

Freedom and Ground

A Study of Schelling's Treatise on Freedom

of freedom all require distinguishing senses of ground and understanding the network of grounding structures. The problem of a system of freedom is really a problem of ground. Reframing it in this way gives Schelling's intention greater specificity: the goal of the treatise is not just to investigate freedom and whatever is connected to it, but to uncover the complex web of grounding relations in which freedom is embedded. This framing also helps clarify why Schelling devotes so much space to discussing parts of the web not obviously connected to freedom, but which shed light on fundamental grounding.

Mark J. Thomas

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MARK J. THOMAS

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for my parents, Ann and Fred

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Wenn man einmal philosophiren zu wollen vorgibt,
so kann man die Frage warum nicht mehr abweisen.

Once one purports to philosophize,
the question *why?* can no longer be dismissed.

—SW II, 35

Von einer Handlung der absoluten Freiheit läßt sich
kein weiterer Grund angeben; sie ist so, weil sie so ist,
d. h. sie ist schlechthin und insofern nothwendig.

No further ground can be provided for an act of
absolute freedom; it is so, because it is so—
that is, it simply is, and to that extent it is necessary.

—SW VII, 429

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Abbreviations

Schelling's Works

- HKA *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, I. Werke; II. Nachlaß; III. Briefe. Edited by the Schelling-Kommission der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976–.
- SW *Sämtliche Werke*, Division I: 10 vols. (= I–X); Division II: 4 vols. (= XI–XIV). Edited by Karl Friedrich August Schelling. Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61.
- WA *Die Weltalter: Fragmente*, in the original versions of 1811 and 1813. Edited by Manfred Schröter. Munich: Beck, 1946.
- GPP *Grundlegung der positiven Philosophie: Münchener Vorlesung WS 1832/33*. Edited by Horst Fuhrmans. Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1972.
- Plitt *Aus Schellings Leben: In Briefen*. Edited by Gustav L. Plitt. 3 vols. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1869–70.
- T “*Timaeus*.” (1794). Edited by Hartmut Buchner. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994.
- TB *Philosophische Entwürfe und Tagebücher 1809–1813: Philosophie der Freiheit und der Weltalter*. Edited by Lothar Knatz, Hans Jörg Sandkühler, and Martin Schraven. Hamburg: Meiner, 1994.

Kant's Works

- AA *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by the Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1900–.
- KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/87). Translation: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.
- KpV *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788). Translation: *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.
- KU *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (1790). Translation: *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

Other Abbreviations

- AT Descartes, René. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Revised edition, 11 vols. Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76. Translation: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91.
- JW Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich. *Werke*. Edited by Friedrich Roth and Friedrich Köppen. 6 vols. Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1812–25.
- FW Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Sämtliche Werke*. Edited by Immanuel Hermann Fichte. 8 vols. Berlin: Veit, 1845–46.
- HW Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Werke in zwanzig Bänden: Theorie-Werkausgabe*. Edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969–71.
- PhG Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (HW 3).
- ASW Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Sämtliche Werke*. Edited by Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen. 5 vols. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1960–65.
- GA Heidegger, Martin. *Gesamtausgabe*. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975–.

Introduction

“Ground” is one of the distinctive terms in German philosophy. Its most common meaning is roughly “reason why,” which accounts for its appearance in the German name for the principle of sufficient reason: *Satz vom Grund*, “principle of ground.” Thus, the word can stand in for other terms associated with explaining or providing reasons, such as “cause,” “condition,” and “principle.” But it also has a meaning connected to its metaphorical roots: the ground is the foundation on which something rests. What lacks a ground is an *Abgrund*—abyss.

Long before its association with modern philosophy, “ground” was one of the key words of German mysticism, going back to Meister Eckhart. In fact, the tradition of mystical thought developed by Eckhart and his followers has been termed “the mysticism of the ground.”¹ In Eckhart, the word refers above all to the mysterious union of God and the soul’s innermost being.² “Ground” is therefore the key term for two very different currents in German thought: (1) a rationalist current concerned with providing reasons and (2) a mystical current concerned with revealing what is hidden from our everyday ways of thinking.

The two currents come together in Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), the last major work published during his lifetime and one of the classic texts of German Idealism. It is therefore no coincidence that “ground” is one of the central terms in the work. But my claim in this book is stronger: Schelling’s treatise as a whole is an answer to what I call “the problem of ground,” that is, the problem of sorting out the different kinds of grounds and the structure of the grounding relations within the system. Though largely implicit, Schelling’s distinction between senses of ground is the key to his project of constructing a system that can satisfy reason while accom-

modating objects that seem to defy rational explanation—including evil, the origins of nature, and absolute freedom. It thus allows him to unite reason and mystery, providing a rich model for philosophizing about freedom and evil today.

