained in this ground merely *potentialiter* [potentially] and raises it to actuality [*zum Aktus*].”¹⁴¹ Philosophy remains the pursuit of an understanding of the whole, and “This can only occur through division, thus through science and dialectic, of which we are convinced that they alone will hold fixed and bring permanently to cognition the system which has been there more often than we think but has always again slipped away, hovering before us and not yet fully grasped by anyone.”¹⁴²

This is as far as Schelling reaches in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He indicates the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 74 (7: 412).

¹³⁹ Ibid., 75 (7: 413).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 75 (7: 413-4).

¹⁴² Ibid., 75 (7: 414).

direction of his future thought, but he remains at the threshold. The *Freiheitsschrift* articulates the principle of Schelling's late reflections—it is our existence as free moral beings that unlocks the meaning of existence for us from within—but he only touches on the philosophical system that he will develop based on that principle. In fact, as is well known, the *Freiheitsschrift* is the last major work that Schelling would publish in his lifetime. Perhaps appropriately, considering his new position, he would spend the rest of his life attempting to develop a new system of philosophy on the basis of the breakthrough he found in the *Freiheitsschrift*. In the years immediately following, Schelling would attempt several times over to draft an account of the ages of the world, but he never arrived at a version that satisfied him. Indeed, he appears to have realized that he could never arrive at a complete account.

Autonomy and the Primacy of Existence

The implications of Schelling's thought in the *Freiheitsschrift* for Kant's concept of autonomy have already been suggested above. As Michelle Kosch has persuasively argued, and as was explained above, Schelling must reject the concept of autonomy insofar as it is understood as rational self-determination and equates freedom with rationally. For Schelling, there is a non-rational element at the basis of all existence that cannot be fully resolved into thought (the principle of the ground, or self-will), and it is, in part, our participation in this element of reality (not only our participation in reason as Kant holds) that constitutes our freedom. For Schelling, freedom is not equivalent to reason; instead he defines freedom as spirit or personality, which is the tension between the self-will and the universal-will of the understanding (i.e., reason). But this does not

lead to completely reject the concept of autonomy. Rather, Schelling shows that autonomy must be understood practically rather than theoretically, and that from within this perspective human autonomy can be understood as an imperfect participation in the autonomy of God. In this way Schelling can reject the concept of autonomy insofar as it suggests that freedom and reason are tied in the human personality, while also maintaining that autonomy is ultimately the reality that constitutes our existence and serves as the *telos* of our moral striving. Thus, we know autonomy as the practical reality that we live within even though we fail to realize it within ourselves as empirical individuals.

Schelling's position is based on his realization that philosophy must be a meditation from within the existential condition, rather than a theoretical investigation of the latter from a perspective outside of it. This is what Schelling takes from Kant's claim for the primacy of the practical, and it is what he is trying to express when he claims that will is the most fundamental being.¹⁴³ Existence is not constituted by the objective realm of consciousness only. Behind the theoretical perspective of the world is the living reality of which the theoretical is only a snapshot. In relation to this point, consider what Schelling writes about the self-consciousness that is the first principle of Fichte's philosophy:

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. This consciousness, however, to the extent it is thought merely as self-apprehension or cognition of the I, is not even primary and all along presupposes actual Being, as does all pure cognition. This Being, presumed to be prior to cognition, is, however, not Being, though it is likewise not cognition: it is real self-positing, it is a primal and fundamental willing, which makes itself into

¹⁴³ Ibid., 21 (7: 350).

something and is the ground of all ways of being [*Wesenheit*].¹⁴⁴

Consciousness of the I is dependent on the existence of the I in the first place, but the I which is prior to the I that is grasped in consciousness is not an object. Rather, it is a living existence; it is pure will or pure freedom, and, as such, it cannot be explained according to thought because it cannot be contained within the limits of thought. It is the living reality that both makes consciousness possible and is fleetingly grasped in consciousness, and, in this sense, consciousness is derivative of the reality of existence.

Thus, Schelling expands Kant's argument for the primacy of the practical insofar as he holds that we have existential access to a reality that goes beyond what can be captured in thought or consciousness. The argument for the freedom of the will points to this reality, as does the question of how evil becomes actual in the world. We cannot explain these things, and yet we "know" them from within the struggle of existence. As mentioned above, this is an aspect of Schelling's thought that goes all the way back to his earliest attempts to claim that we have some sort of intellectual intuition, an immediate participation in reality that transcends thought. The idea is that, insofar as we are able to understand the reality in which we exist theoretically or consciously, it is because our free existence within that reality enables us to understand it. As Schelling writes in the *Freiheitsschrift*, the philosopher "grasps the god outside through the god in himself."¹⁴⁵ The human being is a microcosm of reality, and, as such, we have immediate access to the order of reality via the structure of our own existence.

The immediate reaction to such assertions is to question how Schelling can know that we have such access to the order of reality. How can he know that the god within

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 50-51 (7: 385).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10 (7: 337).

offers insight into the god without? How can he know that the structure of human existence tells us anything about the structure of the reality in which it unfolds? How can he know that the principles of existence pervade the whole of existence from the most inanimate matter all the way up to the God who is the source of all that is? On the one hand, these are fair questions and they must be asked, but, on the other, they evince a failure to see Schelling's point. For Schelling, our participation in a realm of freedom beyond consciousness cannot be proven because it is precisely that part of reality which is beyond all proofs. To ask for proof is to revert to the theoretical mode when Schelling's very point is that we must go beyond the theoretical mode. Thus, the only way to engage Schelling's arguments is to follow him into the existential mode that he adopts in the *Freiheitsschrift*. We must test what he says against our own existence, and only in that way can we judge the validity of his claim that there is a primal unity that underlies the world of experience.

In any event, Schelling's position on the primacy of existence allows him to maintain several key insights into human existence that derive from Kant's concept of autonomy even as he rejects it as a theoretical understanding of human existence. First, he maintains something like Kant's concept of autonomy in his account of human character: we are free because we act according to the inner necessity that is our essence. But this is not autonomy understood as rational self-determination because that essence (our intelligible being) need not be in accord with the universal-will of the understanding that comes from God. Thus, Schelling maintains our autonomy in the sense that we are free to determine ourselves, but he denies that our freedom requires that determination to be rational. By virtue of this redefinition of freedom, Schelling is able to maintain that

we are morally culpable for evil, whereas Kant cannot explain how this would be possible.

Beyond this consideration, however, there is another sense in which Schelling maintains Kant's concept of autonomy: for Schelling, as for Kant, we grasp the moral law from within ourselves. This does not mean, however, that the moral law rests on the contingency of the individual will. As was shown in chapter one, even for Kant, it is ultimately reason that is the source of the moral law. This is because he holds that the will and practical reason are synonymous. Moreover, the practical reason of the individual is a manifestation of the universal reason in which all human beings share. Thus, we exist within an order of reason, and we are able to give the law to ourselves insofar as we know the reason that is without from within. In a similar way, for Schelling, we participate in a moral struggle between good and evil that transcends the self, but we know the terms of the struggle from within. On the one hand, Schelling is clear that our freedom is situated within a battle between good and evil that extends beyond the individual: "given how man is in fact created, it is not he himself but rather the good or evil spirit in him that acts; and, nonetheless, this does no harm to freedom. For precisely the allowing-to-act-within-himself of the good and evil principles is the result of an intelligible act whereby his being and life are determined."¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, we know the principles of good and evil from within because we contain the possibility of both within ourselves. Our existence itself is a revelation of the struggle between good and evil, and, as such, it reveals the moral law to us.

