

Schelling on the Unconditioned Condition of the World

G. Anthony Bruno

Despite fruitful and sometimes bitter disputes regarding philosophy's systematic ambitions, Kant and the German idealists share a commitment to the primacy of the practical. But distinguishing which sense of the practical is primary is crucial for clarifying their various positions.

In the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that while the “negative utility” of critique is to restrict speculative reason to possible experience, its “positive and very important utility” is to reveal the “absolutely necessary practical use of pure reason (the moral use), in which reason unavoidably extends itself beyond the boundaries of sensibility”. Indeed, critique’s negative utility serves its practical utility because it “removes an obstacle that limits or even threatens to wipe out the practical use of reason”. The obstacle is the assumption that the objects of experience are things in themselves, from which it follows that “the mechanism of nature” is “valid of all things in general” and hence that the “human soul” is univocal in “meaning” – viz., “as a thing in itself” subject, like all things, to “natural necessity” – and so is incapable of freedom.¹ Removing this assumption not only resolves the antinomies into which speculative reason falls, but, by depriving the latter of “its pretension to extravagant insights”, it also makes possible the “practical extension of pure reason”. Hence Kant’s declaration: “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” and “morality”.²

The priority of critique’s positive, practical utility frames Kant’s demand in the *Critique of Practical Reason* for the “subordination” of reason’s speculative interests to its practical interests. To prevent “a conflict of reason with itself”, practical reason must have the “primacy” whereby “all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone”.³ By deploying critique for the purpose of reason’s practical extension, and by subordinating all interests to those of practical reason, Kant makes clear that it is in terms of rationality that the practical is primary. As he says in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*:

¹ *KrV*, BXXIV–XXVII.

² *KrV*, BXXX.

³ *KpV*, AA V: 121.

Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a *will*. Since *reason* is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason. (GMS, AA IV: 412)

The practical is primary insofar as it involves a will that is constituted by reason, *i.e.*, by a capacity to act in the light of a law.

Fichte agrees that the will is nothing if not rationally practical. In the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, he claims that Kant rightly “insists upon the primacy of practical reason”, though he complains that Kant “failed to show decisively that the practical is the source of the theoretical”.⁴ While he follows Kant in rejecting the ‘dogmatic’ view of the I as univocally a “thing” among things in themselves,⁵ he charges that Kant’s subordination of speculative to practical reason is unsystematic in that it does not derive the former from the latter.⁶ Nevertheless, Fichte affirms Kant’s position that the primacy of the practical is to be construed in terms of reason. As he says in *System of Ethics*, the only way to explain the “appearance of freedom” is “to grant primacy to practical reason, to hold the moral law to be the true and ultimate determination of our essence”. The practical is primary because this is the only explanation according to which “reason is, in every respect, its own law”.⁷ Such an explanatory *desideratum* reflects Fichte’s assertion in *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* that the “overall gist of the *Wissenschaftslehre* [...] is this: Reason is absolutely self-sufficient”.⁸

I will argue that Schelling diverges from Kant and Fichte by casting the primacy of the practical, not in terms of reason, but in terms of sheer undetermined will. He describes freedom in *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* as the “capacity for good and evil” and the “one and all of philosophy.”⁹ While the latter description posits freedom as philosophy’s unconditioned condition or first principle, the former can be interpreted as positing freedom as conditioned by no law, not even the moral law. Schelling puts both of these descriptions to use when attacking Fichte’s Kantian conception of reason or ‘the I’ as self-positing:

The I, Fichte says, 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 something and is the ground of all ways of being. (AA I 17, 152 | SW VII, 385)

⁴ GA IV/3, 371.

⁵ GA IV/3, 347.

⁶ See Bruno (2018).

⁷ GA I/5, 65; 67.

⁸ GA I/4, 227.

⁹ AA I 17, 124 f. | SW VII, 351 f.

For Fichte, the primacy of the practical consists in the I's capacity to posit itself, *i.e.*, to cognize itself as 'its own law', for only this guarantees its absolute self-sufficiency. Schelling's objection is that all cognition, including the I's self-cognition, presupposes a more 'primal and fundamental' ground. On this view, a truly unconditioned condition escapes cognition. Hence Schelling refers to this condition as non-cognitive 'willing' – a real 'self-positing' that outstrips any lawful cognition of reason. In this regard, the will's expression is necessitated by no law, but is radically contingent. Schelling expands on this idea later in the *Freedom Essay*:

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, indeed, not even, according to the familiar phrase, that the human race can be propagated by it. 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. (AA I 17, 177 | SW VII, 413)

The primal ground of cognition is practical and yet, as we will see, 'dark'. Schelling thus affirms the heterogeneity of ground and consequent such that the practical is *arationally* primary. As he will argue, freedom is unfathomable by reason.