This book is a new interpretation of Schelling’s path-breaking treatise, focusing on the problem of ground. Commonly known in German as the *Freiheitsschrift*, the treatise has been extremely influential within the Continental tradition. Indeed, Heidegger refers to it as “one of the most profound works of German, thus of Western, philosophy.”³ It is also one of the most demanding and complex texts in German Idealism. Despite its enormous influence, many passages remain puzzling, and the work as a whole demands a focused interpretation. By tracing the problem of ground through the *Freiheitsschrift*, this book aims to provide a unified reading of the text, while unlocking the meaning of some of its most challenging passages.

To explain my motivation for this approach, let me begin with a curious fact about the *Freiheitsschrift*: though “human freedom” is in the title, the bulk of the work is concerned with other topics. Schopenhauer already observed this, sardonically: “Only a small part of that treatise deals with freedom; instead, its principal topic is a detailed report about a God with whom the author betrays an intimate acquaintance, since he even describes for us his coming to be” (ASW III, 609). The genesis of God (his becoming fully actual in the world) is indeed one of the main themes—but there are many others, including the meaning of pantheism, the nature of identity and the copula, the problem of evil, the formation of nature, and the varieties of necessity. Why does Schelling treat all of these topics in a treatise ostensibly devoted to human freedom?

The full title of the work provides a first clue. The investigations are to concern both the essence of human freedom and “the matters connected therewith” (*die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*). In other words, Schelling does not treat freedom as an isolated topic but in the context of everything connected to it. And if freedom is one of the “ruling center points of the system,” as Schelling observes in the opening lines (SW VII, 336),⁴ then it is connected to all the major points in his system. This accounts for the text’s comprehensiveness, despite Hegel’s comment that it “pertains to just this one point.”⁵ Indeed, what we might call Schelling’s contextualization of human freedom is one of the most attractive features of his approach, setting it apart from most other treatments of the question. The central task is to construct a “system of freedom,” not only in

the negative sense of showing how system and freedom are not mutually exclusive, but in the genuinely positive sense of showing how freedom is connected to everything else.

Even if this systematicity explains in general terms the lack of focus on human freedom, it leaves unexplained why so much of the text places the accent elsewhere, exploring topics where the connection to freedom is distant and not explicitly stated. The lack of focus has also tempted interpreters to define with more specificity what Schelling is doing in the treatise—to say what the text is *really about*. Thus, a number of commentators have claimed that the heart of the text is something other than freedom. Heidegger famously declares that “Schelling’s treatise . . . is at the core a metaphysics of evil.”⁶ Friedrich Hermanni, on the other hand, contends that the “leading intention” of the text is to carry out a theodicy.⁷ Markus Gabriel has even proposed that the heart of the work is a theory of predication, thus applying the framework of Wolfram Högerebe’s influential interpretation of the *Ages of the World* to the *Freiheitsschrift*.⁸ Other commentators maintain the focus on freedom, but prioritize a specific aspect of the problem. Thus, Michelle Kosch suggests that Schelling’s main concern is explaining how a fully free choice of moral evil is possible.⁹ And in a classic essay, Michael Theunissen notes that the “main problem” of the *Freiheitsschrift* is the question of how the absoluteness of human freedom can also be *not* absolute.¹⁰

These interpretations all identify essential aspects of the treatise. The problem is that they privilege one aspect at the expense of others, and so the reading they offer is necessarily partial. My contention is that it is possible to read the *Freiheitsschrift* as a whole if we interpret it as an answer to the problem of ground. This is because the problem, as I define it, is not an isolated question but brings together the major problems in the text: pantheism and identity, evil, the origin and nature of God, the conflict between freedom and necessity. Each of these problems requires for its resolution the consideration of the kinds of grounds and the structure of the grounding relations within the system. Implicit in the architecture of the *Freiheitsschrift*, therefore, is Schelling’s insight that these “problems of ground”¹¹ are interconnected and must be treated together. In particular, the problem of freedom has to be understood as part of the larger problem of ground.

Of course, the centrality of “ground” is already obvious if one simply notes where the word occurs in the text. At the heart of the treatise is the distinction between that-which-exists and the ground of existence

(SW VII, 357). Schelling notes that his investigation is “founded on” this distinction, and it provides the ontological framework for most of the work. Much later, Schelling discusses the ultimate origin, which he calls “the primordial ground [*Urgrund*] or rather the *non-ground* [*Ungrund*]” (SW VII, 406). This enigmatic way of designating the absolute, using a term (*Ungrund*) from the mystic Jacob Boehme, already suggests that its role in grounding is problematic. Moreover, in the famous passage where Schelling declares that willing is primordial being, he lists “groundlessness” as one of its predicates (SW VII, 350). Finally, in a remarkable statement in the discussion of pantheism, he claims that the law of ground is “just as original” as the law of identity (SW VII, 346). Previously the law of identity was *the* principle of his system. Now the law of ground is said to be just as original.