Finally, although he must reject the identity of freedom and rationality as

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 54 (7: 389).

descriptive of human freedom, Schelling does in fact maintain a place for autonomy understood as the harmony of freedom and the moral law in his account of human freedom. As he writes, “True freedom is in harmony with a holy necessity, the likes of which we perceive in essential cognition, when spirit and heart, bound only by their own law, freely affirm what is necessary.”¹⁴⁷ Schelling speaks here of “religiosity,” which he defines as “conscientiousness or that one act in accordance with what one knows and not contradict the light of cognition in one’s conduct. An individual for whom this contradiction is impossible, not in a human, physical, or psychological, but rather in a divine way, is called religious, conscientious in the highest sense of the word.”¹⁴⁸ This is a moral state beyond the struggle between good and evil: “One is not conscientious who in a given instance must first hold the command of duty before himself in order to decide to do right out of respect for that command. Already, according to the meaning of the word, religiosity does not permit any choice between opposites, any *aequilibrium arbitrii* (the plague of all morality), but rather only the highest resoluteness in favor of what is right without any choice.”¹⁴⁹ Schelling further identifies this state of character as “belief, not in the sense of a holding-to-be-true, which is seen as commendable or as leaving something out in regard to certainty...but in its original meaning as trusting, having confidence, in the divine that excludes all choice.”¹⁵⁰ Here then is a moral disposition that is similar to autonomy understood as rational self-determination, since religiosity or conscientiousness is always already in accord with what is right or good. But for Schelling this is not descriptive of human freedom, but the highest good, true freedom, or

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 56 (7: 391-2).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 56-57 (7: 392).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 57 (7: 392).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 58 (7: 394).

the *telos* of human existence. Thus, in this sense, Schelling maintains the Kantian concept of autonomy as the highest expression of our moral existence, even as he denies that it is descriptive of human freedom.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the concept of autonomy offers a succinct way of understanding the meaning of modernity. Kant originally developed it as the centerpiece of his moral philosophy, while Fichte and Schelling argued that it was the first principle of all philosophy. In either case, as Michelle Kosch has argued, it results in a problematic understanding of freedom insofar as freedom understood as rational self-determination appears to deny the possibility of moral responsibility for evil. Moreover, on the systematic level pursued by Fichte and Schelling, it renders inexplicable the fact that reality does not fit perfectly into a rational system. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, recognizing that there is a ground of existence that we can never fully resolve into a conscious understanding of the world, Schelling exchanges his early systematic efforts for a new mode of existential meditation that unfolds an account of reality on the basis of the moral condition of human existence.

It is from this perspective that Schelling approaches the problem of evil and the possibility of autonomy. He argues that human freedom must be understood as freedom for good and evil. Thus we are not perfectly rationally self-determining, and, therefore, autonomy cannot be a theoretical description of human beings. Yet, Schelling also preserves something of Kant's insight into our moral condition insofar as he maintains that our existence itself discloses the moral law to us. As spirit, Schelling claims, we are

in God, and we are a microcosm of the broader reality in which we exist. Thus, we participate in a moral struggle that transcends the self, but we understand the terms of this struggle from within it. Moreover, Schelling maintains a place for autonomy as the union of freedom and rationality as the *telos* of that struggle. God is the autonomous source of all reality, and we participate in the world that is constituted by his autonomy. Thus, we live within the possibility of autonomy as our moral *telos*, but we are free to decide whether or not we will strive to give ourselves over to that autonomy.

Chapter V

Autonomy as the Primacy of Existence

...only that philosophy has earned the right to call itself a philosophy that has fulfilled the truly scientific demand that all of its essential concepts have just as much a profound ethical significance as they do a speculative significance.¹

Introduction

The last two chapters have offered an analysis of the *Freiheitsschrift* as a work that not only marks Schelling's break with the abstract form of early Idealism, but also sets the stage for his future development of the Kantian idea of autonomy within a philosophy that recognizes the primacy of existence. At the same time, it has been argued that Schelling's thought represents not so much a break with German Idealism as its culmination: Schelling's path points to the true goal of Idealism, namely, the articulation of a post-Kantian account of the transcendent metaphysical reality in which we exist. It has also been shown that Schelling, like Fichte, pursued this goal (in both his early works and in the *Freiheitsschrift*) by developing Kant's idea of autonomy and his argument for the primacy of the practical. It has been suggested that Schelling captures the core insights contained in these Kantian ideas and makes them central to his philosophy: autonomy becomes our participation in an order of existence that we know from within,

¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 183 (II/3: 134).

and the primacy of practical reason becomes the primacy of existence. Schelling remains within the Kantian orbit because his articulation of the metaphysical order in which we exist begins from an analysis of human freedom rather than from an objectivist or theoretical perspective, yet, the *Freiheitsschrift* also represents a decisive moment in the history of German Idealism insofar as Schelling shows that our freedom itself points to our participation in an order that transcends the self. Beginning from Kantian principles, Schelling unfolds the primacy of the practical to reach the metaphysical order that the Idealists had sought all along.

The present chapter serves two functions. First, it offers further reflection on Schelling's new philosophical position through an analysis of two texts that he worked on immediately after the *Freiheitsschrift*, the *Stuttgart Seminars* and *The Ages of the World*. The *Stuttgart Seminars* were a series of private lectures that Schelling offered to an educated lay audience, while *The Ages of the World* is the project to which Schelling turned his attention after completing the *Freiheitsschrift*. Analyses of these texts will confirm the interpretation of the *Freiheitsschrift* offered in this study, solidify our understanding of Schelling's new philosophical position, while also pointing to the future direction of Schelling's philosophy, which is characterized by a continued thinking out of the implications of the insights won in the writing of the *Freiheitsschrift*. These texts confirm that Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* unlocks the hermeneutic of freedom as the true meaning of autonomy and the basis for philosophy. They reinforce the importance of Schelling's discovery that human freedom points to our participation in a reality that transcends the self. As moral and intellectual beings, we are autonomous, but this means that we are contained within the absolute, and that our freedom is charged with the

vocation of realizing the absolute within ourselves. Schelling realizes that the logic of autonomy and the primacy of the practical point to the recognition that we must seek to understand the order of being from within because that is the only perspective from which it is disclosed to us. We cannot step outside of ourselves and observe ourselves as practical agents from a bird's eye view. Strive as we might to achieve some Archimedean point, it is beyond us. The perspective of existence is inescapable, and, in this sense, the primacy of existence and autonomy are one and the same insight: they both recognize that we understand the moral condition from the perspective of our existence as participants within it.

The second task of the present chapter is to offer some reflections on the significance of Schelling's philosophy for our self-understanding in the modern world. What Schelling shows us is that autonomy points to our existence within a moral world order that transcends the self. Reflection on autonomy leads to the realization that we are always already obligated by the moral law. Thus, autonomy is ultimately about the recognition that we knowingly participate in a movement of existence that makes demands on us whether we want to recognize those demands or not. This understanding of autonomy stands in stark contrast to the tendency to understand autonomy as the voluntaristic assertion of the subject as the basis for his or her own comprehensive worldview. It shows instead that Kant's point all along was to show that each of us knows the responsibility that is placed on us by the metaphysical-moral order in which we exist. And we know that this is true because we live within the moral condition and cannot escape it.

As will be shown, this insight applies to politics as well. Schelling does not develop a substantial political philosophy, but the significance of his philosophy for politics can be discerned in the context of Kant's political thought. As we saw in chapter one, Kant derives his metaphysics and philosophy of religion from his moral philosophy, and it was shown that his political thought must be understood within the context of the other two. But Kant leaves the philosophical foundations of his theories in a state of ambiguity because they depend on practical realities that he could not systematically account for in his philosophy. Schelling's contribution is not so much to refute or to alter Kant's political thought—although there may be differences—but, rather, to solidify the basis for Kant's theory of politics by solidifying the epistemological and metaphysical bases of autonomy as the moral condition that grounds politics in the modern world. Schelling throws off the ambiguity that continues to afflict Kant's practical philosophy, and shows that we always already stand in a relation of obligation to others.

Autonomy as Existence within the Absolute

In terms of his conception of philosophy, Schelling's emphasis on the primacy of existence means that we must recognize that we operate within the philosophical endeavor as participants. We do not use philosophy as a tool; rather, we practice it as a mode of existence. This position is a manifestation of what autonomy comes to mean in Schelling's thought: we cannot understand the order of existence from without, as if it were an object that we could handle and observe; rather, we must explore it from within. Thus, philosophy is not a something in existence; it is a mode of approaching the absolute that constitutes our existence, a meditation on the horizon of our self-understanding. This

is what Schelling is driving at when he argues in the *Stuttgart Seminars* that philosophy cannot prove the absolute, or God, from the outset:

We are often asked how, if philosophy conceives of God as its ground, we can arrive at a knowledge of God or of the absolute. There is no answer to this question. The existence of what is unconditional cannot be proven like the existence of something finite. The unconditional is the element wherein any demonstration becomes possible. Where the geometrician, when setting about the demonstration of a given concept, does not begin by proving the existence of space but rather presupposes it, philosophy, too, does not demonstrate the existence of God but confesses that it could not even exist without the absolute or God. Everything can be presented only in the absolute; hence the unconditional does not precede the practice of philosophy, but philosophy in its entirety is occupied with the existence of the former, [and] all of philosophy is properly speaking the progressive demonstration of the absolute, which therefore cannot be demanded from the outset of philosophy. Hence, if the universe cannot be anything but the manifestation of the absolute, and if philosophy is nothing but the spiritual presentation of the universe, philosophy, in general is itself but the manifestation, i.e., the ongoing proof of God.¹

This passage offers both a crystallization of the Kantian argument for the primacy of the practical and a succinct statement of the core of Schelling's contribution to the history of philosophy. It evinces Schelling's recognition of the participatory perspective that governs human existence, and it acknowledges that philosophy is an unending, historical process devoted to exploring the moral-metaphysical order in which we exist. We cannot prove the reality that is the condition for all proofs; we can only explore it from within.