Schelling's position in the *Freedom Essay* marks a radical departure, not only from the other idealists, but also from his own philosophy of identity, which a decade prior grounds philosophy, not on abyssal freedom, but on the absolute identity of reason. In *Further Presentations From the System of Philosophy*, he says: "[e]verything we can know is a fragment of the absolute essence of the eternal principle [*i.e.*, reason], only cast in the form of appearance"; the finite world and its laws are mere appearances, "expressions of their absolute nothingness and insubstantiality".¹⁰ And in the Würzburg lectures published as *System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular*, Schelling claims that human subjectivity "ceases" to be from the standpoint of reason, adding: "it is not me who recognizes [reason's] identity, but it recognizes itself, and I am merely its organ".¹¹

Furthermore, by grounding philosophy on human freedom, the *Freedom Essay* recovers aspects of Schelling's thinking prior to the philosophy of identity, particularly his sympathy in *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* for the finite subject who resists seeking refuge in the absolute:

I understand you, dear friend! You deem it greater to struggle against an absolute power and to perish in the struggle than to guarantee one's safety from any future danger by positing a moral god. (AA I 3, 17 | SW I, 284)

It also reprises Schelling's statement in *Anti-Critique* that the "first step into philosophy must manifest the arrival of a free human being" and that philosophy's first postulate is "to act freely".¹²

¹⁰ AA I 12,1, 133 | SW IV, 396f.

¹¹ SW VI, 142f.

¹² AA I 3, 192 | SW I, 243.

Schelling's philosophical revolution leads him in the *Freedom Essay* to criticize idealism for not grasping freedom as its "innermost presupposition". He marvels, in particular, at how 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 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. (AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 351 f.)

The first *Critique* salvages from its correction of speculative reason the negative thesis that "freedom is at least *not incompatible with nature*",¹³ while the second *Critique* advances the positive thesis that freedom exists supersensibly as independence from empirical conditions of experience like time.¹⁴ As Schelling glosses Kant's positive thesis, freedom and independence from time are 'correlate concepts'. Schelling's complaint is that, by attributing freedom, the 'only possible positive concept' of the supersensible, to subjects alone, Kant problematically restricts his positive thesis, for he shows only that freedom is compatible with our own nature, not with nature itself. Whereas Fichte charges Kant with leaving speculative and practical reason disunified, Schelling charges Kant with leaving freedom and nature disunified.

Schelling extends this charge to Fichte, whose idealism he calls "subjective".¹⁵ The charge is that idealism must show how freedom relates to objects as such, lest they be excluded from the space of freedom occupied by subjects. In Schelling's words, idealism must show, not only that freedom is "truly actual", but also that "everything actual (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground".¹⁶ With this assertion, he demands the expansion of the definition of freedom so that it entails, not merely temporal independence, but the temporal independence of that which grounds the world as an intelligible whole. By not rising to this "higher standpoint of reflection", Kant and Fichte's idealism "does not reach far enough" to grasp "the distinctiveness of human freedom".¹⁷

Schelling immediately observes a consequence of this failure: "it would be an error to think that pantheism has been abolished and destroyed by idealism, a view that could only arise from the confusion of pantheism with onesided realism".¹⁸ Schelling's full charge, then, is that idealism's failure to grasp freedom's distinctiveness undermines its attempt to refute pantheism, as exemplified by Spinoza. This raises two questions, which I will answer in turn: what, for Schelling, is distinctive of hu-

¹³ *KrV*, A558/B586.

¹⁴ Cf. *KpV*, AA V: 43.

¹⁵ AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 351. Cf. *Ideen*, AA I 13, 110 | SW II, 72.

¹⁶ AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 351.

¹⁷ AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 352.

¹⁸ AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 352.

man freedom; and how does the idealists' failure to grasp it render them unable to refute pantheism? To answer these questions, I will reconstruct Schelling's argument in the *Freedom Essay* that freedom has the distinctness of being the unconditioned condition of the world's intelligibility. My reconstruction will illustrate how Schelling's notion of freedom as primal will grounds the primacy of practical reason as Kant and Fichte conceive it. I will then consider three objections to Schelling's argument. Throughout, I will develop the Schellingian idea that freedom is enacted in an unprethinkable decision that cannot be anticipated by any law or principle.

1.

If we are to understand what, according to the *Freedom Essay*, is distinctive of human freedom, we first need to track Schelling's metaphilosophical pluralism, *i.e.*, his commitment to the valid multiplicity of philosophical systems. In *Anti-Critique*, he declares the idea of a sole, correct first principle "unworthy of a free man who knows his own self".¹⁹ Philosophy is not restricted to any principle, "contained as though in a box", because it is the "pure product of a free man".²⁰ Schelling reprises this thought in the *Letters*, saying that knowledge is "the pure product of our freedom".²¹ He then extends this thought further:

no philosopher will imagine that he has done everything, by merely setting up the highest principles. For those principles have only a subjective value as a basis of his system, that is, they are valid for him only inasmuch as he has anticipated his own practical decision. (AA I 3, 81 | SW I, 313)²²

No principle enjoys any validity beyond one's decisive resolve to construct a system on its basis. As Schelling says, "every *system* bears the stamp of individuality on the face of it, because no system can be completed otherwise than *practically*, that is, subjectively".²³

Following the **Philosophy of Identity**,  Schelling resumes his metaphilosophical pluralism in the *Freedom Essay*:

it is entirely the same for pantheism as such whether individual things are in an absolute substance or just as many individual wills are included in a primal will. In the first case, pantheism

¹⁹ AA I 3, 192 | SW I, 242.

²⁰ AA I 3, 192 f. | SW I, 242 f.

²¹ *Philosophische Briefe*, AA I 3, 76 | SW I, 308.

²² This suggests a response to Fichte's challenge to isolate a ground beyond the first principles of idealism and realism (cf. *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung*, GA I/4, 189), for prior to these lies decision, which is restricted in advance by no particular philosophical system. Crucially, the lack of a prior criterion for decision does not diminish the significance of one's choice: although the possible systems by which to live are theoretically equivalent insofar as their first principles cannot be derived and so cannot refute their contraries, they differ practically for one who has found value in one over another; cf. *Philosophische Briefe*, AA I 3, 109 | SW I, 339.