These striking references to ground are all on the surface. If one digs a little deeper, one can see its essential connection to Schelling’s project of constructing a system of freedom and the three main problems associated with it: determinism, pantheism, and evil. To understand the connection, it is helpful to briefly introduce the background of a “system of freedom,” which we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 1. The phrase brings together two desiderata of German Idealism, both with origins in Kant: (1) to know reality as an interconnected whole (system); and (2) to provide a central place for autonomy, particularly the autonomy of the human subject (freedom). Indeed, early in his career Schelling had declared himself a champion of the latter: “The beginning and the end of all philosophy is—freedom!” (SW I, 177; cf. III, 376).

But the very possibility of a system of freedom had been called into question some twenty-four years before the *Freiheitsschrift*—thus, before post-Kantian German Idealism had even begun. In his *Spinoza Letters* (1785), Jacobi had declared that any attempt to construct a consistent system of reason would lead to Spinoza’s philosophy and the denial of freedom. In fact, Schelling alludes to Jacobi’s “old” charge in the opening pages of his treatise (SW VII, 337–38). But why is a system of freedom problematic? The answer has to do with grounding. System requires everything to be connected to form a whole, and this connection is accomplished by grounding—both the grounding of the system’s parts by other parts, and their ultimate grounding in the principle of the system (God).¹² But if this universal grounding is deterministic, then the freedom of the parts is compromised. Thus, the first problem associated with a system of freedom is determinism. A second problem arises if the system

is a form of pantheism, which is true for Schelling's system, as it was for Spinoza's. Pantheism affirms some form of identity between God and creatures, but this identity would seem to compromise the independence that human beings need for freedom. Schelling also regards this as a problem of ground, though the connection is less obvious. In pantheism, God is identified with creatures, but he is also their ground: the God-creature relation is one of grounding identity. By defining more precisely the nature of divine grounding, Schelling intends to show how pantheism does not compromise independence.

Both determinism and pantheism are connected to Jacobi's original allegations. The third problem associated with a system of freedom arises out of something Schelling emphasizes for the first time in the *Freiheitschrift*: the "real and living concept" of human freedom as "a capacity of good and evil" (SW VII, 352). The evil in the world is also a problem of ground, because it appears to be inexplicable and thus "groundless." Where does evil come from, if an all-good Creator is the ground of all things? Resolving the problem of evil therefore requires clarifying how God grounds the world and the ways in which evil is grounded. It also requires articulating evil's ontological structure—the "metaphysics of evil," to borrow Heidegger's phrase—and this essentially involves the ground of God's existence and the aspect of human beings that corresponds to it.

Thus, the three main problems associated with a system of freedom all require distinguishing senses of ground and understanding the network of grounding structures. The problem of a system of freedom is really the problem of ground.¹³ Reframing it in this way gives Schelling's intention greater specificity: the goal of the treatise is not just to investigate freedom and whatever is connected to it, but to uncover the complex web of grounding relations in which freedom is embedded. This framing also helps clarify why Schelling devotes so much space to discussing parts of the web not obviously connected to freedom, but which shed light on fundamental grounding structures. And framing the treatise in terms of the problem of ground reveals strikingly original features of Schelling's solution to the problem, which anticipate—and challenge—developments in contemporary philosophy.

In anticipation of the analysis in the book itself, let me sketch some of the aspects of that solution; this will allow me to introduce some of the innovative features of Schelling's approach and place them in historical context. The key to his solution is his insight into the variety of grounds and the implications for combining dependence and independence.

Although “ground” has a number of meanings depending on the context, three senses are most prominent: (1) ground as condition of the possibility, (2) ground as what determines, and (3) ground as what begets (brings forth without determining). Each sense of ground thus corresponds to a different verb: to condition (*bedingen*), to determine (*bestimmen*), and to beget (*zeugen*). By distinguishing these senses, Schelling is able to claim that something is grounded in one sense, but not another. This allows him to formulate grounding relations that combine dependence and radical independence—an innovation that is essential for addressing the various problems of ground in the text.

Of course, distinguishing senses of ground is nothing new in philosophy. In fact, if one thinks of ground as a rough equivalent of ἀρχή and αἴτιον, one can cite Aristotle’s account of the four causes as a precedent.¹⁴ A couple generations before Schelling, both Christian Wolff and Crusius had emphasized the distinction between the ground of being (*ratio essendi*) and the ground of knowing (*ratio cognoscendi*)—a distinction that Kant uses to explain the relationship between freedom and the moral law.¹⁵ And Jacobi had made the distinction between ground and cause an essential part of his critique of Spinoza, as we will discuss in chapter 3. Notwithstanding these distinctions and variations, the dominant tendency—both in German philosophy and the wider metaphysical tradition—is to regard the deterministic sense of ground as primary. To ground something is to provide a sufficient reason for its existence and thereby determine it.