Ultimately, this position will form the basis for Schelling's positive philosophy, which is the philosophy of existence that he opposes to abstract negative philosophy, or a philosophy of essence. According to Schelling, we must go beyond negative philosophy, for it can only tell us how something must be if it exists, but it can make no pronouncement as to whether that thing exists. Thus, Schelling claims that we must turn

¹ Schelling, "Stuttgart Seminars," in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. Thomas Pfau, 199 (7:423-4).

to the positive philosophy, which is an empirical philosophy of history, in order to determine whether or not what has been determined negatively can in fact be demonstrated to exist.² Previous chapters have suggested that Schelling already grasped the essence of this distinction in the *Freiheitsschrift*; he outlines the basic position in the *Stuttgart Seminars* as well:

the primordial Being as the absolute identity of the Real and the Ideal is itself posited only in a subjective manner, whereas we also need to comprehend it objectively: the absolute identity of the Real and the Ideal must not only be *in and of itself* but also *outside itself*, [that is,] it must be actualized—it must also disclose itself in existence as that which, in its essence, is the absolute identity of the Real and the Ideal.³

As this passage indicates, for Schelling, philosophy becomes the ongoing proof of the existence of God by means of the process of forming a concept of the absolute (the subjective, or the negative) and searching for the manifestation of the absolute so defined in historical reality (the objective, or the positive). But this does not mean that the absolute is readily available to be found in its completeness either. Rather, history is the process by which the absolute discloses itself in time, and the proof must be ongoing because history is not yet over.

From this perspective, it is possible to defend Schelling against the accusation (made in his own time and ours) that he “ontologizes” Kant, which amounts to the charge that he returns to pre-critical metaphysics. Three points can be made in response to this claim. The first is that, as some scholars have argued, Kant himself is already in a sense

² A full discussion of Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy is beyond the scope of this study. Discussion of the dichotomy can be found in English in Schelling, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy*, esp. 141-212.

³ Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars,” 200 (7:424).

ontologized,⁴ although, for Kant, the ontological dimension of his thought is clouded by the ambiguities of his epistemology. Kant restricts human knowledge to the phenomenal in his theoretical philosophy, but then he attempts to articulate the noumenal reality in which we exist through the practical. From this perspective, Schelling is merely clarifying and elaborating on insights that are already, if inchoately, present in Kant's thought. Thus, the ambiguity of Kant's dichotomy between subjective and objective knowledge is overcome by Schelling, but that is simply a more accurate articulation by Schelling of where Kant was going. Thus, as was argued in chapter 2, Schelling is suspicious of the epistemological problems that Kant runs into with his postulates, but this does not cause Schelling to reject the postulates. Rather than consigning them to the epistemological no-man's land that they occupy in Kant's philosophy, he strengthens them by grounding them in a philosophy of freedom.

The second response is that, although Schelling offers a metaphysics, even a theology, he does not objectify God, since God is never presented as a fully present entity that we can study in the subject-object mode of theoretical knowledge. In this sense, Schelling's insight into the perspective of philosophy is precisely Kantian: his reflections are grounded in the recognition that we cannot overstep the limits of our participatory perspective. Schelling does not step outside of his position as a participant in reality in order to develop an "objective" metaphysical account of the world as a series of things. Instead, as was discussed above, God is pointed to as the reality that constitutes our existence. He is both the source and the end of our existence, but he is not an object

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 5th ed., trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997); Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

within it. Rather, as space is to the geometer, so is God the reality that contains all philosophical knowledge. This is a line of thought that Schelling would follow out for the rest of his career, beginning with the *Ages of the World*, which will be discussed below.

The third point has already been suggested. It is that Schelling is not committed to a return to pre-critical metaphysics because he articulates his metaphysics on the basis of freedom, i.e., from within the perspective of the moral condition. For Schelling, metaphysics unfolds from within the perspective of autonomy. Thus, although Schelling often appears to begin his philosophical reflections from God or the absolute, this cannot be the case because such a procedure would be philosophically at odds with his own position. This is further supported by Schelling's suggestion above that God can only come at the end of philosophy (and now history). The truth is that Schelling begins from himself and reaches out to unfold the order of existence from the perspective of his own existence.⁵ Thus, Schelling's model for his explanation of the metaphysical order of existence and the unfolding of historical reality is the human person, and his goal is to show that history is constituted by the progressive self-revelation of the person of God through his relationship to human beings.

The fact that Schelling begins with the human person explains the demand that God must be a person too. Our recognition of spirit or personality as the highest reality points to personality as the source of all reality. How could personhood emerge from a reality that did not include personhood? All naturalist explanations fail because even the possibility of the emergence of personality means that personality existed from the

⁵ But it is important to realize that, for Schelling, this is possible because human existence is grounded in the transcendent reality that we explore through our freedom.

beginning. Thus, our personhood points to our being contained within a reality that is created by a person. Thus, what we want, Schelling claims, is “to conceive of Him [God, or the Absolute] as an actual, personal, and properly living being, in the sense in which we consider ourselves living beings,” and this means that “we are forced to consider Him altogether human; we must assume...that He has everything in common with man except for man’s dependency.”⁶ We must think of God as a person because the world of spirit in which we live could not come from a reality less than spirit. Thus, just as the life of individual is a progressive coming-to-consciousness, so we come to think that “the entire process of the creation of the world...is in effect nothing but the process of the complete coming-to-consciousness, of the complete personalization of God.”⁷ Of course, we cannot prove this in the abstract and we cannot know it with theoretical certainty. Rather, we must turn to the history of human existence in order to determine whether or not it is in fact constituted by the progressive self-revelation of God. Schelling attempts to begin the outline for such a project in *The Ages of the World*.

The Primacy of Existence: Philosophy as History

The *Stuttgart Seminars* point to Schelling’s realization that philosophy must become an historical discipline: since we cannot encapsulate God or the absolute in an abstract rational account, we must turn to a study of the historical unfolding of God as it has actually taken place in history. Schelling already realized this implication of his philosophical development in the *Freiheitsschrift*, as is demonstrated by the fact that he offers a brief account of the history of freedom therein. In the years following, Schelling

⁶ Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars,” 206 (7:432).

⁷ Ibid., 206 (7:433).

would make several attempts to offer an account of the historical unfolding of freedom as the progressive self-revelation of God, but these attempts, referred to as *Die Weltalter*, or *The Ages of the World*, remained unfinished. Schelling's own philosophical position pointed to the impossibility of the task: history, the realm of freedom, is stilling playing itself out, and, therefore, no complete account can be offered. Nevertheless, the drafts of *The Ages of the World* point in the direction that Schelling would take after his discovery of freedom as the centerpiece of philosophy.

All the themes that began to reach clarity for Schelling as he wrote the *Freiheitsschrift* and the *Stuttgart Seminars* inform the *Ages of the World*.⁸ Schelling begins by maintaining his critique of abstract thought as he claims that knowledge must correspond to the emergence of God as a real and living being: "That knowledge is the simple consequence and development of its own concepts was a valid representation [*Vorstellung*] until now. Its true representation is that it is the development of a living, actual being [*Wesen*] which presents itself in it."⁹ It is not enough to create an abstract system of thought; it must somehow be shown that the system corresponds to reality before it can be counted as knowledge. It is in this sense that knowledge is nothing but the self-presentation of the primordial reality in which we live.

⁸ In this presentation I rely on the third draft, which is the most elaborate. It is available in translation as F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). For discussions of *The Ages of the World*, see Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993); Wolfram Högerebe, *Prädikation und Genesis: Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings "Die Weltalter"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁹ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, xxxv (199).

Knowledge is thus the presentation of the absolute as the source and horizon of all reality. “What is living in the highest science can only be what is primordially living, the being that is preceded by no other and is therefore the oldest of all beings.”¹⁰ This is the reality that philosophy cannot go beyond because there is nothing beyond it. As Schelling explains,

nothing precedes or is exterior to this primordial life that might have determined it. It can develop itself, insofar as it develops itself, only freely, out of its own drive and conation, purely out of itself. But it does not develop lawlessly but only in accordance with laws. There is nothing arbitrary in it. It is a nature in the most complete understanding of the word, just as the person is a nature regardless of freedom, nay, precisely because of it.¹¹

Primordial being cannot be contained in thought, but that does not render it chaotic, inexplicable, or arbitrary. While it is true that primordial being cannot be contained by thought, it is not the case that it is thereby against reason. We must distinguish between that which is against reason and that which is simply beyond it. The point is that the primordial being cannot be accounted for in thought because it is always still living itself out, and, as such, it is more than thought. This is what Schelling means when he speaks of the *unvordenklich*, or unprethinkable: it is that which cannot be thought before it has occurred. This does not mean, however, that it is simply unintelligible, for we are capable of grasping it once it has occurred.

