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Schelling, Heidegger, and the Ambivalence of Will

Philipp Höfele. *Wollen und Lassen: Zur Ausdifferenzierung, Kritik und Rezeption des Willensparadigmas in der Philosophie Schellings*. Freiburg / Munich: Karl Alber, 2019. xv + 471 pp.

One of Schelling's most famous lines affirms the ontological primacy of willing: "In the final and highest analysis, there is no other being than willing. Willing is primordial being" (SW VII, 350).¹ This bold claim that *Wollen ist Ursein* appears in the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*, the text to which Heidegger returns again and again in his interpretation of Schelling's thought. Despite his enthusiasm for the philosopher he calls "the most far-reaching thinker" of his age,² Heidegger comes to see Schelling as one of the foremost representatives of a metaphysics of will, summed up in the famous line on primordial being. The implication is obvious: if we want to overcome this metaphysics and all its harmful consequences, we must leave Schelling behind.

Philipp Höfele's excellent book *Wollen und Lassen* demonstrates why this conclusion is gravely mistaken. Far from being an uncritical predecessor of Nietzsche and the will to power, Schelling displays an ambivalent attitude toward willing – affirming it in some forms, critiquing or rejecting it in others. Above all, Höfele argues, Schelling's thought on the will has many layers of complexity: it includes not only a variety of forms of willing, but also "fringe phenomena" (*Rand-Phänomene*) like non-willing or *Gelassenheit* that are ordinarily placed in opposition to will. Moreover, Schelling's philosophy of will is distinctive in not conceiving willing and letting-be as either-or alternatives, as Heidegger tends to do. Especially in the late lectures, Schelling brings them together, showing how non-voluntary phenomena like *Gelassenheit* make an authentic willing possible.

From my summary so far, it may sound as if Höfele is unappreciative of Heidegger. Such is not the case. Even if Heidegger is not explicitly mentioned

1 All translations are my own. Parenthetical Schelling citations refer to the volume and page number in the first division of *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart/Augsburg: Cotta, 1856–1861).

2 *Schellings Abhandlung Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809)*, ed. Hildegard Feick, second edition (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995), 4.

in the book title, his thought plays a decisive role throughout. In fact, the final part of the work – roughly a third – is devoted to Heidegger's reception of Schelling's philosophy of the will, placed in the context of his various Schelling interpretations and his own evolving attitudes toward the will. But even in the parts of the book focused on Schelling, Heidegger is in the background: Höfele highlights precisely those features in Schelling's texts that evade a critique of the metaphysics of presence and thus anticipate aspects of Heidegger's own philosophy, such as the role of withdrawal (*Entzug*).

It is true, of course, that Höfele regards Heidegger's later Schelling interpretations as reductive in important respects. The almost exclusive focus on the *Freiheitsschrift* does not allow Heidegger to appreciate the fullness and complexity of Schelling's conception of the will – especially in the *Weltalter* and *Erlanger Vorlesung*, where his thought on the will is most critical. Moreover, even in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling distinguishes forms of willing and non-willing that complicate any attempt to see him as anticipating Nietzsche's will to power. Whatever the shortcomings in Heidegger's Schelling interpretations, Höfele notes that the two philosophers' thinking on will is remarkably similar in three respects: (1) both are interested in the will not just as a human phenomenon, but as something that is universal in its application, extending to being as such; (2) both develop critiques of the will as part of a critique of modern subjectivity; and (3) both introduce forms of letting-be (*Lassen*) as a means of countering the inadequacies of willing (cf. 297). I will revisit aspects of these connections below.

Before addressing Heidegger explicitly, Höfele devotes the first three parts of the book to a detailed examination of Schelling's thought on the will and related phenomena, spanning the nearly fifty years of his philosophical development. Each of the parts focuses on a specific period – the first treating the early writings through the philosophy of identity (1795–1806); the second treating the middle period, including the *Freiheitsschrift*, *Weltalter*, and *Erlanger Vorlesung* (1809–1821); and the third treating the late lectures in Munich and Berlin (1827–1842). The second part is by far the longest, reflecting Höfele's contention that the middle period contains Schelling's most developed and original thinking on the will (101). The sheer amount of material covered in the book is impressive, especially given the depth of Höfele's analysis and his command of the secondary literature. And by treating a central concept at all stages of Schelling's philosophical development, the book provides an effective overview of Schelling's philosophy as a whole. At the same time, individual sections (and subsections) are tightly organized and relatively self-contained so that readers will have no problem flipping directly to discussions of the texts and themes that most interest them.

