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On Dante in Relation to Schelling's Philosophical Development

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Abstract: Between Schelling's *Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung* (1803) and the Dantean drafts of *die Weltalter* (1811-1815) stand the transitional texts of his middle period, the *Philosophie und Religion* (1804) and *Freiheitsschrift* (1809). His short essay on Dante contrasts an ancient conception of the closed cosmos with the modern universe as dynamic and expanding, then claims to extract from the *Divine Comedy* its eternal, threefold form. This article considers these schemata as they relate to the *Philosophie und Religion* and the *Freiheitsschrift*, disclosing an enduring Dantean influence which first predicts, then persists throughout this stage of Schelling's philosophical development.

*Whoever holds that good can be recognized without evil commits
the greatest of all errors, for in philosophy, as in Dante's poem,
the path toward heaven leads through the abyss.
-Schelling, Philosophie und Religion*

In *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), Arthur Lovejoy assessed that "the ambiguities and difficulties of interpretation in Schelling's philosophical works after 1800 are due in large part to the conflict between incompatible concepts of God: Schelling retains the transcendent, eternally complete Absolute of Neoplatonism even while introducing the idea of an evolving, developing world spirit" (Snow 1996, 206; cf. Lovejoy 1936, 317f). Conflict between an impassible and abstract Absolute, on the one hand, and an evolving and developing divinity, on the other hand, is arguably *the* productive tension behind the developments of Schelling's middle period. The former description clearly characterizes the Absolute of the *Philosophie und Religion* (1804), the latter the God of the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809). Together these texts comprise Schelling's central transition away from the abstract, rationalist Absolute of his earlier works, later characterized as indicative of a merely negative philosophy, toward the voluntarist, personal God of his late lectures on positive philosophy.

The cryptic writings of the theosophist Jakob Boehme are the catalyst that ignites the *Freiheitsschrift's* transition away from the static Absolute of the *Philosophie und Religion* (cf. Brown 1977, 1996). Yet after the publication of the *Freiheitsschrift*, prefiguring his decades-long preoccupation with the aesthetic and religious outworkings of positive philosophy, Schelling delivered his *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) and wrote the extent drafts of *Die Weltalter*

(1811, 1813, 1815). These reintroduce Neoplatonic themes present in the *Philosophie und Religion* (1804), but omitted from the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809).¹ Exceeding a merely Neoplatonic influence, the planned division of the unfinished *Weltalter* into three parts—past, present, and future—elicits due comparison with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.²

Bracketing the works that follow the *Freiheitsschrift*, our focus will be on the Dantean influence that portends the contrast between the Neoplatonic Absolute of the *Philosophie und Religion*, and the *Freiheitsschrift*’s dynamic account of God’s becoming. Schemata introduced in “On Dante in Relation to Philosophy” (1803) will begin to reveal how it is that the *Philosophie und Religion* (1804), and its dialogical successor, the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809), come to present two contrasting conceptions of God, with correlative anthropological implications: one rationalist, which prioritizes rational essence over individual freedom, and one voluntarist, which prioritizes the inverse.

Our opening section introduces two schemata from the essay on Dante. First (a) is Schelling’s contrast between the ancient conception of a closed cosmos, and the modern conception of an evolving and dynamic universe. Second (b) is his “modern” argument that the threefold division of the *Commedia* presents an eternal form that can be re-informed with the content of any age.

Our second section addresses these schemata as they apply to the *Philosophie und Religion*, against the background of Schelling’s Identity Philosophy. In reference to (a), we argue that this text is decidedly more ancient than modern: in its invocations of the teachings of ancient Greek mystery cults as the background for Plato’s metaphysical elucidations, in its conception of the Absolute as absolutely One, and ideal, by contrast with the phenomenal particularities of the finite and material world, and in its presentation of the problem of selfhood, or freedom, and its proposed solution. In reference to (b), we argue that the *Philosophie und Religion* conceives the *Commedia*’s threefold form within an ancient conception of the cosmos wherein necessity supersedes freedom.