This is clear from the opening words of the *Ages of the World*: “The past is known, the present is discerned, the future is intimated. The known is narrated, the discerned is presented, the intimated is prophesied.”¹² Only the past is narrated, which is to say that we can only offer an account of that which has already occurred. The present,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., xxxv (199-200).

¹² Ibid., xxxv (199).

the reality of our existence, is the reality which we are always one step behind, barely catching the events of our time as they unfold. The future is even more elusive: it remains hidden from us; it is uncertain, even if we can guess at its trajectory. “Why cannot what is known in the highest knowledge also be narrated with the rectitude and simplicity of all else that is known? What holds back that intimated golden age in which truth again becomes fable and fable again becomes truth?”¹³ The answer is that the present is not yet the past. The course of history is incomplete. Thus, we cannot account for it in abstraction; we can only know it by living it out.

Thus, Schelling continues to operate with the principle discovered in the *Freiheitsschrift*: our freedom is our point of access to the order of reality. Philosophy is possible because we participate in primordial being as free beings, and our existence itself points to the order of the reality in which we live. In a sense, we have within us a model of the whole of being, and that is why we are capable of knowing it. Echoing his similar claim in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling writes:

A principle that is outside and above the world must be granted to the person. How else could the person, alone among all creatures, trace the long trail of developments from the present back into the deepest night of the past? How else could the person alone climb up to the beginning of the ages if there were not in the person a principle of the beginning of the ages? Created out of the source of things and the same as it, the human soul is conscientious [*mitwissenschaft*] of creation. In the soul lies the highest clarity of all things, and the soul is not so much knowing as knowledge itself.¹⁴

We are embedded within the truth of existence, and the order of reality is discovered from within the process of its being worked out in history. The truth of reality radiates out from our own freedom, which points to the order of the reality in which we live.

¹³ Ibid., xxxv (200).

¹⁴ Ibid., xxxv-xxxvi (200).

Thus, by inspecting the course of our own existence, the process of reality is revealed to us:

There is a light in this darkness. Just as according to the old and almost hackneyed phrase that the person is the world writ small, so the events of human life, from the deepest to their highest consummation, must accord with the events of life in general. Certainly one who could write completely the history of their own life would also have, in a small epitome, concurrently grasped the history of the cosmos.¹⁵

The principle of truth constitutes our existence, and thus the structure of our existence offers us access to the structure of reality. This is the principle that forms the basis of Schelling's analysis in the *Freiheitsschrift* as well: "like is recognized by like."¹⁶

The other important element of Schelling's position in *The Ages of the World* is that knowledge, as narration, emerges out of the movement of existence and must remain tied to that movement. A true philosophical system can never be detached from the reality in which it emerges. Thus, Schelling's system is not an abstract, lifeless one, but a narration, an account of movement, of life. As Schelling writes, "just as all history is not just experienced in reality or only in narration, it cannot be communicated, so to speak, all at once with a general concept. Whoever wants knowledge of history must accompany it along its great path, linger with each moment, and surrender to the gradualness of the development."¹⁷ Thus, all philosophy must be grounded in the movement of existence. The only way toward an account is through the process itself. It is the process that grounds what is true in our knowledge:

it is no less the case with true science than it is with history that there are no authentic propositions, that is, assertions that would have a value or an unlimited

¹⁵ Ibid., 3 (207).

¹⁶ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 10 (7: 337).

¹⁷ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 4 (208).

and universal validity in and for themselves or apart from the movement through which they are produced. Movement is what is essential to knowledge. When this element of life is withdrawn, propositions die like fruit removed from the tree of life. Absolute propositions, that is, those that are once and for all valid, conflict with the nature of true knowledge which involves progression.¹⁸

This is not a denial of universal truth on Schelling's part, but a recognition that the truth of a proposition depends on its connection to the reality that it attempts to express. As Schelling writes, "it seems evident that in true science, each proposition has only a definite and, so to speak, local meaning, and that one who has withdrawn the determinate place and has made the proposition out to be something absolute (dogmatic), either loses sense and meaning, or gets tangled up in contradictions."¹⁹ Our claims to knowledge must remain tied to the existence out of which they emerge, or else they lose all meaning.

Schelling explains this further through an analysis of the internal process of opening toward the order of being that takes place in each of us. He describes the process in terms of the two principles that he believes every human being can find within himself: a higher principle, the principle of knowledge, and a lower principle, the principle of being. According to Schelling, we arrive at knowledge through a process of enlightenment or coming-to-consciousness: we pull knowledge out of the darkness of the lower principle into the light of the higher principle. Thus, as in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling suggests again that the finite world serves as the opening in which revelation can occur. Knowledge is only possible after the division of primordial being into knower and known, and, therefore, the two principles constitute the dialectical condition that makes knowledge possible.²⁰ As Schelling explains:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4-5 (209).

²⁰ See Wolfram Högrefe's account of *The Ages of the World* as a theory of predication in *Prädikation und*

the higher principle feels that the lower principle is not added to it in order to remain fettered to it. It is with it in order to have an Other through which it would be able to contemplate itself, present itself, and be intelligible to itself. In the higher principle everything lies without differentiation and is one. But in the Other it can differentiate, express, and set apart what in it is one.²¹

Thus, this dual principle of human existence opens a space for knowledge, and the dialogue between the two principles within the philosopher is his path to truth: “this silent dialogue, this inner art of conversation, is the authentic mystery of the philosopher.”²² Dialectic, the external “copy of this conversation,”²³ is the outward manifestation of the process through which the knowledge within the unconscious is brought into consciousness. Thus, it is in some sense possible to communicate the knowledge arising from this inner conversation, but one cannot simply transmit it to another unless they come to acquire the knowledge through their own internal dialogue. The external language must be accompanied by the meaning within or else what is communicated will be no more than the dead husk of the meaning that it once contained: “When dialectic has become only form, it is this conversation’s empty semblance and shadow.”²⁴ One must recognize dialectic as the external presentation of the philosophical movement of the soul in order to understand it.

Thus, all knowledge must emerge out of the dialectic that we know from within, and anything that can be “narrated” must therefore have emerged out of the dialectic: “everything known, in accord with its nature, is narrated. But the known is not here something lying about finished and at hand since the beginning. Rather it is that which is

Genesis and Andrew Bowie’s parallel account in *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*.

²¹ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, xxxvi (201).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

always first emerging out of the interior through a process entirely specific to itself.”²⁵ The known is that part of the process that has already taken place, that has already been raised out of the dark principle into the light. As he did with the principle of intellectual intuition in his earliest writings, Schelling likens the process to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, while also emphasizing that the end of the process always eludes us:

What we call knowledge is only the striving toward anamnesis [*Wiederbewusstwerden*] and hence more of a striving toward knowledge than knowledge itself. For this reason, the name Philosophy had been bestowed upon it incontrovertibly by that great man of antiquity. Hence the view, harbored from age to age, that philosophy can be finally transformed into actual knowledge through the dialectic and to regard the most consummate dialectic as knowledge itself, betrays more than a little narrowness. The very existence and necessity of the dialectic proves that it is still in no way actual knowledge.²⁶

We live within the present, and the future remains open ahead of us. To offer a complete account would mean to bring about the end of history.

All of this amounts to saying that the philosopher must become an historian: “the philosopher is situated in no other circumstances than any other historian.”²⁷ Like the historian, the philosopher must “question the testimonies of old documents or the recollection of living witnesses.”²⁸ Philosophy becomes the process of illuminating, or narrating the past, and this means bringing the past to life for ourselves. The measure or principle of our investigations must be the internal dialogue within ourselves. We live within truth, and we must use that position as the basis for broadening our understanding of reality. Thus, Schelling claims that “Everything, absolutely everything, even that

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., xxxvii (201-2).

²⁷ Ibid., xxxvii (202).

²⁸ Ibid.

which by nature is eternal, must have already become internal to us before we can present it externally or objectively. If the writer of history does not awaken in himself or herself the past age whose image they want to project to us, then they will never present it truly, nor vividly, nor in a lively fashion.”²⁹ Or again: “everything remains incomprehensible to human beings until it has become internal to them, that is, until it has been led back to that which is innermost in their being and to that which to them is, so to speak, the living witness of all truth.”³⁰ This is the hermeneutic of freedom at work: the reality within the self is the basis for understanding the reality that transcends the self, which is in turn what supplies the reality within the self. The position is obviously circular when observed from without. From within, however, it is recognizable as the process by which we come to know anything at all. We are always already embedded within truth.