One general feature of Höfele's approach is likely to surprise many readers: he has comparatively little to say about Schelling's account of freedom. This may seem strange, since Schelling is known as *the* philosopher of freedom, and so much of the broader philosophical discussion of willing takes place within the context of the "freewill debate," as Höfele himself notes (2–3). Nevertheless, the decoupling of will and freedom is understandable to the extent that so much of Schelling scholarship focuses on freedom (perhaps no other theme is more discussed), while relatively little has been written on Schelling's philosophy of will in its own right. Moreover, Höfele rightly notes that freedom and will-related phenomena are not coextensive, even if he does not wish to go so far as Heidegger in claiming that "freedom has nothing to do with will and vice versa."³ All the same, it seems to me that decoupling will and freedom comes at a cost. The connection to freedom and responsibility provides a sense of what is at stake when the will is included (or excluded) in various contexts – and more generally why we value will in the first place. It is not a coincidence that Heidegger combines a strong distinction between will and freedom with a negative assessment of the will.

Before engaging some of the details of the book, I also want to praise Höfele's style of interpreting Schelling. One of the recurring debates in Schelling scholarship concerns the placement of the turning-points in his philosophical development and to what extent a text like the *Freiheitsschrift* should be read in continuity with what came before. Höfele's approach is balanced: through a close and precise reading of the texts in historical succession, he identifies points of continuity, while freely acknowledging inconsistencies and changes in Schelling's position – for example, in the 1806 supplement to *On the World Soul*, where Schelling characterizes the absolute as self-willing for the first time (92, cf. SW II, 362). As an interpreter, Höfele is more inclined to differentiation than generalization, a tendency that matches well his claims about the will in Schelling. In contrast, Heidegger's readings, though creative and provocative, often include sweeping claims and a slightly procrustean tendency to read the text in light of those claims.

Precisely because Höfele is less inclined toward generalization, the strength of his book lies in the details of his analysis. Since this makes summary difficult, I will instead draw attention to key moments and themes in the book that illustrate the differentiation and ambivalence in Schelling's conception of will. These can be summed up in three keywords: art, tragedy, and *Gelassenheit*.

3 Höfele cites GA 73.1: 731 as well as the more nuanced statements in Heidegger's 1936 Schelling lectures. *Schellings Abhandlung*, 10–11, 19.

The first of these moments is Schelling's discussion of artistic production through genius, the culmination of the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*. In the product of art, conscious and unconscious activity are united, and the I is conscious of this identity. This is possible because artistic production begins with freedom and consciousness: artists will to create a work, intentionally using their craft as shaped by an artistic vision. And yet the work that results goes beyond their intentions; it unites their conscious activity with something unconscious, thus forming a product of genius. Although the language of will is not prominent in this passage, Höfele convincingly demonstrates how Schelling's later attempts to combine forms of willing and non-willing are already anticipated here. On the one hand, there are non-voluntary elements in play. Schelling compares genius to fate, that power which accomplishes through our free actions and "even against our will" purposes we did not intend (SW III, 616). Moreover, the artwork is an expression of "rest" (SW III, 620), which Höfele connects to Schelling's later thinking on *Gelassenheit* (78). On the other hand, the non-voluntary elements do not exclude voluntary elements, such as the artist's intentions (79). Thus, in art we have an instance where willing and non-willing come together in "unexpected harmony" (SW III, 615).

Although the role of willing in art is positive, the next theme brings out the ambivalence in Schelling's approach to will: tragedy. To be sure, Schelling has his own account of tragedy in the 1795 *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* and the 1804–5 lectures on the *Philosophy of Art*, focusing on the relationship between freedom and necessity in *Oedipus Rex* (cf. 86–88). But even more remarkable from the standpoint of Schelling's philosophy of will are the implicitly tragic elements Höfele identifies in texts from the middle period. These follow a common pattern: a perverse form of willing, through its attempt to achieve some end, accomplishes the opposite of what it intends. (Höfele connects this to Aristotle's definition of *περιπέτεια* or tragic reversal in the *Poetics*.⁴) One of the first instances of this pattern is Schelling's description of the "beginning of sin" in the *Freiheitsschrift* (cf. 138–9). Human beings strive to be "all things" and rule over everything "for themselves," but instead fall into non-being (SW VII, 390–1). Connections to modern attempts to dominate nature are clear enough. Höfele draws attention to a similar "entanglement of freedom" (SW IX, 235) in the *Weltalter* and *Erlanger Vorlesung*: in the process of willing, human beings overstep their own limits and fall into necessity, represented by an endless circle of the same (166–7).