This is no longer the case in the *Freiheitsschrift*, where Schelling swings the metaphysical pendulum to the voluntarist extreme. In reference to (a), our third section argues that by contrast with the *Philosophie und Religion*, the *Freiheitsschrift* introduces a distinctively modern ontological situation. In reference to (b), we argue that freedom is prioritized over and above necessity. Far from annihilation of individuality and materiality within the cosmic return of all things to Identity, the individual is afforded the power to disrupt both the course of history and the divine intention that goodness prevail over evil. The contrasting conceptions of God found in these two transitional works will need to be brought up into cosmological harmony in Schelling’s later thought, where the Dantean influence subtly resurfaces.

¹ “For a nineteenth century – not a third century – version of a hierarchical cosmos in relation to God, we must move on to the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*. For Neoplatonic themes reintroduced into the account of God’s transcendent being, but without undoing the dynamism of the *Freiheitsschrift* and while preserving the notion of a freely-made decision to create the world, we must move on further to *Die Weltalter*” (Brown 1996, 118n7).

² E.g. “My thesis is now, said briefly, that in the end this trichotomy of the *Divina Commedia*, and also the quality of the three realms, remained structurally prototypical for the three conceived parts of *Die Weltalter*: The past corresponds to the *Inferno*, the present to the *Purgatorio*, and the future to the *Paradisio*. One could therefore in a certain sense designate *Die Weltalter* as the Divine Comedy of Time...” (Hogrebe 1989, 31-32; cited in Jason Wirth’s footnotes to Schelling 2000, 135n20; cf. xix, where Wirth invokes the comparison).

I. “On Dante in Relation to Philosophy” (1803)

(a) Schelling conceives of the *Divine Comedy* as the preeminent artistic expression of its age, initiating the transition from the ancient conception of a closed cosmos to the modern conception of a dynamic and expanding universe. The precedent is set not by the *Commedia*'s science and cosmology, which remain ancient, but in its introduction of poetic individuality into a holistic vision of both ideality and reality, within the divine totality. As creator of this artistic gateway to beatitude, Dante becomes the first modern religious poet: “‘In the Holy of Holies, where religion and poetry ally,’ stands Dante as the high priest and he who initiates the whole course of modern art” (Schelling 1988, 239-240). Schelling explains,

The necessary law governing the as yet undetermined, far-away point where the great epic of modern times, which has revealed itself up to now only rhapsodically and in single manifestations, emerges as a complete totality, is this: that the individual moulds that part of the world revealed to him into a whole, and creates his own mythology from the material of his age, from its history and its scientific learning. For just as the ancient world is in general a world of types, so the modern is one of individuals. There it is the general that is truly particular; the species acts as a single individual. Here on the other hand the point of departure is particularity, which is supposed to become general. For that reason everything among the ancients is enduring and everlasting. [...] Among the moderns change and alteration are a constant law. Not a completed, closed circle but one to be endlessly expanded through individuality determines its modifications, and because universality is of the essence in poetry, the necessary requirement is this: that through the most supreme uniqueness the individual should become universally valid once again. Through fully developed particularity he must become once more absolute. It is through the sheer individuality of his poem, comparable to nothing else, that Dante is the creator of modern art, which cannot be conceived without this arbitrary necessity and necessary arbitrariness (ibid., 240-241).

By contrast with the modern, dynamically evolving universe, the ancient cosmos is a “completed, closed circle.” Among the ancients, Schelling contends, the cosmos and its contents are practically perceived, and likewise theoretically conceived, as eternal and everlasting.

From within the modern conception of the universe, however, “change and alteration are a constant law.” The universe is ever-expanding, generating endless particularities. Schelling’s claim concerning the *Commedia*'s role as an archetype for the whole of modern poetry, and as the first work of modern art, is made on the basis of Dante’s location of his own historical and personal particularity within a mythological conception of the entirety of the cosmos: “...through the most supreme uniqueness the individual should become universally valid once again. Through fully developed particularity he must become once more absolute” (1988, 241). In these ways, Schelling is careful to differentiate his own modern conception of the universe as dynamic and evolving from Dante’s ancient conception of the cosmos as fixed and unchanging.³

³ Schelling relativizes and then brackets theoretically the poem’s own assumptions concerning the cosmos as fixed, eternal whole; such a claim can only be made from within his own “modern” situation. He writes, “To present Dante’s philosophy, physics and astronomy purely in and for themselves would only be of minor interest, since his true uniqueness lies solely in their merging with poetry. The Ptolemaic cosmology, which is to some extent the basis of poetic edifice, already has a mythological colouring in itself; but if his philosophy is generally described as