Although Schelling recognizes that we can never escape the perspective of participation and achieve objective knowledge, he holds that this is nevertheless the unending task of philosophy. Philosophers, he argues, strive toward the realization of fully reflective truth: “everything must be brought to actual reflection in which it could reach the highest presentation.”³¹ This goal marks the difference between theosophy and philosophy, according to Schelling. Theosophy may see deeper than philosophy, but it does not attempt to break down its vision into reflective knowledge. Philosophy, on the other hand, submits knowledge to reflective analysis: “all knowledge must pass through

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., xxxix (204).

the dialectic.”³² The inner vision to which we have access must be brought into the light of reflection. Only then will true knowledge be achieved. Thus, the goal of philosophy, now tempered by the recognition of its impossibility in the finite world, remains the same as it was when Schelling conceived his *Naturphilosophie*, i.e., to bring together thinking and being, the ideal and real. Thus, Schelling still notes that “As long as this age restricts itself to the interior and to the Ideal, it lacks the natural means of an external presentation.”³³ The real must be recognized as the ground of all thought: “science no longer begins from the remoteness of abstract thoughts in order to descend from them to the natural. Rather, it is the reverse. Proceeding from the unconscious existence of the eternal, science guides it up to the highest transfiguration and into divine consciousness.”³⁴ Only when the dark principle is fully uncovered in the light will the goal of philosophy be achieved: “Then there will no longer be a distinction between the world of thought and the world of actuality.”³⁵

But this goal, this *telos*, always remains a task for us. “We do not live in vision. Our knowledge is piecemeal, that is, it must be generated piece by piece, according to section and grades, all of which cannot happen without reflection.”³⁶ Thus, Schelling concludes his introduction with a warning to his contemporaries.

Perhaps the one is still coming who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, what will be. But this time has not yet come. We must not misjudge our time. Heralds of this time, we do not want to pick its fruit before it is ripe nor do we want to misjudge what is ours. It is still a time of struggle. The goal of this investigation has still not been reached. We cannot be narrators, only explorers, weighing the

³² Ibid., xxxix (205).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., xxxix-xl (205).

³⁵ Ibid., xl (206).

³⁶ Ibid., xxxviii (203).

pros and cons of all views until the right one has been settled, indubitably rooted forever.³⁷

Schelling still maintains that the task of the philosopher is to explicate the nature of reality in reflective or discursive thought. This has always been the task of philosophy as he conceives it, and it is a task that he continues to undertake in the wake of the *Freiheitsschrift*, although now with a firmer grasp of the limitations on the endeavor. In particular, recognizing that an abstract account is not possible and that truth emerges in the process of existence, Schelling turns to history in order to begin an account of the reality in which we live. Unlike Hegel, Schelling harbors no expectation that philosophy has been brought to an end. Like history, it stretches out into the unforeseeable future. We must be satisfied to live within the truth as it unfolds. This is what autonomy has become in Schelling's thought.

Autonomy as Existence within Obligation

For Schelling, the metaphysical and epistemological reflections just discussed are developed on the basis of our existence as free beings. Thus, the structure of his metaphysical thought and the structure of his moral philosophy mirror one another. Our existence as beings who know and our existence as beings who choose between right and wrong are tied insofar as they both take place in relation to our existence within the process of reality as a whole. In this sense, autonomy takes on the broader meaning of the primacy of existence in Schelling's thought: both ideas point to our perspective as participants within reality. Thus, although Schelling does not use the language of autonomy to describe his position, his philosophy from the *Freiheitsschrift* onward

³⁷ Ibid., xl (206).

nevertheless captures the essence of the insight that Kant struggled to bring to light with the term.³⁸

By characterizing the moral life as autonomous, Kant meant that morality only makes sense from the perspective of one who participates in the moral condition; otherwise, conformity to law is mere legality. This is why Kant claims that we give the law to ourselves: we must be the ones who decide to accept moral responsibility. This does not mean that we decide whether or not we live under the moral condition, however. We assent to the responsibility that is already placed upon us. Thus, for Kant, autonomy marks the recognition that we can understand the moral only from within, but it does not mean that we are free to decide whether or not we are morally culpable, or that we are free to decide what counts as right. Just as the Christian can obey God's will out of fear or love, so too can the Kantian follow the law for heteronomous or autonomous reasons. The key point, then, is that autonomy recognizes that we bind ourselves because we know the moral law from within.

As was discussed in chapter two, early post-Kantian Idealism expanded on Kant's insight by attempting to make autonomy into the center of all of philosophy, not just its practical branch. This amounted to the extension of the principle of autonomy to all of reality. As was discussed in chapter two, the expanded autonomy of the Idealists continued to suffer from the ambiguities that afflicted Kant's thought. The language of self-determination, and its association with the Enlightenment goal of completely certain and transparent knowledge continued to skirt unjustifiably the ultimate impossibility of

³⁸ This is in contrast to Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), who argues that Schelling turns away from autonomy. Her position is based on agreement with the standard interpretation of autonomy as discussed in chapter one.

the goal that the Idealists had set themselves. Struggle as they might, they could not reach a perspective outside of autonomy from which they could explain it once and for all. This tension is manifest in Schelling's early essays as he struggles to offer a scientific account of knowledge, while also recognizing that the absolute is precisely that which cannot be contained in any account. Schelling would go on to develop several systems: his *Naturphilosophie*, the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and his *Identitätsphilosophie*, and each of these systems attempted to offer a complete account of reality, but they all failed to capture the living whole because the absolute necessarily eludes all attempts to systematize it.

In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling finally resigns himself to the fact that he seems to have been aware of all along: we are contained within the absolute, and, therefore, we can only seek to understand it from within. For Schelling, this is the essence of Kant's idea of autonomy: it expresses the recognition that we can only approach reality from the perspective of a participant rather than that of an onlooker. Autonomy, or freedom understood as the moral and intellectual struggle to realize the good and the true, constitutes our existence and serves as the *telos* toward which we endlessly must strive. And it is only from within the perspective of freedom that we can unfold the order of reality. Thus, as the *Oldest System Program of German Idealism*, discussed in the introduction, calls for, ethics becomes the only source of metaphysics. In order to understand the order of reality, we must look to ourselves and the moral condition of our existence: as free participants in the freedom of God, which constitutes the world, we have the principles within ourselves to understand the reality in which we are embedded.

From an ethical point of view, this means that our freedom points to our being beholden to a moral-metaphysical order that transcends the self. Unlike in some of the interpretations of Kant's philosophy discussed in chapter one, there is no doubt or ambiguity in Schelling's thought about the reality or universality of morality. The fact that this is an order that we come to know from within ourselves does not undermine its validity or its universality. Rather, it shows that a universal morality is embedded in who we are. We are constituted by an order that transcends the self. This is evident in Schelling's discussions of ground and existence in the *Freiheitsschrift* and the two principles (the higher and the lower) in *The Ages of the World*. The principles that structure our existence are the principles the structure the whole of reality.

This is also evident in Schelling's reflections on the "forces and powers" that constitute the human spirit in the *Stuttgart Seminars*. Following the pattern of his *Potenzenlehre*, Schelling argues that the human spirit is divided into three parts: the real, the ideal, and a third part that mediates between them. He refers to these, respectively, as temperament [*Gemüth*], soul [*Seele*], and spirit [*Geist*].³⁹ Schelling argues that the middle component, spirit, is again divided into three: in the human spirit, there is the self-will, the universal-will, and the point of indifference between the two. Schelling is clearly following his account of the human spirit in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and he continues to maintain that human freedom is constituted by the struggle between the egotistical will and the universal will. On a higher level, this struggle between the principles of the spirit

³⁹ Schelling uses "spirit" to refer to both the whole and one of the components. He acknowledges the linguistic confusion, but notes that this is also appropriate, since, according to the *Potenzenlehre*, the three parts are exponentially repeated throughout the hierarchy of being. For discussion of the *Potenzenlehre*, see Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

is also the struggle between the other two parts of the spirit, temperament and soul.

Temperament, as our connection with nature, is the real, or egoistic pull in the human spirit, whereas soul, as the divine within us, is the pull of the universal.

As in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling's analysis of the human spirit in the *Stuttgart Seminars*, serves as the basis for his account evil. Schelling once again maintains that the mere existence of the egoistic principle is not the source of evil. Rather, it opens up the possibility of both good and evil. As Schelling writes, in the spirit, the "individual will must exist, and it is not intrinsically evil unless it becomes dominant. Virtue without an active individual will has no merit. Hence it can be argued that the good already implies the idea of evil. A good, unless it involves the overcoming of an evil, is not a real, living good. The most active, and yet subordinate individual will is the highest good." Thus, as he did in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling maintains that evil is a spiritual disease that attempts to overtake existence and dominate it:

evil is not merely a privation of the good, not a mere negation of an inner harmony but rather a positive disharmony. Nor does it derive from the body, as many people continue to believe even today. The body is a flower from which some extract honey and others poison. It is not the body that infects the spirit but rather vice versa. It could indeed be argued that evil itself proves perhaps the most spiritual [phenomenon] yet, for it wages the most vehement war against all Being; indeed, it wishes to destroy the very ground of all creation.⁴⁰

The structure of the human soul also serves as the basis for Schelling's account of the good. In this respect, Schelling's account of the soul is of particular interest, for he claims that it is the manifest presence of the divine within us. As he writes, "The soul constitutes the properly divine in *man*; hence it is something *impersonal*, the proper

⁴⁰ Schelling, "Stuttgart Seminars," 231-2 (7: 468).