4 1452a22. Höfele cites Aristotle's definition in a discussion of the intelligible deed in the *Freiheitsschrift* (137).

The same tragic pattern appears in a different context in Schelling's discussion of willing-to-know (*Wissen-Wollen*) in the 1821 *Erlanger Vorlesung*. Human beings want to know the original or eternal freedom (one of Schelling's designations for the absolute). But in *willing* to have this knowledge, they attempt to objectify what cannot be objectified, thus distorting the knowledge they seek. What adds to the tragedy is its inevitability: Schelling notes that we will to know before we even know that we will to know (218–9; cf. 222–4). Interestingly, Höfele describes a parallel tragic pattern within the absolute itself. Originally, its unity is a "Gelassenheit" of will and being (Schelling's own language), "where the will lets being be."⁵ This original unity is disrupted, however, when the will falls prey to a temptation to draw being to itself or "put on" being (*Sein anziehen*). As a result, the three potencies break out of the absolute as three wills in conflict with one another, trapped in the same endless circle of repetition described in the *Weltalter* (228–33).

As these tragic moments indicate, Schelling is far from an uncritical advocate of an ontology of will. In fact, Höfele draws attention to the ways in which Schelling anticipates Heidegger's critique by showing the tragic consequences of an objectifying will that is closed off to alterity and newness (233). In any case, Höfele identifies the 1821 *Erlanger Vorlesung* as the text in Schelling's corpus where he is most critical of the will, "problematizing all forms of willing" (233).

Unlike Greek tragedy, however, these tragic forms of willing admit of redemption. In the *Erlanger Vorlesung*, this is accomplished by various forms of *Gelassenheit*, the third theme I wish to highlight in Höfele's analysis. If we return to the problem of the human "will to know," all knowledge of the absolute is impossible so long as the human being remains a subject attempting to objectify the absolute. Instead, the human I needs to relinquish its status as subject, allowing the absolute to take its place. Schelling names this event using the Greek word ἔκστασις – it is a standing outside itself (238–9). It is therefore not the human subject that sees the absolute, but the absolute that sees itself in the place of the human being (cf. 220). Although Schelling connects this event to accounts of intellectual intuition in his early philosophy, Höfele notes a key difference: Schelling had previously characterized intellectual intuition as absolute willing and activity; here willing is relinquished in the process of self-withdrawal (239–40).⁶

5 *Initia Philosophiae Universae: Erlanger Vorlesung WS 1820/21*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969), 71.

6 I am sympathetic to Höfele's interpretation, but I believe it is important to distinguish between (1) the absolute's willing/activity and (2) finite human willing/activity. In my

At the level of the absolute, the tragic situation is also resolved through a moment of “letting-be,” though the structure of the resolution is different, taking place within the absolute itself (235). The first potency, the will that draws being to itself, plays the decisive role: it must deny its own voluntary striving, thus opening itself to true being and alterity, while recognizing that it is only a part rather than the whole. The ultimate result is a complete passivity of all moments of the will (234–7).

If Schelling during the Erlangen period is critical of all – or nearly all – forms of willing, that is not the end of the story. In part three of *Wollen und Lassen*, Höfele treats the late lectures in Munich and Berlin, which he regards as a summation of Schelling’s thinking on the will (253). While still critical of its perverse forms, Schelling brings elements of *Gelassenheit* and ἔκστασις into willing itself – especially in the creative deed of the “Lord of being,” which involves self-distancing and an openness for the other (262–3). Similarly, finite willing is only truly free in relation to another, whose alterity makes willing possible (287). Finally, forms of willing and non-willing play important structural roles vis-à-vis the distinction between positive and negative philosophy, which is decisive for this period. For example, one of the ways that Schelling accounts for the transition between negative and positive philosophy is through an ἔκστασις of reason (280–1). In any case, Schelling’s final account of will is both comprehensive and balanced – appreciating its various forms, critiquing its abuses, and uniting it with variations on *Gelassenheit*.