(b) From within his own modern conception, he then claims that the threefold division of the *Commedia* expresses an eternal form that can be re-informed with historical and ideational content particular to any age. The spark of the idea behind his later *Weltalter* project flickers into existence in the following passage:

The division of the universe and the arrangement of the subject matter into three realms, the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* is, independent of the particular significance of these concepts in Christianity, also a general symbolic form, so that one does not see why each age depicted in the same way could not have its divine comedy. [...] That form is eternal, not only as outward form but also as sensuous expression of the inner paradigm of all scientific knowledge and poetry, and is capable of containing within it the three great domains of science and culture: nature, history, and art. Nature, as the birthplace of all things, is eternal night, and as that unity through which they have their being in themselves, it is the aphelion of the universe, the place of distance from God as the true centre. Life and history, whose nature is a succession of step by step advances, is simply a refining process, a transition to an absolute state. This is present only within art, which anticipates eternity, and is the *Paradiso* of life, truly at the centre (Schelling 1988, 243).

By framing the threefold division of the *Commedia* as expressive of the eternal form whereby Nature progresses into human History, and where divine self-consciousness is thereafter achieved in the production of religious or mythological Art—which brings the ideas and events of its age up into an absolute and universal framework—Schelling follows through with his aim to assess the poem in its “universal validity.”

Here he appears to be reading the *Commedia* in light of his own earlier thesis of *historical immanentism*, or “the metanarrative that describes the history of being as a dialectical process through which God achieves consciousness of himself” (McGrath 2012, 6).⁴ Nature is aphelion, or the point of darkness furthest from the light of the divine Sun: an *exitus* from divinity, a cosmic *Inferno*. History presents a series of step by step advances out of the night of nature. Stripping away the stains of materiality, this is a cosmic *Purgatorio*. Finally, Art anticipates the *reditus* of all things back to the stillness of eternity, where their re-assumption into simple Identity would constitute a cosmic *Paradiso*.

Aristotelian, then what must be understood here is not the purely peripatetic version but rather the particular connection current at that time between it and Platonic ideas, one which reveals itself on repeated investigations of the poem” (Schelling 1988, 242). He relativizes these ancient suppositions when he introduces qualifying phrases such as the following: “*For that reason*, everything among the ancients is enduring and everlasting.” With this Schelling specifies that he is offering not an ontological claim that everything *is* enduring and everlasting, but rather a perspectival claim about the ancients’ perception of the cosmos within which they found themselves. *From within their perspective*, he claims, everything *is*—or rather, in Schelling’s view, *seems* to be—enduring and everlasting.

⁴ McGrath continues, “We call the thesis ‘historical’ because it breaks with modern (pre-Kantian) a-historical metaphysics and insists on the inclusion in philosophy of the material and cultural reality of world-history: not all times and places are historically equivalent, for being itself has a history, which coincides with man’s changing understanding of it. We call the thesis ‘immanentist’ because it subsumes God into history: God does not begin conscious, he becomes conscious of himself through the developing consciousness of man, which presupposes the entire trajectory of natural and cultural evolution (2012, 6).”

II. *Philosophie und Religion* (1804)

(a) Considering the first schema introduced in “On Dante,” the context of the *Philosophie und Religion* is decidedly more ancient than modern. This is clear firstly from the rhetorical manner in which Schelling introduces the essay, which has been prompted by C. A. Eschenmayer’s most recent publication (2010, 3; citing Eschenmayer 1803). Contrasting popularized religion with the ancient mystery cults, in which the sacred mysteries are revealed only to qualified initiates, Schelling predicts that “the philosophers of our time will take offense to the philosophical tenor of old that we have sought to resound” (ibid., 4). Having concluded his Preliminary Remarks by warning the masses to avoid altogether the Promethean fire of genuine philosophical knowledge, he opens his Introduction with the following:

There a was a time when religion was kept separate from popular belief within mystery cults like a holy fire, sharing common sanctuary with philosophy. The legends of antiquity name the earliest philosophers as the originators of these mystery cults, from which the most enlightened among the later philosophers, notably Plato, liked to educe their divine teachings. At that time philosophers still had the courage and the right to discuss the singly great themes, the only ones worthy of philosophizing and rising above common knowledge. Later the once-secret mystery cults became public and contaminated with foreign elements from popular belief. In order to keep itself pure, philosophy retreated from religion and became, in contrast to it, esoteric Religion, which against its originary nature had intermingled with the real, sought to become an outward power, and since it lost any momentum to reach the well of truth, it also sought to stifle any truth outside of itself. Thus religion gradually disposed philosophy of those themes it had dealt with since antiquity, and philosophy found itself confined to that which had no value for reason (ibid., 7).