Being, to which personality as an intrinsic nonbeing shall remain subordinate.”⁴¹ The soul is not our capacity for truth and goodness, but it is truth and goodness themselves: “the spirit *possesses knowledge* whereas the soul does not know but is science itself. The spirit has knowledge because it also contains the possibility of evil; it can only be *good*, i.e., partake of goodness, whereas the soul is not good but is this goodness [*die Güte*] itself.”⁴² The soul represents the divine within us and it serves as the basis for our participation in the divine source of truth and goodness. It is the measure of the good that we know from within because it is constitutive of the human spirit.

Schelling argues that the struggle between the individual and the universal wills points to the soul as the third aspect of the human spirit, since “if error and evil are both spiritual in kind and origin, the spirit itself cannot possibly be the highest form.”⁴³ If there were no higher principle, there would be no basis for orienting the spirit toward the good. As Schelling writes,

Because disease, error, and evil always originate in the erection of a relative nonbeing on something existing, the human spirit too must once again be a relative nonbeing in relation to some superior being. For otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish between truth and error. Indeed, if there did not exist such a superior power *above* the spirit, everybody and *nobody* would be right.⁴⁴

Without the direction provided by the soul, the spirit would be aimless. In other words, autonomy only makes sense insofar as we see that it includes the recognition that we participate in a universal moral condition that constitutes our existence. Ultimately, autonomy, or freedom, means the proper ordering of the human spirit: “human freedom,

⁴¹ Ibid., 232 (7: 468).

⁴² Ibid., 232 (7: 469).

⁴³ Ibid., 232 (7: 468).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 231 (7: 467-8).

properly speaking, consists precisely in the spirit being subordinate to the soul on the one hand while standing *above* the temperament on the other.”⁴⁵

Schelling emphasizes autonomy as submission in his discussion of the distinction between reason and the understanding, which Kant drew in order to separate the operations of reason in its theoretical mode from its profounder possibilities. In contrast to the strict separation, Schelling argues that “reason is strictly the understanding in its submission to the superior [power] of the soul. Consequently, too, reason in true science assumes a truly passive role, whereas the soul proves active. Reason is but the recipient of truth, the book inscribed by the inspirations of the soul, yet also the touchstone of truth.”⁴⁶ Thus, for Schelling, reason is by definition attached to the living reality of the soul, which is the presence of the divine within every human being. This may not be so far from Kant’s own positions, since one always senses the divine status of reason in Kant’s thought, but Kant’s interpreters have struggled to reconcile that with the notion of autonomy as self-determination. The fact is, however, that even if we were able to explain everything according to reason, we could still not explain the authority of reason. This is why Kant could not go beyond the “fact of reason” as the basis for the moral law.

From this perspective, we are prepared to understand the sense in which each of us, individually and collectively, participates in the process of God becoming manifest as we raise ourselves above our given being. This struggle, according to Schelling, is

the highest moral act of man. Our Being is only a means, a tool for ourselves. Whoever is unable to separate himself from his Being (i.e., whoever cannot become independent and free from it) but remains altogether entangled in, and one with, His Being is completely trapped by His selfhood and unable to improve himself, be it morally or intellectually. Whoever does not separate himself from

⁴⁵ Ibid., 234 (7: 471).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 234-4 (7: 472).

his Being considers this Being essential rather than his inner, superior, and more truthful essence.⁴⁷

God is the being who has always already conquered his Being and risen above his mere ground to assert his existence, and human existence is structured by the attempt to realize this reality in ourselves, or, in other words, to become God-like. Thus, for Schelling, God represents the moral *telos* of our existence that is also its source. Whether we struggle toward the good or not, God holds this position: “Regardless of whether we seek to cultivate ourselves with regard to cognition and science, in a moral sense, the process of self-creation always involves our raising to consciousness what exists in us in unconscious form, to turn our innate darkness into light, in short, to attain a state of clarity.”⁴⁸ Thus, we are free to strive toward the good, but we are not free to escape culpability for choosing not to do so.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Schelling’s position is that, for him, autonomy points to virtue ethics. Schelling claims that when our will and desire are “altogether subordinate to (and in continuous rapport with) the soul, this produces not the individual, good act but the moral disposition of the soul, or *virtue*, in the highest sense, namely, as *virtus*, purity, propriety, and fortitude of the will.”⁴⁹ Schelling argues that this produces the maxim of all the great ethical systems, even Kant’s: “Permit the soul to act within you, or act as a thoroughly holy man.” Schelling notes that Kant only took the formal aspect of this maxim: “‘Act according to your soul’ means simply to act not as a subjective being but in an entirely impersonal manner, without allowing your subjectivity

⁴⁷ Ibid., 208-9 (7: 436).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 206-7 (7: 433).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 235 (7: 473).

to disrupt its influence on you.”⁵⁰ But by choosing the good, by giving ourselves over to the reality that transcends our individuality, we become substantively divine as well: “Whenever this summit has been reached, all temporality and human subjectivity has been discarded, and we are inclined to consider the resulting works the products of the soul, independent of any human collaboration. What is divine is created, known, and produced by the divine only.”⁵¹ At the height of the realization of autonomy, our subjectivity becomes nothing more than a vehicle for the realization of that which transcends the subject. This does not undermine the value of our individuality, however, for the result gains its worth from having gone through the process.

Thus, while Schelling does not offer a complete treatise on ethics, he is well aware of the implications of his philosophy for ethics. Schelling articulates our existence within an order that transcends the self, but he does so on the basis of the self. It is the nature of our ethical existence that points to the metaphysical reality in which we live. As was discussed in chapters three and four, this is essentially the view that Schelling develops in the *Freiheitsschrift* as well. Our existence is constituted by our freedom, which is the struggle between good and evil that takes place in our souls. Thus, the nature of our existence itself points to the reality in which we live. It is on this basis that Schelling attempts to articulate his account of the empirical manifestation of that order.

Religion as the Unfolding of Autonomy in History

Chapter one briefly demonstrated how Kant’s theories of religion and politics are built on his moral philosophy. As should be evident by now, Schelling’s thought follows a

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

similar pattern. There are differences, but these differences are the result of the fact that Schelling is carrying forward Kant's position rather than undermining it. The most important difference is that Schelling has made religion and history central to his philosophy in a way that Kant, in comparison to Schelling, did not. Whereas Schelling claims that philosophy is essentially theology, Kant, on the other hand, "only add[s] God after the fact."⁵² In Schelling's thought, philosophy becomes nothing other than the progressive revelation of God, but, as we saw in chapter one, God sometimes seems to be only an appendage in Kant's a system, a supreme causality that can ensure that the realms of freedom and nature ultimately coincide. For Schelling, on the other hand, "the absolute is the principle of all of philosophy."⁵³

Another important difference is that, for Schelling, history is the history of religion, whereas, for Kant, it often seems that it is political history (although *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* offers an historical account of religion as well). It is true that Kant's various accounts of history must be understood from within the perspective of his philosophy of religion, but his primary concern appears to be the progressive improvement of external, i.e., legal or political, order among human beings. Thus, the significant events in history have to do with the improving of political conditions among human beings. For Schelling, on the other hand, the story of history is the story of man's relation to God as God progressively reveals himself to man in mythology, revelation, and ultimately, what Schelling calls philosophical religion. Thus, for Schelling, since history is constituted by the progressive self-revelation of God, it is constituted by the history of religion. The spiritual reality of human existence supplies

⁵² Ibid., 199 (7: 423).

⁵³ Ibid.

the guiding thread that brings coherence to the mass of historical events that the human species has undergone.

Thus, there are important differences, but there is also a more fundamental sense in which Schelling is also fulfilling Kant's philosophy. It could be said that, for Schelling, God takes the place that reason holds in Kant's philosophy: in Schelling's thought, "philosophy understands God simultaneously as the supreme reason for the explanation of all things."⁵⁴ Thus, for Schelling, "God" is the order that rules over reality just as "Reason" is that order for Kant. This means, in turn, that Schelling and Kant are making the same claim when Schelling claims that history is the progressive self-revelation of God and Kant claims that it is the progressive manifestation of reason (in the guise of the categorical imperative). For both, human beings are caught up in a teleological movement toward the complete realization of the highest good.