The references to *Gelassenheit* raise an important question: what role does Schelling’s interest in mysticism play in shaping his thought on will and non-willing? Höfele does not address this question at length, but he draws attention to important clues. The most important of these occurs in the discussion of eternal freedom in the *Weltalter*, which Schelling characterizes as a “will that wills nothing.” He adds that this will is named “poor” by “an older German writer.”⁷ As Höfele notes, this may refer to Meister Eckhart’s famous “Poverty Sermon,” where being poor is likewise associated with non-willing and indifference to external things (158–9). Of course, Eckhart is also the originator of the term *Gelassenheit* that Schelling occasionally uses.⁸ But Schelling never mentions Eckhart by name, and so Höfele suggests he may have in mind some other writer in the Eckhartian tradition – Silesius, for example (158). Moreover,

reading, intellectual intuition in Schelling’s earlier writings always concerned (1) and not (2), but the passage on ἔκστασις focuses on relinquishing (2), not (1).

7 *Die Weltalter: Fragmente*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: Beck’sche, 1946), 15.

8 Additional examples include: *Die Weltalter*, 46, 134, 136, 150, 200.

the mystical thinker with whom Schelling is most closely associated is Jacob Boehme, from whom he borrows the term *Ungrund*. In various places, Höfele notes the likely influence of Boehme on Schelling's conception of the will (90, 115–6, 137), and I would add him to the possible sources for Schelling's thinking on *Gelassenheit*, since he wrote a short treatise on the subject.⁹

Of course, the fact that Schelling borrows language from mystical thinkers does not define his precise relationship to mysticism. Were his views shaped by reading the mystics? Or did he notice affinities between their thought and his own, borrowing their language to express his independently developed ideas? The question of influence is often murky, so it may be impossible to decide. In any case, the mystical connection is an important link between Heidegger and Schelling – and worth exploring more when considering Heidegger's evolving views on Schelling and the will.¹⁰ Towards the end of the book, Höfele notes that Heidegger in the 1950's copied excerpts from the *Erlanger Vorlesung* with commentary, including a passage on “the pure will that neither wills nor does not will” (cf. GA 86: 524–5). Höfele draws attention to parallel formulations in Heidegger's writings during this period (431–2), although he stops short of suggesting any direct influence. What is more likely, it seems, is that Heidegger was attracted to the same mystical language in Schelling that he found conducive to his own thought.

Having given an overview of some key themes in Höfele's book, I would like to return to the *Freiheitsschrift*, the text at the heart of Heidegger's readings of Schelling. As Höfele points out, one of the innovative features of the text is the introduction of a plurality of wills within God, running parallel to the plurality of wills in human beings. Within God, Schelling distinguishes the will of the ground (corresponding to the human self-will) from the will of the understanding (corresponding to the human universal will); both are united in a third will, the will of love or spirit. This triplicity of wills becomes a recurring theme in Schelling's philosophy, running through his late works (cf. 212), and reflects his threefold scheme of the potencies. In addition to the dynamic plurality of wills, Höfele draws attention to structures in the *Freiheitsschrift* that involve letting-be or a withdrawal of the will. Perhaps the most important of these is love, the different forms of which Höfele carefully delineates (144–5). On one

9 “Von der wahren Gelassenheit” (1622).

10 Ian Alexander Moore has thoroughly examined the Heidegger-Eckhart connection in his excellent book *Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement* (Albany: SUNY, 2019). Interestingly, Heidegger asked his student Käte Oltmann to prepare a presentation on Eckhart for his 1927–28 Schelling seminar. Moore, *Imperative of Releasement*, 13–15.

level, love involves “letting the ground work” (*Wirkenlassen des Grundes*) (146, cf. SW VII, 375). On another level, the so-called “mystery of love” is a form of unity that respects alterity, joining two independent wholes in a relationship of dependence where will plays a limited role (147–8, cf. SW VII, 408).