In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling breaks decisively with this tendency. The first and third senses of ground mentioned above are non-deterministic. And one of my central claims in this book is that the primary meaning of ground in the *Freiheitsschrift* is condition of the possibility. In a letter to Georgii the following year (1810), Schelling makes clear that the word “ground” in the phrase “ground of God’s existence” does not mean “cause” but *conditio sine qua non*—that without which God cannot exist.¹⁶ This same sense of ground plays an essential role in Schelling’s solution to the problem of evil and his characterization of the “non-ground” as primordial ground. Moreover, the third sense (to beget), which defines God’s relation to free beings, incorporates this primary sense and builds on it.

One might say that the emphasis on this sense of ground has its roots in Kant, since determining the conditions of the possibility of knowledge is what defines his transcendental method—the same method that underlies Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). In the *Freiheitsschrift*, however, this sense of ground plays a role that is primarily metaphysical,

not methodological: it defines the grounding relations of reality. This allows Schelling to offer a highly original alternative to what I call the “all-from-one model” of grounding relations, the model to which rationalist philosophies are naturally drawn. What is this model? We begin with a single, absolute starting point, usually called God. This starting point contains the sufficient reason for everything that follows from it. For any single thing that exists, someone with enough knowledge could trace its every feature back to the absolute beginning. Thus, a single ultimate ground inaugurates a deterministic progression reaching into every corner of the universe.¹⁷ Leibniz’s philosophy is perhaps the clearest example of this model, but many other philosophers with rationalist tendencies have been drawn to it in one form or another. Indeed, Schelling’s earlier *Identitätsphilosophie* seems to follow this model, at least at first glance: absolute identity is the principle of the system, and all else follows with necessity. Even if there are good reasons for distinguishing the *Identitätsphilosophie* from the all-from-one model, both sympathetic interpreters and critics have often assumed that it is operative—for example, when objecting that Schelling does not adequately explain how finite reality is “derived” from the absolute.¹⁸ Along these lines, Wilhelm Traugott Krug challenged Schelling to deduce his quill pen from the principle of his system.¹⁹

By making “condition of the possibility” the primary sense of ground, Schelling is able to move decisively away from the all-from-one model. Everything is grounded by God, but this does not mean that everything is derived deterministically from the divine essence. Instead, God is the ground of all things primarily in the sense of making them possible. This rejection of the all-from-one model has decisive consequences for the system’s structure—and sheds light on features of the text we might otherwise view as flaws. First, since Schelling is no longer obliged to derive every feature of reality from a single beginning, he is free to multiply the beginning points for his system. Indeed, through the ultimate act of freedom, each human being becomes a new starting point, a “free and eternal beginning” (SW VII, 386). This plurality of starting points has a “decentering” effect that is reflected in the structure of the *Freiheitsschrift* itself. Unlike other presentations of the system, the discussion of “the unconditionally absolute” (SW VII, 408) occurs toward the end of the text rather than at the beginning, thus avoiding the impression that everything is derived from a single absolute. And at various points in the treatise, the transitions between topics are abrupt, as if Schelling is making a new beginning.²⁰ Dieter Sturma has even referred to Schelling’s philosophy as

a *System von Brüchen* on account of such structural breaks throughout his mature philosophy.²¹ Indeed, commentators sometimes imply that this is a shortcoming, a failure to explain how we get from point A to point B—for example, from negative philosophy to positive philosophy in Schelling’s late lectures. But this presupposes the all-from-one model of deriving each point from what came before. If we reject this model of grounding, each point can still be grounded by the conditions of its possibility, while beginning something radically new.²²

The multiplication of beginnings is connected to another aspect of Schelling’s break with traditional ontology: his movement toward equiprimordiality (*Gleichursprünglichkeit*), Heidegger’s notion that multiple beings can be “equally original.”²³ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes the failure of traditional metaphysics to acknowledge this concept and links this failure to the all-from-one model of grounding: “The phenomenon of the *equiprimordiality* of constitutive factors has often been disregarded in ontology on account of a methodologically unrestrained tendency to derive everything and anything from a simple ‘primordial ground.’”²⁴ By rejecting this tendency, Schelling is able to introduce grounding structures that allow for co-originality—in particular, the “circle from which everything comes to be,” where there is “no first and no last because all things mutually presuppose each other” (SW VII, 358). Remarkably, this movement toward equiprimordiality leads Schelling to grant free beings a quasi-divine status, summed up in the astonishing (and seemingly paradoxical) phrase “derived absoluteness or divinity” (SW VII, 347). At the same time, Schelling challenges the anti-systematic tendencies within contemporary philosophy, showing how equiprimordiality can be incorporated within a system: while multiple points are equally original, they are nonetheless grounded non-deterministically and thereby integrated into the larger whole.