Moreover, for Schelling, as for Kant, metaphysics, religion, and politics (as will be discussed in a moment) emerge out of the moral condition of human existence. As free beings, our moral existence illuminates the reality in which we live, and, once discovered, we can trace that reality and strive to under the order of existence in which we are contained. We live in tension toward the absolute as the *telos* of our existence. Our existence as finite beings, as historical beings in time, is defined by our struggle to realize the absolute within ourselves. Thus, religion and history are the historical manifestations of our moral and spiritual struggle to realize truth and goodness. In absolute terms, we are always already obligated to pursue the realization of the absolute. History as the history of religion is the story of this struggle. As we shall see, for

⁵⁴ Ibid., 199 (7: 423).

Schelling, political order in the modern state depends on its being embedded in this context.

Autonomy as the Foundation for Politics

Unlike Kant, Schelling never wrote a specifically political book, and his works rarely provide any evidence of prolonged reflection on specifically political questions.

Nevertheless, Schelling's philosophy has relevance for contemporary political thought insofar as he rethinks the basis for the modern development of liberal political thought through his analysis of autonomy and personhood. Moreover, although he does not devote much time to political philosophy, he does not completely ignore it either. In the *Stuttgart Seminars*, for instance, Schelling himself points to the place of politics in his later thought, and, after reviewing Schelling's discussion, it will become evident that, for Schelling, his understanding of politics is tied to his conception of autonomy.

As was discussed in the last section, Schelling develops his philosophy of religion on the basis of the ethical position that he develops in the *Freiheitsschrift* and afterwards. In the *Stuttgart Seminars*, we see that he, like Kant, thinks about the state in the context of religion and history. Schelling argues that human beings have evidently fallen away from their spiritual unity with God. No longer enjoying unity within the absolute, Schelling argues that human beings seek to reestablish the lost unity. We cannot regain unity in God, however, and thus Schelling points to the state as the attempt to reestablish the lost spiritual unity on a natural basis. As he claims, originally "God *Himself* would have been this unity [of mankind], for only *God* can be the unity of free beings."⁵⁵ Only

⁵⁵ Ibid., 226 (7: 461).

unity in God would have been autonomous unity. Having lost this unity, however, we attempt to reestablish it on our own. According to Schelling, human beings realize that “God can no longer be their unity, and hence they must search for a natural unity that, because it cannot be the true unity of free beings, remains but a temporal and finite bond.”⁵⁶ This leads to politics: the substitute unity, “to which man must necessarily take recourse, is the *state*.”⁵⁷ The state can never serve as an adequate substitute for the original unity in God, however, since the state can only provide external or legal unity, whereas unity in God would be internal or moral. As Schelling remarks, “Because man no longer has God for his unity, he must submit to a material unity.”⁵⁸ Thus, for Schelling, the state fits into a narrative of the human fall from unity with God.

Defined as such, the state is never more than a halfway house that we inhabit as we strive to re-achieve unity with God. As Schelling stresses, the state is by definition forever attempting to achieve something that it can never fully achieve. This is because it represents the attempt to accomplish by external means what can only be achieved internally. But the state cannot achieve the moral or spiritual unity that is sensed as missing: “It is my opinion that the state *as such* can never find a true and absolute unity and that all states are merely attempts at finding such a unity; that is, doomed attempts to become a whole and, as such, subject to the fate of all organic life, namely to bloom, to ripen, eventually to age, and finally to die.”⁵⁹ Citing Plato’s *Republic*, Schelling concludes that “The true state presupposes a heaven on earth, and the true *politeia* exists

⁵⁶ Ibid., 226-7 (7: 461).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 227 (7: 461).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 227 (7: 462).

only in heaven.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it is this true state that underwrites all existing states in history.

For Schelling, this means that political order depends on the higher moral and spiritual principles of our existence. We are motivated to be members of a state by the need to regain the lost unity we once had with God, and the state depends on this missing moral unity for its own maintenance:

The idea of the state is marked by an internal contradiction. It is a natural unity, i.e., a unity whose efficacy depends solely on material means. That is, the state, even if it is being governed in a rational manner, knows well that its material power alone cannot effect anything and that it must invoke higher and spiritual motives. These, however, lie beyond its domain and cannot be controlled by the state, even though the latter boasts with being able to create a moral setting, thereby arrogating to itself a *power* equal to nature. A free spirit, however, will never consider [such] a natural unity sufficient, and a higher talisman is required; consequently, any unity that originates in the state remains inevitably precarious and provisional.⁶¹

Here Schelling recognizes that law along with its coercive power is never enough to hold a state together. A political community also depends on the moral and spiritual dispositions of its members for its sustenance. If no one in a political community were committed to it, then all the force and coercion in the world would not be enough to hold it together.

But, as has already been suggested, Schelling also recognizes the limits of political order and he cautions against trying to set up a state that manifests freedom perfectly. The trauma of the French Revolution is still fresh in Schelling’s mind:

We all know of efforts that have been made, especially since the advent of the French Revolution and the Kantian concepts, to demonstrate how unity could possibly be reconciled with the existence of free beings; that is, the possibility of a state that would, properly speaking, be but the condition for the highest possible

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 227 (7: 461).

freedom of the individuals. Quite simply, such a state is an impossibility. Either the state is deprived of the proper force or, where it is granted such [force], we have despotism.⁶²

Schelling points out that this is, in fact, how the political thought of Fichte (and perhaps others) developed: “Hence it is quite natural that at the end of this period during which people have been talking of nothing but freedom, the most consequent minds, in their pursuit of the idea of a perfect state, would have arrived at the worst kind of despotism (e.g., Fichte’s ‘closed Trade-System’).”⁶³ The attempt to secure a perfect state is necessarily futile, and quite likely dangerous.

Thus, for Schelling, we must pursue political order as a necessary basis for our existence as natural beings, but our moral-spiritual vocation cannot be satisfied by the state. Instead, Schelling argues that “revelation becomes a philosophical necessity,”⁶⁴ and only religion can provide the necessary outlet for our moral end. Thus, Schelling notes the necessity of the Church as an institution separate from the state: “The state, when viewed as an attempt to produce the merely external unity is opposed by another institution, one based on revelation and aimed at producing an inner unity or unity of the mind; namely, the Church.”⁶⁵ Thus, as in Kant, Schelling’s political theory must be read in the context of his moral and religious thought, since it stands as a preparatory step toward the realization of our lost unity with God:

Whatever the ultimate goal may turn out to be, this much is certain, namely, that true unity can be attained only *via* the path of religion; only the supreme and most diverse culture of religious knowledge will enable humanity, if not to abolish the state outright, then at least to ensure that the state will progressively divest itself of the blind force that governs it, and to transfigure this force into intelligence. It

⁶² Ibid., 227 (7: 461-2).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 228 (7: 463).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

is not that the Church ought to dominate the state or vice versa, but that the state ought to cultivate the religious principles within itself and that the community of all peoples ought to be founded on religious convictions that, themselves, ought to become universal.⁶⁶

In other words, what is external should become internal: our legal relationships with one another should become moral ones.

For Schelling as for Kant, politics is a conceptually distinct realm of obligations, but it is one that is ultimately grounded in our moral obligations as free beings, and, while it regulates us as natural beings (i.e., externally), it nevertheless points to our self-regulation as moral beings (i.e., internally). Thus, as we saw was the case with Kant in chapter one, Schelling stands at odds with the social contract tradition in modern liberal thought, since he argues that there is an a priori basis for political obligation. In this way, Kant and Schelling overcome a serious theoretical problem in liberal political thought, i.e., its inability to explain how we are obligated to obey the law even when we have not expressly given our consent to be governed. For both Kant and Schelling, we always already live within a state of obligation. It is a metaphysical fact that we know as being necessarily attached to our freedom.

The trouble with Kant's account is that it is not wholly convincing because he does not seem to adequately articulate the nature and source of our obligations. Kant maintains the dichotomy of theoretical and practical reason, and, therefore, he cannot escape the sense of doubt that always accompanies his practical philosophy. Kant himself recognizes the problem with respect to the postulates of immortality, God, and freedom, but, as was suggested in chapter one, the problem actually affects his whole practical philosophy because it never reconciles itself to the standards for knowledge that

⁶⁶ Ibid., 229 (7: 464-5).