²³ *Philosophische Briefe*, AA I 3, 72 | SW I, 304. One may of course lack or refuse this resolve.

would be realist, in the other, idealist, but its basic concept remains the same. Precisely here it is evident for the time being that the most profound difficulties inherent in the concept of freedom will be just as little resolvable through idealism, taken by itself, than through any other partial system. (AA I 17, 124 f. | SW VII, 352)

Pantheism ‘as such’ is indifferent to its realist and idealist appropriations since, in both, ‘its basic concept remains the same’, *viz.*, ‘the concept of freedom’. This concept grounds pantheism whether the latter is construed as the existence of all things ‘in an absolute substance’, following Spinoza’s realism, or in a ‘primal will’, following Fichte’s idealism (this, despite Schelling’s appropriation of the same term for his own view). This is why realism and idealism are ‘partial systems’: they equally presuppose the thesis that freedom grounds the world pantheistically construed.

Earlier, Schelling states: “individual freedom is surely connected in some way with the world as a whole (regardless of whether it be thought in a realist or idealist manner)”.²⁴ According to this claim, neither idealists nor realists have exclusively authoritative access to the essence of freedom. Since the *Freedom Essay* treats freedom as the ‘one and all of philosophy’, this entails that idealism and realism have equal validity regarding a matter of systematic philosophical importance and hence equal validity as philosophical systems. Beyond this metaphilosophical point, however, the claim broaches the issue of what is distinctive of human freedom, for it states that freedom relates, not to some entity or domain in the world, but to ‘the world as a whole’. This suggests the thesis that freedom is the world’s ground or unconditioned condition, for only such a condition relates to ‘the world as a whole’, as opposed to one of its contents or domains. In fact, just prior to the claim, Schelling provides a four-step argument for precisely this thesis, which I will now reconstruct.²⁵

In the second sentence of the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling says:

[1] Since no concept can be defined in isolation, [...] and only proof of its connection with the whole also confers on it final scientific completeness, [2] this must be pre-eminently the case with the concept of freedom, which, [3] if it has reality at all, must not be simply a subordinate or subsidiary concept, but [4] one of the system’s ruling centerpoints. (AA I 17, 111 | SW VII, 336)

Step [1] posits a holism criterion according to which the ‘scientific completeness’ of a concept’s definition depends on its conceptual relation to all other concepts in a systematic ‘whole’. This criterion expresses the plausible idea that a system of concepts is not comprehensive if one of its constituents bears no conceptual relation to any others.

Step [2] asserts that the holism criterion applies ‘pre-eminently’ to the concept of freedom. Schelling clarifies the importance of this particular application when, in the next sentence, he acknowledges “an old but in no way forgotten legend” that freedom is “completely incompatible with system, and every philosophy making claim to uni-

²⁴ *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 111 | SW VII, 337.

²⁵ A version of this reconstruction appears in Bruno (2014).

ty and wholeness should end up with the denial of freedom".²⁶ The longstanding suspicion is that freedom, by being its own reason or cause, is self-explanatory, whereas a system's comprehensiveness precludes explanatorily autonomous or isolated conceptual regions. Applying the holistic criterion to the concept of freedom is meant to dispel this suspicion by showing that systematicity and freedom are indeed conceptually compatible.

Step [3] specifies a requirement for this compatibility. It claims that the concept of freedom cannot stand in a 'subordinate or subsidiary' relation to other concepts in a system. Old as it may be, the suspicion that systematicity and freedom are incompatible reflects the proximate role that nihilism plays in the emergence of German idealism. The idealists confront nihilism amid a controversy stoked by Jacobi's *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* concerning a tension between rational systematicity and human freedom. According to Jacobi, reason's demand for explanatory comprehensiveness requires a commitment to the principle of sufficient reason that unavoidably leads to necessitarianism, as typified by Spinozistic pantheism, one corollary of which is that human freedom is incoherent. The nihilistic threat this poses is that we are the effects of external causes that determine us *ad infinitum*. The explanatory priority of such causes over us subordinates the concept of freedom to the level of illusion, which the idealists agree must be refuted through freedom's absolute enshrinement.

Step [4] concludes that the concept of freedom must stand in an unconditioned conditioning relation to all other concepts within a systematic whole – as what Schelling calls a 'centerpoint'.

To recap: if [1] a specific concept must relate explanatorily to all other concepts in a system, such that [2] that system is compatible with this concept and such that [3] that system's explanatory relations subordinate this concept to no others, *i.e.*, such that this concept is conditioned by no others, then [4] that concept's explanatory role within that system is unconditional. The threat of nihilism motivates the affirmation of this argument's antecedent, as a consequence of which the concept of freedom cannot be one among many in a systematic whole but must be the unconditioned condition of that whole. Insofar as the world is a totality represented as an intelligible whole, freedom must serve as its unconditioned condition.

Understood in the context of nihilism, Schelling's four-step argument demonstrates that a system in which freedom has any place is one that is unconditionally conditioned by freedom. And since, on pain of nihilism, a system must have some place for freedom, the only possible system is one that is unconditionally conditioned by freedom.²⁷ This illustrates what is distinctive about human freedom: it relates to 'the world as a whole', as only an unconditioned condition can. Nevertheless, we can

²⁶ AA I 17, 111 | SW VII, 336.