Having sketched aspects of Schelling’s approach to the problem of ground, I would like to highlight two topics of special importance for setting up this problem and appreciating Schelling’s solution. The first is the role of the *Satz vom Grund*—known in English as the “principle of sufficient reason.” In its simplest form, the principle states *there is nothing without reason*, or *there is nothing without a ground*. In other words, it affirms the universality of being grounded. Though one can find versions of this principle already in ancient philosophy, it did not receive a name—and the recognition that comes with a name—until Leibniz.²⁵ Between Leibniz and Kant there was a lively debate among German philosophers

about the principle's status and possible derivation, and some years later Schopenhauer would devote his dissertation to it. Schelling, on the other hand, does not seem particularly interested in the principle, at least at first glance: he rarely mentions it in his writings, and there is only one explicit reference to it in the *Freiheitsschrift*. It is therefore unsurprising that the principle has received very little attention from Schelling scholars. And yet the single reference in the *Freiheitsschrift* is decisive: Schelling declares that the law of ground is *just as original* as the law of identity (SW VII, 346), which he had previously regarded as the highest principle of his system. Moreover, he affirms the principle of ground indirectly in other passages—for example, when discussing the formal concept of freedom (SW VII, 383).

We are therefore confronted with an interesting puzzle: on the one hand, Schelling acknowledges the central place of the principle; on the other hand, he hardly ever writes about it explicitly. As I argue in chapter 3, part of the solution is that for Schelling the principles of identity and ground have merged into one—discussions of the former are therefore implicitly discussions of the latter. But more generally, I wish to demonstrate that the principle of ground plays a decisive role behind the scenes in the *Freiheitsschrift*, even when Schelling's references to it are indirect or implicit. As we will see, Jacobi himself identifies a version of the principle as the source of the problem of a system of freedom. This is no accident: the principle is essential for articulating and understanding the problem of ground as I have defined it. This is because the principle makes a claim about the total structure of grounding relations in the system, thus defining its large-scale architecture. Of course, the precise form this architecture takes depends on the meaning of ground in the claim “nothing is without a ground.” Indeed, we will see that the three main senses of ground in the *Freiheitsschrift* correspond to three different versions of the principle, only the first of which is explicitly labeled “the law of ground.” I will therefore refer to the principle of “ground” rather than “sufficient reason” when it is important to leave open what meaning of ground is intended.

Examining the role of the principle in the *Freiheitsschrift* is also essential for understanding Schelling's relationship to rationalism, another puzzling aspect of the text and a place where my approach is quite different from other interpreters. By “rationalism,” I mean a commitment to the fundamental intelligibility of the world as expressed in the “principle of sufficient reason” in its traditional Leibnizian form. The acceptance or rejection of this principle is an excellent gauge of a philosopher's level of commitment

to rational order: is it true that *nothing* is “without reason”? But here we encounter a problem, because Schelling seems to affirm *and* deny the traditional principle. On the one hand, he implicitly affirms it when ruling out chance and contingency (SW VII, 383) and endorsing “absolute necessity” (SW VII, 397). On the other hand, he seems to deny it by introducing “irrational” phenomena such as evil and the “irreducible remainder” (SW VII, 359–60). The dominant tendency among commentators has been to emphasize these irrational, “dark” elements, implying that Schelling rejects the principle of sufficient reason and thus any form of rationalism.²⁶ I will argue that such an interpretation is mistaken. This requires showing how Schelling’s distinctive way of circumventing the all-from-one model allows him to affirm the principle while leaving room for “irrational” phenomena and a qualified form of contingency. Instead of rejecting rationalism, Schelling transforms it into what I call a “living rationalism.”

Closely related to Schelling’s relationship to rationalism is his stance on absolute contingency and determinism—both at large and with respect to his account of freedom. Indeed, those who approach the *Freiheitsschrift* with an interest in the freewill debate may wonder if Schelling ultimately endorses a form of libertarianism (and thus contingency) or compatibilism (and thus determinism). The answer is neither—at least as those terms are usually understood. Like Kant, with whom he shares key premises, Schelling develops an account of freedom that defies easy classification. The usual (libertarian) way of rejecting the all-from-one model would be to deny the principle of ground and thus accept that certain phenomena are absolutely contingent: not everything has a *determining* ground. By contrast, in my reading, Schelling’s solution to the problem of ground is distinctive in both (1) affirming that everything has a determining ground *and* (2) rejecting the all-from-one model. He accomplishes this by conceiving ultimate freedom as an act of radical self-grounding outside of time. Each free being is determined in its essence, but not by another: it is *causa sui*. Though this account contains mysterious elements, its aim is to meet the demands of ultimate moral responsibility—demands that are impossible to satisfy with a non-mysterious account of freedom, as both Galen Strawson and Peter Van Inwagen have shown.²⁷