Recalling the above characterization of Dante as high priest mediating “In the Holy of Holies, where religion and poetry ally,” Schelling frames the treatise to follow as a retrieval of the “holy fire” that is the originary and proper subject of philosophy, in the metaphysical sanctuary where philosophy and religion originarily ally. He aligns himself with Plato in addressing the “singly great themes” which do in fact, by contrast with the popularizing religious opinions of Eschenmayer, Jacobi, and others, have “value for reason.” From the beginning, then, this text announces that its task will be to untangle the content proper to true philosophy from its popularized and debased “intermingling with the real,” so as to initiate the philosopher once again into the metaphysical mysteries that characterize genuine religion’s “originary nature.”

Despite the dismissive assessment of the *Timaeus* offered in the *Philosophie und Religion* (Schelling 2010, 25) its metaphysics harkens more clearly to the ancient, tripartite ontology of the *Timaeus* than to the threefold division of the *Commedia*.⁵ Schelling writes, “The basic truth is this: the real is not real by itself insofar as it is determined by the ideal. Therefore the ideal is the *first* per se. As certain as it is that the ideal is the first, the *form of the determination of the real by the ideal* is the second, and the real is the *third*” (Schelling 2010, 19). The ideal is absolute Identity,

⁵ What this comparison would begin to indicate, in fact, is that in “On Dante in Relation to Philosophy” Schelling reads the *Commedia* not as the theological and philosophical culmination of the western philosophical tradition, beginning with Plato; but rather, and to the contrary, that he interprets the *Commedia* according to the “higher” truths of Platonism (as he himself conceives them, at this point in his philosophical development).

and as such it is absolutely simple. The second is form, whereby the ideal determines the real.⁶ The third, or the real, is the phenomenal universe, taken to be utterly discontinuous with the Absolute. Once the discontinuity between the ideal and the real is properly grasped, he maintains, then the real will “manifest itself in its true nonbeing” (ibid., 24). Central to both the metaphysics and the ethics of this text is its claim that the material world exists only on the basis of a fall from, or a break with ideality. The implication: “The absolute is the only actual; the finite world, by contrast is not real” (ibid., 26).

Since the material realm is produced, or realized, in its falling-away from the Absolute, and since human individuals are in part material beings, according to this text’s principal assumptions beatitude can only consist in the annihilation of materiality, and subsequent purification of the soul from individuality. This is the core of Plato’s metaphysical teachings, Schelling contends, which disclose the truth of the sacred mysteries:

This view, which is as evident as it is noble, also represents the true Platonic doctrine put forward in the aforementioned writings and carries most purely and distinctively the imprint of its founder’s spirit. According to Plato, the soul can descend from its original state of beatitude and be borne into the temporal universe and thereby torn away from the truth only by means of a falling-away from the originary image. This was the tenet of the Greek mystery cult’s secret teachings, to which Plato alluded quite explicitly: that the origin of the phenomenal world should not be imagined, as popular religion does, as a *creation*, as a positive emersion from the Absolute, but as a falling-away from it. Hereupon was founded its practical doctrine that the soul, the fallen divine essence in man, must be withdrawn from and purified of its creation and association with the flesh as much as possible so that by mortifying the sensate life the soul can regain absoluteness and again partake of the intuition of the originary image (2010, 27).

The soul’s fall into materiality occurs on the basis of a “freedom” whereby selfhood is willed over and against Identity. As matter is assumed to be the principle of individuation, or the basis for particularity among finite, fallen beings, beatitude demands its annihilation within the larger cosmic return to undifferentiated Oneness.