²⁷ The requirement that freedom have some non-illusory place within a philosophical system is, of course, only salient in the face of nihilism. The contingency or fragility of a philosophy of freedom in Schelling's sense accordingly consists in one's being alive to this threat.

say that freedom is rationally, not really, distinct from what it grounds: its grounding role is intelligible only in relation to its consequent.

Before turning to the question of how the idealists' failure to grasp freedom's essence renders them unable to refute pantheism, I want to pause over Schelling's claim in step [4] that freedom is 'one of' a system's centerpoints. This implies that a system has other centerpoints – multiple unconditioned conditions – whereas we might expect that freedom is a system's single centerpoint. Recall that, according to Schelling's abiding pluralism, the idea of a single, correct first principle in philosophy – a single unconditioned condition – is incoherent insofar as philosophy is a pure product of human freedom.²⁸ Humans express their freedom through their construction of intelligible systems. But this activity is restricted to no particular system. As we might put it, there is no one way of leading the examined life. Humans can therefore arguably serve as distinct 'ruling centerpoints' of one system, given the unconditionally conditioning role that their freedom plays in it.

Having reconstructed Schelling's argument that freedom is the unconditioned condition of the world grasped as a systematic whole, I will now turn to his argument for why the idealists' failure to grasp this distinctive feature of freedom is what undermines their attempted refutation of pantheism. I will focus, in particular, on Fichte.

2.

The nihilistic threat posed by pantheism animates much of Fichte's thinking. He sees its solution as requiring a transition from the letter of Kant's idealism to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte argues that Kant's negative thesis that freedom is not incompatible with nature assumes an unstable distinction between appearances, which we can know, and things in themselves, which we cannot know speculatively, but must think regulatively. In the *New Presentation*, he says that Kant

speaks of a deception that constantly recurs, even though one knows it to be a deception. How can Kant know that it always recurs [?...] To know that one is deceived, and yet to be deceived, is not the state of conviction and agreement with oneself, but rather that of an unstable inner conflict. (GA I/4, 264)

The deception in question is transcendental illusion, whereby, as Kant says, we naturally and unavoidably confuse the "subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts" with "objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves".²⁹ Fichte thinks we cannot consistently diagnose this deception without thereby over-

²⁸ Schelling thus avoids the spoiling ingredient in an antinomy between skeptical and dogmatic views that affirm that philosophy must have a single first principle yet disagree about whether it can be known.

²⁹ *KrV*, A297/B353.

coming it, *viz.*, by jettisoning all thought of things in themselves, including regulative thought. We are able to jettison such thought because it is “created solely by [us]”.³⁰ And we must jettison such thought on pain of adopting an “unstable” perspective from which we acknowledge an illusory mode of thinking yet condemn ourselves to what Kant describes as the peculiar fate of indulging the “false hopes”³¹ that it offers. If, instead, we see that consciousness of appearances is “our only truth”, then the “false philosophy” of things in themselves “falls from [our] eyes like scales, and the deception never returns”.³² We are only wilfully deceived if, after diagnosing the deception, we persist in thinking in any way about the thing in itself.

Worse still, thinking the thing in itself regulatively, according to Fichte, tempts us beyond the standpoint of consciousness. This is to court Spinozistic pantheism. As he says in *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, “if we go beyond the *I am*, we necessarily arrive at Spinozism”, for “there are only two completely consistent systems: the *critical*, which recognizes this boundary [of consciousness], and the *Spinozistic*, which oversteps it”.³³ For Fichte, a philosophical system must rest on a knowable first principle, which both Spinozism and the *Wissenschaftslehre* purport to do, but which Kant’s idealism does not. For Kant, the first principle or common root of theoretical and practical reason is unknowable. This dangerously leaves open which of the ‘only two’ systems is true.³⁴ Fichte’s idealism thus stands alone against the nihilistic threat posed by Spinozistic pantheism.

Fichte gives an indirect refutation of Spinozistic pantheism in the *New Presentation*, where he says that philosophy’s “first task” is to posit a first principle.³⁵ As we saw, this principle must either be critical or Spinozistic – philosophy is idealistic or else pantheistic. Fichte cannot directly refute the Spinozist in order to vindicate idealism: “we cannot force anyone to accept [idealism], since the acceptance of this system is something that depends on freedom”.³⁶ Instead, Fichte shows how she refutes herself. Since positing a first principle is the response to a task, it is a normative act for which one is responsible. However, the Spinozist posits a principle whose nihilistic

³⁰ *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung*, GA I/4, 264.

³¹ *KrV*, A298/B355.

³² *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung*, GA I/4, 265.

³³ GA I/2: 264.

³⁴ Cf. *KrV*, A681/B709: “One mistakes the significance of this idea [of the highest being] right away if one takes it to be the assertion, or even only the presupposition, of an actual thing to which one would think of ascribing the ground for the systematic constitution of the world; rather, one leaves it entirely open what sort of constitution in itself this ground, which eludes our concepts, might have.”

³⁵ GA I/4, 186.