Unlike the principle of ground, the importance of the second topic I wish to highlight is immediately evident when reading the text. This is the fundamental distinction between that-which-exists and the ground of existence. According to Schelling, “the present investigation is founded” on the distinction (SW VII, 357), which provides the ontological frame-

work for his account of God, nature, and evil. Indeed, the distinction is the focal point of Heidegger's various Schelling interpretations, especially his 1941 lecture course (GA 49). Despite its unparalleled importance for understanding Schelling's philosophical development, the distinction is widely misunderstood, even by careful interpreters. Accordingly, one of the contributions of this book is to help clarify this distinction at the heart of the *Freiheitsschrift*. Let me briefly sketch two widespread interpretative tendencies that I hope to correct. This will also help to define some of the distinctive features of my approach.

The first mistaken tendency is the conflation of existence and that-which-exists. Thus, the distinction would no longer be between *that-which-exists* and the ground of existence but between *existence* and the ground of existence. Heidegger makes this mistake throughout his interpretation of Schelling's treatise—and, because of Heidegger's immense influence, the conflation is widespread in the secondary literature, especially in English. However, Schelling himself points out this error in his published reply to Eschenmayer, who had made the same mistake as Heidegger. According to Schelling, existence and that-which-exists are “two concepts that are worlds apart” (SW VIII, 172; cf. SW VIII, 164). I call this *the distinction within the distinction*.

But what difference does this make? If something is the ground of existence, would it not also be the ground of that-which-exists? This would only be true if by “existence” Schelling simply meant “being” in the usual sense of the term: the ground of a thing's being is also a ground of that thing. However, we will see that “existence” for Schelling does not mean “being” in the usual sense: its core meaning is *revelation*, or the external manifestation of what was previously enclosed inside itself. And if existence means revelation, then that-which-exists means that-which-is-revealed. This shows the consequence of conflating existence and that-which-exists: in effect, one would be collapsing the difference between revelation and what is revealed. But Schelling clearly wishes to distinguish the two. It is possible to be without being revealed—to use Schelling's language, it is possible to be without existing. Indeed, all revelation presupposes a prior state of hiddenness, a state of being before existence. Moreover, Schelling's identification of existence and revelation allows us to reformulate his fundamental distinction using the language of revelation. The distinction between (1) that-which-exists and (2) the ground of existence amounts to a distinction between (1) what is revealed and (2) the condition of its revelation.

The second mistaken interpretative tendency has wider implications for the problem of ground in Schelling. When discussing the ground of existence, commentators often treat the word “ground” as if it were a proper name rather than a concept that has applicability beyond what it designates. What I mean can be illustrated through an example. One can use the phrase “the queen of England in 2021” to refer to the person Elizabeth II: it is a description that uniquely designates her. However, Elizabeth as a person has attributes—the details of her private life, for example—that go beyond her role as queen. How does this apply to the ground of existence? Schelling uses this phrase to designate one of the principles in God (the real principle) and provides a rich description of this principle in its relationship to that-which-exists (the ideal principle). However, one cannot assume that every aspect of this description pertains to the real principle’s function as ground of existence, just as one cannot assume that every aspect of Elizabeth pertains to her function as queen. Instead, one has to investigate what is true of the ground of existence *qua* ground, and this reveals a meaning of ground that applies more broadly. Indeed, in the letter to Georgii mentioned above, Schelling explains that the core meaning of “ground” in his distinction is *conditio sine qua non*—the same sense of ground that appears in other contexts in the treatise. Thus, by recognizing that “ground” is a concept with wider applicability, one can connect the ground of God’s existence to the larger problem of ground.

These considerations also allow me to distinguish my project from that of Miklos Vetö, whose book on *le fondement* in Schelling is a landmark of French scholarship. At first glance, our projects look very similar, because we share a focus on “ground.” And indeed, Vetö’s treatment of the ground of existence in the *Freiheitsschrift* is especially rich and insightful. However, he is not primarily interested in placing it in the context of the larger problem of ground and thus showing the connection to other grounding structures in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Instead, his focus is on the structural role of the ground of existence within Schelling’s system and the various elements of Schelling’s earlier and later philosophy that occupy the same structural role—including “reason” in the negative philosophy. Tracing the “avatars and metamorphoses”²⁸ of the ground throughout Schelling’s philosophical development is no doubt important, but there remains the task of exploring the diverse grounding structures *within* the *Freiheitsschrift*, especially since this reveals an inner unity among the text’s central questions and Schelling’s response to them.