(b) Together these points lead to the conclusion that the *Philosophie und Religion* conceives of the *Commedia*’s threefold form from within a conception of the cosmos whereby necessity supersedes freedom. Schelling examines the harmony of necessity and freedom in the Absolute: “Since God is the *absolute* harmony of necessity and freedom, and this harmony cannot be revealed in individual destinies but only in history as a whole, only history as a whole is a revelation of God – and then only as a progressively evolving revelation” (2010, 44). Implicit is the claim that the harmony of freedom and necessity cannot be expressed within “individual destinies.” Within this context, rather, the harmonization of freedom with necessity can occur only in conjunction with the annihilation of individuality: “In this way, the grand purpose of the phenomenal world reveals itself in history. The ideas, the spirits, must fall away from their center and insert themselves into

⁶ “...Just as light emanates from the sun, without the sun moving, so form [the second] emanates from essence [the first], whose nature can only be expressed in terms of an activity that is itself motionless at deepest rest” (Schelling 2010, 21). This is Schelling’s rendition of the Platonic Ideas, which emanate from the first, or the Absolute, without the first acting or being acted upon (cf. Brown 1996, 114).

the particularity of nature, the general realm of the falling-away, so that afterward...they may return to indifference” (ibid., 44-45). Harmony is only *ideally* restored, therefore, at the abstract level of cosmic necessity.

Far from being a purgative process whereby divinity comes to self-consciousness *through* human cognition, in the *Philosophie und Religion* the transition from History toward beatitude, through Art, is conceived as a process of purgation *from* cognition.⁷ At both the divine and human ontological levels, unconsciousness—or absolute indifference—is prioritized over the development of self-consciousness. The latter is a *consequence* of materiality, freedom, and selfhood; and these are to be eradicated, in a conception of beatitude which prioritizes the necessary return of all things to the cosmic nothingness of absolute Identity.⁸ This background informs Schelling’s assertion that “in philosophy, as in Dante’s poem, the path toward heaven leads through the abyss” (2010, 31). Along the march toward beatitude that purges the soul of both matter and individuality, the “abyss” overcome thereby is the abyss of both human *and* divine freedom.

III. *Freiheitsschrift* (1809)

(a) By contrast, the *Freiheitsschrift* constitutes a modern shift toward a conception of divinity evolving toward self-consciousness within history. Careful consideration of the metaphysical problem of evil introduces the fissure that splits the system of Identity through to its core, revealing the abyss of unreason at the heart of the *Freiheitsschrift*. Here Schelling responds to Jacobean charges against reason’s preeminence by acknowledging the seeds of truth that those charges contain, at least in reference to the system of Identity.⁹ The theosophy of Jakob Boehme ignites ontological kindling desiccated by personal grief, and irrational will is now prioritized over rational necessity. The static, pantheist system of reason is supplanted by a radical and dynamic philosophico-theological voluntarism.

In the *Freiheitsschrift* change and development are introduced into the divinity itself. Its theogony begins with an unconscious and indifferent “Absolute” akin to that found in the *Philosophie und Religion* (cf. Brown 1996, 116). Now referred to as *Ungrund*, this primordial state of unconscious indifference “divides itself into [...] two exactly equal beginnings,” which are ground and existence (Schelling 2007, 70). This willed act of division initiates the process whereby divinity strives toward rational self-consciousness: “At some indeterminable point between 1804 and 1809, Schelling breaks with the assumption, so foundational for all of his early work, that the absolute must exclude all real difference. For the sake of the production of self-consciousness and self-

⁷ Considering the lectures that Schelling delivered in the same year as the *Philosophie und Religion*’s publication, McGrath explains, “In its most mature expression, the 1804 Würzburg lectures, identity-philosophy insists on an abiding identity of reason with the absolute, the non-duality of being, which is essentially non-conscious. But this absolute unconsciousness is not a deficiency; rather, consciousness, characterized by the subject – object distinction and the experience of (comparative) differences among individuals, is a decline from the absolute, a descent into non-being” (McGrath 2012, 8).

⁸ It is on this basis, it appears, that in reference to Schelling’s Identity philosophy, Friedrich Schlegel had “condemned the *hen kai pan* of pantheism as reducible to all is nothing,” and so concluded that “pantheism could not account for evil” (Vaught 2010, 71; cf. Henningfeld 2001, 38).