³⁶ GA I/4, 252. Cf. *System der Sittenlehre*, GA I/5, 278f.: “theoretical conviction itself cannot be forced upon anyone [...] No one is convinced who does not delve into himself and feel inwardly the consent of his own self to the truth that has been presented, a consent that is an affect of the heart and by no means a conclusion of the understanding [...] Conviction is an action of reason, through which it *subordinates* itself to the truth through an act of its own self-activity; it is not a passive state of reason.”

corollary precludes her capacity for normative activity. Infinitely determined modes are incapable of the responsibility required to fulfill philosophy's first task. The Spinozist refutes her principle, then, just by positing it, a performative contradiction that undermines her intended system. Her act comes too late to vindicate her system because it already has the normative feature of endorsement, which betrays her system. As Fichte observes: "there is something within [the Spinozist] that sides with the [idealist]"³⁷. Pantheism's self-refutation leaves idealism as "the only possible philosophy"³⁸, in possession of the sole, correct first principle.

This argument removes the appearance of metaphilosophical pluralism from Fichte's dictum that one's philosophy depends on "the kind of person one is".³⁹ The dictum seems to suggest that one could legitimately endorse pantheism, given a Spinozistic personality. But the Spinozist's self-refutation shows that she can have no first principle.⁴⁰ With no first principle, she has no system. The kind of person one is accordingly amounts to a question about whether one rises to "the level of idealism"⁴¹ and owns up to one's freedom, or else evades it in bad faith. As Fichte says in the *Nova Methodo*:

[w]hether one embraces or rejects [idealism] is something that depends upon one's inmost way of thinking and upon one's faith in oneself. A person who has faith in himself cannot accept any variety of dogmatism or fatalism. (GA, IV/3: 335)

If the only kind of person is an idealist (whether self-willed or failed), then, as Fichte concludes, "[t]he only type of philosophy that remains possible is idealism".⁴²

How, then, does Fichte's idealism fail to refute Spinozistic pantheism, as Schelling charges? Schelling remarks in a footnote that idealism, no less than Spinozism, has the "honour" of being a "system of reason".⁴³ We saw that, according to Schelling's pluralism, a system of reason, whether 'idealist' or 'realist', is a product of human

³⁷ GA I/4, 195.

³⁸ GA I/4, 198.

³⁹ GA I/4, 195.

⁴⁰ Cf. GA I/4, 190: "the object of dogmatism cannot be considered to be anything but a pure invention".

⁴¹ GA I/4, 195.

⁴² GA I/4, 198. Contrast Jacobi in his open letter to Fichte: "Every philosophy, without exception, is at some point marked by a *miracle*. Each has a particular site, its *holy place*, where its miracle appears and, being alone the True, makes all others superfluous. Taste and character determine to a large extent in which direction we shall look, towards one of these sites or another. You have aptly remarked on this yourself (on p.25 of your *New Exposition*) where you say: 'The philosophy one chooses depends on the kind of man one is. For a philosophical system is not a dead utensil that one can either take up or put down at will, but is quickened through the soul of the man who has it.' You may well be surprised that I should quote this passage, and call it apt, for the surrounding context (pages 23 to 26) proclaims with biting wit your contempt, or at least your *indifference, for my way of thinking*, and a scarcely *restrained* ridicule. But for this reason I have thought of this passage with all the greater fondness, as an occasion to note that by writing this letter I have exhibited a *strength of spirit* at least not *contemptible*." (JWA 2,1, 223)

⁴³ *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 122 Fn. | SW VII, 349 Fn.

freedom – hence his claim above that Fichte’s I ‘is not even primary’, but presupposes ‘a primal and fundamental willing’. Thus, although Spinozism for Spinoza is incompatible with human freedom, Spinozism *qua* system of reason is essentially compatible with it. Just after this footnote, Schelling explains why Spinoza’s own “fatalist” denial of freedom is “completely [...] independent of pantheism” as such:

[Spinoza] treats the will also as a thing and then proves very naturally that it would have to be determined in all its activity through another thing that is in turn determined by another, and so on *ad infinitum*. Hence the lifelessness of his system, the sterility of its form, the poverty of concepts [...] [H]ence his mechanistic view of nature follows quite naturally as well. Or does one doubt that the basic view of Spinozism must already be essentially changed by a dynamic notion of nature? (*Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 122 | SW VII, 349)

Spinozistic pantheism’s ‘poverty of concepts’ owes to its lack of a concept of human freedom, while its ‘sterility’ owes to its elimination of purposiveness.⁴⁴ However, we can *essentially* alter this fatalistic construal of pantheism if we adopt a ‘dynamic notion of nature’. A dynamic conception of nature implies willful, purposive activity – precisely the sort of activity denoted by Schelling’s construal of freedom as the productive source of philosophical systems. The ‘lifelessness’ of Spinoza’s fatalistic pantheism accordingly does not preclude the possibility of a pantheism that is compatible with freedom, for pantheism, if properly understood, is essentially compatible with it.⁴⁵

This allows us to see why idealism cannot refute pantheism. Schelling attributes its failure to the “confusion of pantheism with one-sided realism”.⁴⁶ Pantheism is one-sidedly realist if it entails fatalism. But it avoids one-sidedness if it is understood

⁴⁴ Beyond the sterility of Spinozistic or ‘dogmatic’ pantheism, see Schelling on its explanatory blind spot: “The dogmatist, who assumes everything to be originally *present* outside us (not as *coming to be* and *springing forth* from us) must surely commit himself at least *to this*: that what is *external* to us is also to be explained by external causes. He succeeds in doing this, as long as he remains within the nexus of cause and effect, despite the fact that he can never make it intelligible how this nexus of causes and effects has *itself* arisen. As soon as he raises himself above the individual phenomenon, his whole philosophy is at an end; the limits of mechanism are also the limits of his system.” (*Ideen*, AA I 13, 81 | SW II, 40)