Up to this point, I have emphasized the distinctiveness of approaching the *Freiheitsschrift* as an answer to the problem of ground. But my interpretation also differs from other approaches in methodological respects. First, I engage with the significant body of German scholarship on Schelling, which tends to be neglected in anglophone commentary. On certain interpretative questions, the German scholarly discussion is more advanced. Moreover, much of the commentary on Schelling is as challenging to read as the philosopher himself. In part, this is a consequence of his style of philosophizing, which places great demands on the reader. Indeed, the pages of the *Freiheitsschrift* are filled with bold claims formulated in enigmatic language, often with little supporting argumentation. At times, the text can seem more a record of mystical insight than a philosophical treatise—an impression memorably captured by the great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. After referring to the *Freiheitsschrift* as “the most titanic work of German Idealism,” he adds: “Schelling no longer deduces anything; he *views* the inner history of God with the stony and incontrovertible gaze of a sibyl.”²⁹

To be sure, Schelling is a philosopher of profound insight with an appreciation for mystery that is rare in modern philosophy. However, he is also a philosopher who values reason and systematicity, as he himself attests in the *Freiheitsschrift*. I hope to demonstrate that his claims can be formulated and explained with greater clarity, making explicit the implied argumentation and logical connections while remaining faithful to his intentions. The goal is to attain the same combination of depth and transparency that Schelling earlier had attributed to the imagination: “Klarheit mit Tiefe” (SW VII, 146).

Key to accomplishing this goal is to read the treatise as much as possible in light of texts Schelling wrote in the years leading up to its publication as well as texts immediately following it. I do not mean to suggest that other commentators ignore these writings. But too often passages of the *Freiheitsschrift* are read on their own terms without reference to works that shed light on the same issues—and even ignoring later texts that explicitly address the passages in question. I mentioned already a salient example of the latter tendency: the widespread mistaken interpretation of the fundamental distinction, which Schelling himself corrects in statements to Georgii and Eschenmayer. More generally, many of Schelling’s bold but unexplained assertions are based in previous texts in his philosophical development; evidently, he does not always see fit to

retrace the ground he had already covered. For example, the famous line that “willing is primordial being” (SW VII, 350) is based in Schelling’s early, Fichte-inspired writings and represents for him the fundamental insight of idealism. Moreover, many of the ideas that are inchoately expressed in 1809 appear in more developed form in the *Stuttgart Private Lectures* (1810) and *Ages of the World* drafts (1811–15).

In the preface to the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling refers to his writings as “fragments of a whole,” whose connection is not easy to see (SW VII, 334). We can infer from this that one has to bring the pieces together to understand the whole. Schelling himself signals the continuity of the treatise with what came before by first publishing it side by side with republished earlier works in the first volume of his *Philosophische Schriften*, and by referencing texts in his *Identitätsphilosophie* in footnotes throughout the work.³⁰ Unfortunately, comparatively little attention has been paid to texts in the “philosophy of identity,” which has the reputation for being “the most sterile moment” in Schelling’s development.³¹ This reputation is certainly unfair, and I attempt in this book to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the *Identitätsphilosophie* for understanding the nature of identity, the *Ungrund*, the principles within God, and other key themes of the *Freiheitsschrift*.

Of course, one can object that Schelling’s citation of his previous writings is a self-stylization on his part—an attempt to disguise significant changes in his thinking by insisting on continuity. Along these lines, it has been debated among commentators whether the *Freiheitsschrift* really is continuous with his previous philosophy or instead marks a radical break, inaugurating a more dynamic period of philosophizing with a greater appreciation for historicity and the irrational.³² No doubt Schelling at times overstates the consistency of his oeuvre, but I think debates about the continuity and periodization of his philosophy are largely misguided. His development is best regarded as a path. At any point on the path Schelling draws on what came before even as he adds something new: continuity and disruption exist side by side. In any case, we cannot assume we will understand what is said about a topic in the *Freiheitsschrift* simply by reading about the same theme in another work. The proof of the usefulness of other texts is the resulting interpretation: do they help us to understanding what Schelling says in the *Freiheitsschrift* on its own terms? This is important to remember when considering themes that are central to Schelling’s later philosophy, like the relationship between divine freedom and creation. One should be careful not to read into the *Frei-*

heitsschrift positions he will only adopt later—for example, the view that God has the freedom to create or *not* to create. The connection between divine freedom and alternative possibilities is notably absent in 1809.³³

Finally, there is one other respect in which my approach differs from much of the other commentary on Schelling's treatise. There is a common—often tacit—assumption that his project to construct a system of freedom ultimately fails (*es scheitert*).³⁴ The task of understanding the treatise thereby becomes a matter of discerning where and why it fails—and perhaps must do so. Whether Schelling's project ultimately succeeds is, of course, an essential question to ask. But it is dangerous to pose the question too soon, given the enormous challenges in interpreting the treatise. Indeed, it is relatively easy to point to difficulties in the text and declare the project a failure. Instead, I have attempted to interpret the treatise so as to make it as coherent as possible, resolving apparent difficulties whenever feasible. Of course, so long as difficulties remain, one cannot declare the project an unqualified success. Despite the open questions, however, I hope to show how Schelling offers a compelling answer to the problem of ground and a system of freedom.