Kant establishes through his practical philosophy. For Kant, even as he argues for the primacy of practical reason, the theoretical continues to threaten to take priority in his mind. His readers must continue to ask: how does he know that there is a universal principle of right? Kant, of course, can offer no proof except for existence itself, which is what he attempts to do in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Schelling, on the other hand, embraces the primacy of practical reason as the primacy of existence. For Schelling, it is our existence within the order of being that reveals that order to us. Schelling leaves behind the doubt that accompanies the lack of a theoretical explanation. On the basis of our freedom itself (in effect, the *Groundwork* procedure that Kant rejects in the second *Critique*), Schelling claims that we have access to a moral-metaphysical order that transcends the self and makes possible our freedom as we experience it. We know it because we live it; our experience is grounded in our existence. Thus, it is not that Schelling offers a substantially different account of political obligation than the one that Kant put forward. Rather, it is that Schelling provides a more solid foundation for Kant's moral and political thought. For Schelling, our very existence as free beings establishes that we are always already members of a state, i.e., the one true state that is the end of our moral existence. This is suggested by his short treatment of politics in the *Stuttgart Seminars*, which grounds politics in the metaphysical and historical context of human existence that has just been elaborated, but it is also suggested by his whole treatment of freedom as the basis for our knowledge of reality. For Schelling, existence in freedom is existence within obligation.

Modernity as Autonomy

Reflection on the meaning of autonomy amounts to reflection on the meaning of modernity insofar as it can be argued that autonomy symbolizes the spirit of modernity by throwing off external authority and asserting the priority of the subject.⁶⁷ This study of autonomy and the primacy of the practical in Schelling's thought points to a very different narrative of modernity than the one that is usually accepted (at least implicitly, but very often quite explicitly) by students of Kant and the German Idealists. While interpreters of autonomy have wrestled with the tension between the notion that we give the laws to ourselves and the universality of the moral law, they have displayed a strong tendency to emphasize the former, the so-called voluntaristic aspect of autonomy. The belief is that autonomy must be about liberating the individual from any obligation that comes from outside of our own reason. As one interpreter of Kant's political philosophy has claimed, "We are subject to the laws of reason alone: With this recognition Kant frees us from the domination of theological absolutism and the bonds of teleological natural law, and likewise elevates us above the prosaic banalities of the doctrine of prudence."⁶⁸ Interpretations such as these demonstrate an acceptance of the common narrative of modernity as the progressive liberation of the individual.

When we include Schelling's contribution to the development of autonomy in the narrative, however, we arrive at a very different picture, one that even a proper reading of Kant should support, as was argued in chapter one. This is because Schelling understands autonomy as an articulation of the order that we live within rather than as a

⁶⁷ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

⁶⁸ Wolfgang Kersting, "Politics, freedom, and order: Kant's political philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed., Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 342.

Promethean revolt against the order of being. In so doing, he offers us another way to think about the modern world in which we live.⁶⁹ Instead of conceiving of ourselves as completely undetermined and unattached selves who rightfully express ourselves as we see fit—as practitioners of what Charles Taylor calls an ethics of authenticity⁷⁰—we realize that we remain within a moral-metaphysical order that transcends the self just as the ancients and medievals claimed all along. Autonomy is the recognition that we live within morality. Our freedom is a participation in God’s freedom. We are free to decide if we will respond to the call of morality; but we are not free to escape culpability should we decide not to heed that call. Thus, if autonomy is the definitive expression of modernity, then modernity is a reformulation of our understanding of the moral tradition of Western civilization, but not a complete break with it.

Yet Schelling’s position does not represent a mere return to pre-Kantian metaphysics. His approach to the order that we live within is distinctively modern because he begins from the self. Schelling’s analysis shows that if we begin from ourselves, from our freedom, we arrive at the recognition of the order that we live within. Being a self, being free, implies that order. This is the point of Schelling’s development of Kant’s arguments for the primacy of practical reason into the recognition of the primacy of existence, and it also means that he does not simply return to early attempts to

⁶⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von Letzten Haltungen*, vol. 1: *Der Deutsche Idealismus* (Freiburg: Johannes, 1998). Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 25: *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VII: *The New Order and the Last Orientation*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999). For discussion of Voegelin’s relationship to Schelling, see Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Steven F. McGuire, “Voegelin and Schelling on Freedom and the Beyond,” in *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition: Explorations in Political Thought*, ed. Lee Trepanier and Steven F. McGuire (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010 [forthcoming]).

⁷⁰ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

offer an abstract metaphysical account. For Schelling, as for Kant, our understanding of metaphysics develops from within the perspective of participation. It is transcendently articulated as the order that we live within. Metaphysics does not involve the identification of static entities, but, rather, it designates the process of articulating the living reality of which we are a part. This becomes most evident in Schelling's later distinction between the negative and positive philosophies, but it is already manifest in the *Freiheitsschrift's* critique of the abstractness of Idealism and other previous philosophical approaches. For Schelling, we must explore metaphysics from within, which means that we cannot handle metaphysical realities like objects in the world of experience. It also means that our exploration is always incomplete.

In this way, Schelling challenges the Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge as requiring theoretical certainty that still haunts Kant and early German Idealism. For Schelling, we cannot know God as an object of theoretical reason, but that does not mean that we cannot know him. Why should all knowledge be reduced to the theoretical model? Clearly we know more than it has to offer: the very fact that we can recognize the limitations of theoretical reason points to our participation in a reality that eludes it. Thought cannot contain all of existence, but that does not render the rest of existence a phantasm. This is the realization contained in Schelling's hermeneutic of freedom, and, while Kant remains mired in the tension between theoretical and practical reason, Schelling embraces the perspective of existence as our conduit to the metaphysical order in which we exist. Thus, Schelling points beyond the theoretical epistemology that continues to influence philosophy into the present. He points beyond the belief that the certainty of theoretical reason is the only acceptable form of knowledge.

For Schelling, while modernity is about realizing individual freedom, it is also about recognizing the metaphysical context in which that freedom exists. We live within a moral-metaphysical structure that is not of our own making; human freedom is a participation in the divine freedom that constitutes the world. Many have taken the failure of theoretical reason to demonstrate our freedom, the moral law, or the existence of God as evidence that we cannot know their reality, but Schelling demonstrates that such a position is in its own way an instance of speculative mischief. These are realities that transcend the subject-object mode of knowing, and thus we cannot determine their reality on that basis. Instead, Schelling shows, we know these things because we live within them; they constitute our existence. They are the realities that make our existence possible. Modernity recognizes that every individual should come to recognize these realities of his or her own volition, but it does not thereby deny that they exist. Thus, even for Schelling, autonomy remains the consummate expression of modernity since it articulates our participatory existence within a moral-metaphysical order, while also recognizing that every individual must choose that order for him- or herself.

Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken two tasks. In the first half, it elaborated the philosophical position that Schelling develops in the *Freiheitsschrift* by showing how he continues to work with it in subsequent works, notably the *Stuttgart Seminars* and *The Ages of the World*. For Schelling, our freedom itself becomes the basis for our philosophical exploration of the order in which we live. This means that we can only know that reality from the perspective of participation, and it means that we can never arrive at complete

knowledge of the order of reality—although such knowledge remains the hypothetical goal toward which we strive. Our freedom is the basis for our exploration of reality because it is the principle by which we recognize the reality that transcends reflective awareness. It is the aspect of our existence that enables us to see the finite as finite and the immanent as immanent. Our ability to recognize the limitations of these categories points to the fact that we are not contained by them. We have within us a principle that transcends reflective consciousness and theoretical reason.

This chapter has also shown how Schelling's account of human existence—including not only ethics, but also religion, history, and politics—continues to unfold from within his account of autonomy. For Schelling as for Kant, our spiritual calling, which is most fundamentally a moral one, is our highest vocation, and it defines the structure and purpose of our existence. Only God is truly autonomous, but we are called to strive to realize autonomy in ourselves by bringing ourselves ever closer to union with God or the absolute. Schelling's account of religion, history, and politics all emerge within this context. Religion is the location of the divine-human encounter, and history is the story of the development of that relationship as God progressively reveals himself to the world. Politics fits into the story as the natural order among human beings as we strive to regain spiritual union with the divine through our struggle toward autonomy. Thus, for Schelling, politics depends on our spiritual-moral vocation, since it is that vocation which ultimately grounds politics. Without the sense of obligation that comes with our freedom, there would not be enough force in the world to maintain order among human beings. Even though it can force us to recognize our obligations, the state nevertheless depends on our recognizing that freedom comes with obligations.

Finally, Schelling offers a glimpse into a parallel narrative of modernity as search for order. Autonomy is not about the voluntaristic assertion of the self; rather, it is the recognition of our participation in an order the transcends the self. Modernity entails recognizing the value of every individual discovering this order for him- or herself, but it does not mean that the order of reality depends on our recognizing it. Whether we live up to our obligations or not, they are still our obligations. Schelling's development of autonomy shows that this was its meaning all along. We must choose to align ourselves with the moral law, but, whether we do so or not, our freedom remains tied to our participation in a moral order that transcends the self.

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