⁴⁵ Cf. *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 113 | SW VII, 338f.: “The same opinion has been more decisively expressed in the phrase: the only possible system of reason is pantheism, but this is inevitably fatalism. It is an undeniably excellent invention that with such labels entire viewpoints are described all at once. If one has found the right label for a system, the rest falls into place of itself, and one is spared the effort of examining what is characteristic about it more meticulously. As soon as such labels are given, with their help even one who is ignorant can pass judgment on the most thought-through matters. Nevertheless, with such an extraordinary claim, all depends on the closer determination of the concept. For thus it should likely not be denied that, if pantheism denotes nothing more than the doctrine of the immanence of things in God, every rational viewpoint in some sense must be drawn to this doctrine. But precisely the sense here makes the difference. That the fatalistic sense may be connected with pantheism is undeniable; but that this sense is not essentially connected with it is elucidated by the fact that so many people are brought to this viewpoint through the most lively feeling of freedom.”

⁴⁶ *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 352.

as an expression of freedom, as all philosophical systems are. Grasping freedom's role as unconditioned condition – grasping the practical as arationally primary – avoids assimilating pantheism with fatalism because it discloses pantheism's essential compatibility with freedom. Kant and Fichte cannot refute the pantheist, then, for they misunderstand their opponent. And they misunderstand her because they misunderstand that in virtue of which her or any system is possible, *viz.*, abyssal freedom, whose primary expression, Schelling says, is our “yearning and desire” for understanding.⁴⁷

In the third draft of *Ages of the World*, while assessing the early legacy of “German idealism”, Schelling observes that it had “aroused the hope of an elevated Spinozism that led to what is vital”.⁴⁸ This hope goes unrealized with the idealists' failure to grasp freedom's unique character and, with it, the possibility of a revitalized pantheism. Schelling takes himself to have solved this problem through his account of freedom's unconditionality in the *Freedom Essay*, a few years prior. Over two decades later, in the 1833/34 Munich lectures, he restates his solution, while reaffirming its need:

The Spinozist system will [...] always remain in a certain sense a *model*. A system of freedom – but with just as great contours, with the same simplicity, as a perfect counter-image of the Spinozist system – this would really be the highest system. This is why Spinozism, despite the many attacks on it, and the many supposed refutations, has never really become something truly past, never been really overcome up to now. (*GNP*, SW X, 36)

We saw how it is that freedom's unconditionality defines the ‘contours’ of a system of freedom. We saw, too, that such a system is only a ‘counter-image’ to pantheism fatalistically construed, not to pantheism as such. By overlooking this distinction, the idealists fail to elevate pantheism to something ‘vital,’ *viz.*, to a way of living that is driven, as all systems are, by the desire for a systematically intelligible world.

I turn, now, to consider three objections to Schelling's argument.

3.


One may object that positing freedom as the unconditioned condition of the world is troublingly subjective, for it seems to make the world's systematic intelligibility a

⁴⁷ *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 131 | SW VII, 359.

⁴⁸ WA III, 342. A decade prior, Schelling seems to express this hope, with some trepidation, in his final letter to Fichte, 25 January 1802: “I will await your *New Presentation [of the Wissenschaftslehre]*. If you make Spinoza your imaginary opponent in it, that does not seem to me to be the right way to proceed, since you may manage to refute more than what is contained in Spinoza (presuming that it will not be less), and then I shall have double the work that would otherwise be necessary in having to sharply distinguish what belongs to him and to me, though I in no way think I have to fear that anything of his will be misunderstood under my name, or anything of mine under his.” (*Philosophical Rupture*, 75)

matter of interest or value. By contrast, a certain naturalistic account of the world purports to explain the world in terms of entities or processes that are independent of our interests and values. However, as Andrew Bowie argues, the strength of the *Freedom Essay* lies in its insight into the constitutive explanatory incompleteness of any system. Any systematic view assumes one's motivation for endorsing it, *i.e.*, its meaning or significance. Attempting to explain one's motivation for endorsing it assumes the further motivation behind that explanation. Bowie notes that making sense of motivation always assumes a "prior direction of sense-making",⁴⁹ which entails the incompleteness of explanation. A naturalistic worldview thus presupposes freedom as its unconditioned condition because any systematic investigation is "motivated by something that is not explained by the investigation itself",⁵⁰ *viz.*, the interest and value with which all investigation freely begins. Only these expressions of freedom ground the existence of a system beyond its mere concept – its thatness beyond its mere whatness. The troublingly subjective fact of freedom, then, is no more than our unavoidable role in and responsibility for endorsing some worldview or other.⁵¹ Schelling acknowledges this daunting fact in the *Ages of the World* when he says that "most people are frightened precisely by this abyssal freedom in the same way that they are frightened by the necessity to be utterly one thing or another".⁵² Freedom's unconditionality signals the inescapably interested and valuing perspective by which the world, as a whole that we strive to render intelligible, is conditioned. Freedom has no intelligible actuality outside its role in conditioning some system – no appearance except through the world whose intelligibility it makes possible.⁵³ However, that it conditions the specific system that it does is a contingent fact of its subjective expression. As Schelling puts the point:

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. (*Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 131 | SW VII, 359)

 One may still object that grounding the world's systematicity on human freedom neglects God, despite the *Freedom Essay's* focus on God's relation to freedom. But it is crucial to understand how the text casts this relation. Schelling observes that God cannot include finite things, which differ in kind from God by being mutable, yet

⁴⁹ Bowie (2014), 187.