⁹ As responses to Schelling’s contemporaries, both texts must be interpreted against the background of the *Pantheismusstreit*. This is not to contest, but merely to nuance Brown’s contention that whereas the setting of the *Philosophie und Religion* is “decidedly Platonic or Neoplatonic,” the *Freiheitsschrift*, “in contrast, moves quickly to an analysis of pantheism reflecting the Spinoza-controversy of the late eighteenth century” (Brown 1996, 113).

revelation, Schelling argues in his middle period, the divine must divide itself into ground and existence” (McGrath 2012, 120). Ground now takes the place of materiality as that in God which is not God. Rather than excluding materiality from the Absolute, then, the *Freiheitsschrift* posits the ground of existence as the “space” in which materiality is generated, and the mirror through which God arrives at self-consciousness. Division of the *Ungrund* into ground and existence introduces a uniquely “modern” conception of God, and of the universe through which God arrives at self-knowledge, as evolving and dynamic.

Ground gives rise to the dark principle of egoism, contraction, and individuality. As blind will, and yearning devoid of understanding, this is the basis by which “individuality” is introduced into divinity, and subsequently into humanity. Existence, by contrast, gives rise to the light principle of unity, expansion, and universality. This is Will governed by understanding. Goodness is produced in the proper subordination of ground to existence, in love (Schelling 2007, 42). *Evil* is therefore no longer the necessary byproduct of materiality and individuality, but emerges rather with an inversion of the principles within the individual creature. Rather than presenting the annihilation of individuality as the ultimate end of things, Schelling’s Bohemian distinction between ground and existence entails that individuality is fundamentally affirmed as constitutive of the development of *personality*: firstly and archetypally within the godhead, and subsequently, or analogously, within the human being.

(b) Reintroduction of the development of divine self-consciousness means that in the *Freiheitsschrift*, History reassumes pride of place as medium of the development of God’s self-knowledge.¹⁰ The ultimate end of divine and creaturely existence alike is no longer absolute unconsciousness and the cessation of striving; it is now, rather, the perfected self-knowledge of God, and ethical self-relation of creatures. Imitation of the divine archetype, in subordinating egoic self-will to universal Will, is of utmost ontological importance. Recalling our schemata from the essay on Dante, it is in this “modern” manner that the individual is to become universal: by passing from the *Inferno* of egoic Nature, through the *Purgatorio* of History, toward the *Paradiso* of aesthetic—now better termed ethical, or ethico-religious—beatitude. In this rendition of the individual’s pilgrimage toward becoming “universally valid once again” through a purgative process of maturation, the ultimate aim is progress toward “fully developed particularity” through the proper ethical combination of “arbitrary necessity and necessary arbitrariness” (Schelling 1988, 241).¹¹

Subordination of ground to existence is key to the restoration of ontological order within oneself, and within the dynamically evolving universe. Beatitude entails not the annihilation of materiality and individuality, then, but their *perfection*. Schelling arrives at this conclusion in his *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810). Having claimed that “the most beautiful works of art have been made

¹⁰ “In fact, Schelling seems to have become bored with historical immanentism after working out its rough outlines in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, dropping it for a more classical Neoplatonic emanationism in the identity-philosophy, only to reawaken his interest in the idea in his middle period under the influence of Boehme and new psychological questions concerning the history of the personality. Identity-philosophy does not deny the articulation of the self-sufficient absolute in hierarchically ordered levels of being; it denies the autonomous ontological reality of the hierarchy and thus does not seriously consider history as an event in the life of God” (McGrath 2012, 8).

¹¹ Cf. Karin Nisenbaum’s argument that in the *Freiheitsschrift*, this ideal of harmonizing freedom and necessity presents an ethical rendition of the Demiurge’s ordering of creation, in the *Timaeus*, in light of a divine archetype (Nisenbaum 2021).

with love,” he then argues that the philosopher’s acts creation are to be of the same divine kind: “Anyone destined to be a philosopher feels within himself a quasi divine love, that is, an impulse not to abandon the rejected and excluded nature in this state of rejection, but to transfigure it again back into the divine and to realign the entire universe in one vast creation of love” (Schelling 1994, 236). The *Freiheitsschrift*’s beatific vision demands artful perfection of disordered material creation, both within and without.