Before giving a brief overview of the contents, I want to note one limitation of my treatment of ground in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Although I occasionally refer to the writings of Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, from whom Schelling borrows the term *Ungrund*, the connections between mysticism and Schelling's understanding of ground are not a focus of my study. In part, this is because significant work on the Boehme-connection has already been done.³⁵ But more importantly, I believe that the nature of Schelling's relationship to Boehme—and mysticism in general—limits the usefulness of the latter's writings, and even makes their extensive consideration misleading, if one's primary interest is understanding Schelling's philosophical thought. It is certainly true that Schelling borrows language from Boehme (1575–1624) and the theosophist Friedrich Oetinger (1702–82), especially in the passages describing the ground of God's existence and the *Ungrund*. But we should not be too quick to infer from this that he is appropriating their ideas or that his reading of Boehme fundamentally transformed his thinking on ground. In fact, we will see that Schelling had already developed key aspects of his account of the ground and *Ungrund* years earlier.

In my view, Boehme's significance for Schelling lies above all in his gift for language and vivid metaphors. Throughout his philosophical development, Schelling never settles on a fixed set of terms but is con-

stantly experimenting with new language. (I suspect this is due to his appreciation for the limits of language in articulating the phenomena he describes.) So when he read Boehme, Schelling recognized a powerful vocabulary for expressing positions resembling his own; he then freely borrowed from this vocabulary when writing the *Freiheitsschrift* without feeling bound to the precise meaning the language had in Boehme.³⁶ If this account is correct, the best means of understanding the mystical language in Schelling is not to focus on Boehme's texts but to follow the thread of philosophical ideas within the *Freiheitsschrift* itself.³⁷ Nonetheless, Schelling's willingness to borrow mystical language reveals something important about his conception of ground: though rational in certain respects, grounding also involves mysterious elements that go beyond our ordinary ways of speaking. The *Freiheitsschrift*, in addressing the problem of ground, unites reason and mystery.

I begin by introducing the problem of a system of freedom, which involves discussing its historical context and showing its essential connection to the problem of ground. I also argue against Heidegger's interpretation of Schelling's famous line that God is not a system but a life (chapter 1). The next two chapters treat the relationship between identity and ground as a means of addressing the nature of identity and the problem of pantheism. This first involves a careful examination of Schelling's accounts of the copula in judgments, showing in what way the subject and predicate exhibit a grounding relation (chapter 2). The discussion of the copula sets the stage for my interpretation of the claim that "the law of ground is just as original as the law of identity" and the resulting transformation of the principle of ground. Through a close reading of Schelling's account of the "creative unity" of the law of identity, I then examine key features of divine grounding and its relationship to freedom, including the concept of "begetting" and its correlate, "derived absoluteness" (chapter 3).

The book's central chapter is devoted to the fundamental distinction between that-which-exists and the ground of existence. After characterizing the distinction in relation to the doctrine of potencies, I develop the implications of the above-mentioned "distinction within the distinction," which allows us to understand the meaning of "existence" and the precise relation between ground and that-which-exists. Examining the grounding character of the ground of existence reveals a rich set of meanings, one of which Schelling extends to grounding relations throughout the system (chapter 4). The fundamental distinction then provides the basis for Schelling's account of evil and theodicy, treated in the next chapter. I

discuss the ways in which evil is grounded in his account and weigh in on the debate about whether evil is a necessary condition (or “ground”) of revelation. I also examine the nature of other “irrational” phenomena, including the “irreducible remainder,” and draw the consequences for Schelling’s relationship to rationalism (chapter 5).

Next, I turn to Schelling’s most striking challenge to the all-from-one model of grounding: his account of the enigmatic *Ungrund*. I attempt to shed light on this account by showing the connection of the *Ungrund* to the copula and Schelling’s previous descriptions of the absolute. On the basis of a close reading of the passage on “indifference,” I argue that the *Ungrund* is a ground in one sense but not in another—and this explains its unique place within the system (chapter 6). The topic of the final chapter is Schelling’s formal account of freedom, which is a creative extension of Kant’s solution to the third antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Schelling unites freedom and necessity in an act of self-grounding outside of time. I compare this radical self-determination to the traditional concept of *causa sui* and show its connection to Schelling’s rejection of the all-from-one model; this allows for multiple “eternal beginnings” and ultimate moral responsibility (chapter 7). I conclude by summing up and critically evaluating Schelling’s solution to the problem of ground.