⁵⁰ Bowie (2014), 189.

⁵¹ Cf. Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung*, GA I/4, 195: "a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; instead it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it".

⁵² WA III, 304.

⁵³ In other words, an unconditioned condition is only rationally distinct from what it conditions. This suggests that while freedom cannot be subordinate to any other concept within a system, on pain of nihilism, freedom has no existence independent of the systematic totality of concepts that it grounds, without which it would be a mere idea or empty form.

must include them, since “nothing can indeed be outside of God”.⁵⁴ He then claims 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”.⁵⁵ By distinguishing God’s existence from the ground of its existence, Schelling poses a relation between God and its unconditioned condition.⁵⁶ Putting this grounding condition “in human terms”, he describes it as a “yearning” that

wants to give birth to God, that is, [to] unfathomable unity [...] Hence, it is, considered for itself [...] a will of the understanding, namely, yearning and desire for the latter. (AA I 17, 130 f. | SW VII, 359)

We saw that freedom expresses our interest in systematicity, *i.e.*, for an intelligible totality or world. Putting this world in divine terms, Schelling identifies it with God construed as the ideal of the understanding – as that ‘unfathomable unity’ which is absent so long as we are free to yearn to comprehend it. Freedom is thus teleologically related to God construed as an outstanding task for the understanding: “If you mean to act *freely* at all, you must act *before* an objective God *is*”.⁵⁷ Hence, over a decade later in *On the Nature of Philosophy as Science*, Schelling says:

Those, then, who want to find themselves at the starting point of a truly free philosophy, have to depart even from God. Here the motto is: whoever wants to preserve it will lose it, and whoever abandons it will find it. Only those have reached the ground in themselves and have become aware of the depths of life, who have at one time abandoned everything and have themselves been abandoned by everything. (SW IX, 217)

Human freedom expresses a will to understand. It is an activity that grounds a system whose construction is for the sake of an ideal of understanding, from which we can infer that they – activity and ideal – are only rationally distinct.⁵⁸ No grounding activity, no guiding ideal, and vice versa.⁵⁹ ‘God’s existence’ names this ideal.

⁵⁴ AA I 17, 130 | SW VII, 359.

⁵⁵ AA I 17, 130 | SW VII, 359.

⁵⁶ This sheds light on Schelling’s response to the argument concerning the compatibility of human freedom with God’s existence: “Is there any other way out of this argument than to save personal freedom within the divine being itself [...] to say that man is not outside of, but rather in, God and that his activity itself belongs to the life of God?” (AA I 17, 114 | SW VII, 339)

⁵⁷ *Philosophische Briefe*, AA I 3, 56 | SW I, 290.

⁵⁸ Cf. Kant, *KrV*, A676–679/B704–707: “I can have a satisfactory reason for assuming something relatively (*suppositio relativa*) without being warranted in assuming it absolutely (*suppositio absoluta*). This distinction is pertinent when we have to do merely with a regulative principle [...] Now I can nevertheless assume such an incomprehensible being [*i.e.*, the ground of a world-whole], the object of a mere idea, relative to the world of sense, though not in itself [...] I put that transcendental presupposition to no other use but a relative one – namely that it should give the substratum for the greatest possible unity of experience [...] I think only the relation which a being, in itself unknown to me, has to the greatest systematic unity of the world-whole, and this is solely in order to make it into the schema of a regulative principle for the greatest possible empirical use of my reason.”

⁵⁹ See Bowie (1993), 95: “the ground can only be as the ground because God exists on the basis of it: without the difference between itself and God it could not be as itself”.

One may yet object that if freedom is, as Schelling holds, the ‘capacity for good and evil’, we are thrown back to the equilibrium of indifference or what Kant calls *Willkür* – an arbitrary capacity for choice that is indifferent to the moral law. In a way, this is true. Schelling says in the *Freedom Essay* that

the common concept of freedom, according to which freedom is posited as a wholly undetermined capacity to will one or the other of two contradictory opposites, without determining reasons but simply because it is willed, has in fact the original undecidedness of human being as idea in its favor. (AA I 17, 150 | SW VII, 382)

This passage affirms the will’s original undecidedness on the grounds that the question of the human being is initially and always to be settled. Who one is – the philosophical system by which one is to live – remains an open matter. Schelling is quick to clarify that the will’s undecidedness in this respect does not apply to “individual actions”.⁶⁰ An individual action, under the guidance of a principle such as the moral law, will always have compelling reasons for or against it. However, that one is committed to the moral law in the first place is originally undecided, for this is a matter of will, which is just as capable of evil.⁶¹ As Schelling says a few years later in the *Ages of the World*: “absolute freedom [...] is not freedom for a particular deed”.⁶² Rather, it is a capacity for committing to a form of life, such as the life of Kantian morality. Having committed to it, my actions will not be arbitrary, but will exemplify what

⁶⁰ AA I 17, 150 | SW VII, 382.