This text maintains that through an originary, willed act of egoic self-love, the individual has fallen into the abyss of unreason. The individual must therefore assume responsibility by ascending a purgative path which demands a proper ordering of the two principles. Gesturing toward an inchoate vision of beatitude that would include humanity’s co-operation with divinity, in the artful perfection of fallen creation, the *Freiheitsschrift* thereby presents a personalizing take on the *Philosophie und Religion*’s Dantean declaration: “for in philosophy, as in Dante’s poem, the path toward heaven leads through the abyss” (Schelling 2010, 31).

Conclusion

“On Dante in Relation to Philosophy” contrasts an ancient conception of the closed cosmos with the modern conception of a dynamic and evolving universe (a), then extracts from the *Divine Comedy* the threefold form whereby Nature develops into History, and History progresses toward beatitude, as facilitated by Art (b). Dante is lauded as the artist who bridges the gap between ancient and modern in his development of the historical individual toward universal perfection, from within a particularized, poetic expression of that threefold form. Even while bracketing ideas relative to Dante’s age, the *Philosophie und Religion* assumes an “ancient” cosmology. It prioritizes cosmological necessity over both divine and human freedom, and Absolute unconsciousness as the ultimate end of things, over God’s becoming self-conscious through history. By contrast, the *Freiheitsschrift* shifts to a modern ontological context according to which divinity becomes individual, or personal, through the progressive and dynamic synthesis of ground and existence. This divine archetype epitomizes the ideal of love by which the human being is then called also to restore rational order, both within and without.

Schelling’s Dantean task thereafter will be to harmonize the contrasting conceptions of divinity found in these transitional texts within a larger, cosmic context. Recognizing this in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, he invokes the *Freiheitsschrift*’s division of an indifferent *Ungrund* into ground and existence:

By means of the theory of the two principles inherent in God we avoid two errors common to many doctrines of God. As regards the idea of God, two forms of aberration seem to be preponderant. According to the dogmatic view, which is considered orthodox, God is conceived of as a particular, isolated, unique, and entirely self-centered essence, thereby separating Him from all creation. Contrastingly, the common pantheist view does not grant God any particular, unique, and self-centered existence; instead, it dissolves Him into a universal substance that is merely the vehicle of all things. Yet God is both of these; to begin with, He is the essence of all essence, yet as such He must also exist, that is, as such an essence He must possess a grasp or foundation. Hence God, in His supreme dignity, is the universal essence of all things, yet this universal essence does not float in the air but

rather is grounded in, as it were supported by, God as an *individual essence; the individual in God thus is the basis or foundation of the universal* (Schelling 1994, 210).¹²

Perhaps for the first time in Schelling's philosophical development, God is here recognized as *both* absolute essence *and* personally existing. This middle position between the pantheism of his early writings and the more orthodox theism of his late lectures is characteristic of a voluntarist *panentheism*, whereby God becomes self-conscious as reason comes to reign over unreason.

Die Weltalter will begin to work out the implications of the voluntarist shift in Schelling's thought by seeking to synthesize the two contrasting conceptions of divinity within the temporalized context of *Nature* as past. Schelling's ensuing lectures will focus on the presently purgative, step-by-step progression of *History*. Finally, his late philosophy will attend carefully to the prophetic, future-oriented, aesthetico-religious histories of mythology and religion. His own earlier thesis of historical immanentism will by then have been bypassed once and for all: "The history of consciousness remains a central theme of the late philosophy, only now it is the history of human consciousness, teleologically evolving out of matter toward personhood and friendship with the always already individuated God" (McGrath 2012, 9). Progression from the night of fallen Nature, through the purgative process of History, toward a beatitude predicted in the progressive history of revelation, remains of critical importance for the individual human being. By then, Schelling's conception of the threefold, eternal form recognized already in the essay on Dante will have become more properly trinitarian than Platonic—recognizing the former as a theological completion of the latter—and thus more duly Dantean.¹³

¹² This passage is paraphrased by Paul Tillich at a critical juncture in his *Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development* (1974, 93). Tillich comments, "The differentiation of absoluteness and individuality and, at the same time, the assertion of their eternal identity, shows clearly in what direction the solution of our problem lies. Mystical identity with God corresponds to his absoluteness, guilt-consciousness to his wrath, i.e., to his self-assertion as an individual being" (ibid., 139n13).

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