⁶¹ Schelling affirms the concept of freedom as original undecidedness. Yet he claims shortly after that “[t]rue freedom is in harmony with a holy necessity”, whereby “spirit and heart, bound only by their own law, freely affirm what is necessary”, and that when the relation between one’s spirit and one’s law is “conditional” rather than “unconditional”, one falls into “the inconsistent system of equilibrium of free will” (AA I 17, 158 | SW VII, 391 f.). Despite appearances, his claim does not conflict with his affirmation. First, Schelling specifies neither a Kantian nor a Spinozist law, which implies no agreement with Kant’s opposition to regarding the will fundamentally as *Willkür*. Second, his metaphysical pluralism explains his neutrality about the kind of law in which one’s spirit may stand in a conditional or unconditional relation. Third, in the *Letters*, which Schelling reaffirms in the Preface to the *Freedom Essay*, he says that the relation between one’s “freedom of spirit” and “the law of [one’s] life” is determined by a “practical decision” between two systems: idealism and Spinozism (AA I 3, 75; 111; 81; cf. 65 | SW I, 307 f.; 341; 312 f.; cf. 299). A system is a way of living or “ethics” that aims to solve “the problem of the existence of the world” (AA I 3, 82 | SW I, 313), which is the practical problem of how to live in the world and which thus “demands the act” by which a system “ought to be realized” (AA I 3, 65 | SW I, 299). Prefiguring his affirmation of freedom as original undecidedness, Schelling calls this decision an “original insuperable prejudic[e]” (AA I 3, 81 | SW I, 312 f.). Yet merely deciding that a system’s first principle should be ‘the law of one’s life’ and should express one’s ‘freedom of spirit’ does not guarantee that law and spirit are here unconditionally related. One can waver in committing to one’s law: we can always fail to “be what we call ourselves theoretically” (AA I 3, 75 f. | SW I, 308). In that case, spirit and law relate merely conditionally, e.g., on the basis of rationalization or reward. One is thereby no longer in harmony with one’s system, for one no longer imbues its principle with ‘holy necessity’, but instead perpetuates an ethics through external, arbitrary factors. Performing irresolute gestures that comply with one’s law as easily as they might violate it, one succumbs to what in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling now calls “the inconsistent system of equilibrium of free will” (AA I 17, 158 | SW VII, 392).

⁶² WA III, 304.

Kant calls *Wille* by conforming to the moral law. My commitment creates a space of action in which the moral law's necessity goes unquestioned. However, it is an originally undecided act that makes it possible that I commit to practical reason at all.⁶³ At this level of abstraction, the moral law's necessity is contingent.⁶⁴ Hence, whereas the moral law constitutes practical reason, freedom willingly takes up the moral law as one among opposing laws for living. This explains Schelling's claim in the *Freedom Essay* that, construed as "the original ground or the *non-ground*", freedom "can only be described as the absolute *indifference*" of opposites.⁶⁵

I want to conclude with a remark about Schelling's conception of freedom as the unconditioned condition of the world. It anchors his commitment to metaphysical pluralism both before and after the *Freedom Essay*. It extends Schelling's view in the *Letters* that,

for a spirit who has made himself free and who owes *his* philosophy only to himself, nothing can be more unbearable than the despotism of narrow minds who cannot tolerate another system beside their own. (AA I 3, 74 | SW I, 306)

And it anticipates his position in the 1841/42 Berlin lectures:


[n]othing could more enrage a youthful and fiery sensibility, burning for the truth, than the intention of a teacher to prepare his audience for some one special or particular system, wishing in this way to emasculate them by underhandedly removing the freedom of inquiry. (*PO*, SW XIII, 16)

At the level of systematicity, the 'freedom of inquiry' consists in an originally undecided capacity to pursue a form of life, *i.e.*, to seek an intelligible totality that reflects one's interest in and the value of its construction.⁶⁶

⁶³ Cf. *Rel.*, AA VI: 21.

⁶⁴ To be sure, Schelling speaks of the "inner necessity" of human freedom (*Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 152 | SW VII, 385). However, this term does not dissolve, but only entrenches, freedom's character as *Willkür*. Schelling defines inner necessity as "the essence of the acting individual itself" and specifies that this essence is "fundamentally [one's] *own act*" (AA I 17, 151 f. | SW VII, 383; 385). But if the necessity of my nature is fundamentally an act, as opposed to a principle like the moral law, then there is no way to specify and privilege in advance any principle in order to account for what I do. Nothing more primary than the will offers a ground for what I do. 'Inner necessity' thus refers to the original undecidedness of freedom, *i.e.*, to the philosophically (which is to say, existentially) insuperable character of the will's *a priori* indifference toward how to live. This would explain Schelling's claim, directly following his discussion of *Willkür*, that the human being is initially "an undecided being" (AA I 17, 153 | SW VII, 385). The inner necessity of my nature as free accordingly consists in the ineluctable fact that I must decide what my nature is, which decision is nevertheless abyssal or groundless.

⁶⁵ AA I 17, 170 | SW VII, 406. This raises a question about the originality or absoluteness of this indifference, for one's chosen law for living will presuppose both the theoretically available laws and one's way of life prior to one's free choice of law. But we can distinguish the order of experience from the order of explanation: while my experience may constrain both the number of possible systems and the system by which I have so far (perhaps irresolutely) lived, it is my free decision that explains the validity of the system by which I (having becoming resolute) choose to live.

⁶⁶ Thanks to Marcela Garcia, Sebastian Stein, audiences at the Universities of Munich, Bochum, and Leuven, and the volume editors for helpful feedback on this [article](#). 

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