What does Höfele have to say about the famous line *Wollen ist Ursein*? Despite its importance for Heidegger and its boldness as a philosophical claim, Höfele’s discussion of the line is relatively brief. On the one hand, he places it in the context of Schelling’s discussion of the formal concept of freedom, which is the legacy of “idealism” (i.e., Kant, Fichte, and Schelling’s earlier writings on the “ideal” side of philosophy). However, Höfele notes that Schelling goes one step further than his predecessors, making willing the foundation of nature and thus reinterpreting Spinoza’s substance in terms of the will (112). On the other hand, Höfele connects the claim that “willing is primordial being” to the dynamic interplay of the wills within God (116). This is justified in part by Schelling’s account of the copula, which states that the subject of a judgment relates to the predicate as ground to consequence (SW VII, 345–6). Thus, the statement “willing is primordial being” is really claiming that willing *grounds* primordial being, or primordial being *follows* willing. If we apply this interpretation to the wills within God, it explains why the will of the ground gives birth to being. Finally, at the end of his interpretation of the *Freiheitsschrift*, Höfele returns to the claim *Wollen ist Ursein*, arguing that it is part of a fundamental tension in the text. On the one hand, this claim gives primacy to willing; on the other hand, Schelling introduces love and the *Ungrund* as principles, and these principles either do not involve willing or contain elements that counteract it (149). So it seems that Schelling is ambivalent about the primacy of willing, even in the text that proclaims *Wollen ist Ursein*.

I find this interpretation creative and insightful, but I have a couple of reservations. First, I am not sure that Schelling intends his account of the copula to apply in this context. He actually has competing accounts of the copula even in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and he is not consistent in applying them to his own use of the word “is.”¹¹ Moreover, in a passage later in the text, Schelling uses very similar language but reverses the order of subject and predicate: “Genuine being [*das eigentliche Sein*] ... is a primordial and fundamental willing” (SW VII, 385). It would be difficult to explain this reversal if the ground-consequence account of the copula applies.

11 See Mark Thomas, “The Mediation of the Copula as a Fundamental Structure in Schelling’s Philosophy,” *Schelling-Studien* 2 (2014): 21–40.

My second reservation concerns the connection between the statement “willing is primordial being” and the different wills within God. On the one hand, such a connection makes sense: if willing is the primary ontological category, the different forces within God must be forms of will. On the other hand, the connection is problematic because it seems to mix two different ontological levels in the text. The claim that “willing is primordial being” applies at the level of *timeless being*. Immediately following the famous statement, Schelling lists the predicates of primordial being, which include eternity and independence from time (SW VII, 350). By contrast, the different wills within God operate at the level of *temporal becoming*: their dynamic interaction accounts for the development of nature and history. The tension between the two levels appears in other places in the text, and their presence in Schelling’s later philosophy is the subject of Habermas’s dissertation.¹² Höfele seems sympathetic to Heidegger’s attempts to overcome this dualism by interpreting becoming as essential to being in Schelling (cf. 352). However, I do not think this can be reconciled with Schelling’s frank claim that “there is no becoming in being ... but in actualization through opposition there is necessarily a becoming” (SW VII, 403). In any case, it seems to me that an account of the two ontological levels and their possible relation is essential for determining the full meaning and scope of the claim that *Wollen ist Ursein*.

I want to conclude by posing a couple broader questions about the language of will in Schelling. In the metaphysical tradition, this language is applied primarily to the human being and, by extension, to God. Schelling’s philosophy, by contrast, extends the language of will beyond these limits, applying it to all being. This raises two related questions: (1) Isn’t this a spectacular case of anthropomorphism – and therefore problematic? (2) What does the language of will even mean when applied beyond human beings?

In answer to the first question, it is indeed a form of anthropomorphism – but an intentional one. As Höfele observes, Schelling explicitly states he is using human terms when describing the ground as “longing” in the *Freiheitsschrift* (SW VII, 359) and when characterizing the primordial being in the first draft of the *Weltalter*.¹³ A passage from the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* is particularly striking: “If we require a God whom we can view as a living, personal being ... we must assume that he has everything in common with the human being except for dependency” (SW VII, 432). For his part, Heidegger

12 *Das Absolute und die Geschichte: Von der Zwiespältigkeit in Schellings Denken* (Bonn: Ph.D. dissertation, 1954).

13 *Die Weltalter*, 17.

does not see any problem with this anthropomorphism. As Höfele observes, Heidegger praises Schelling's orientation toward human existence and his inference from the structure of the human being to the structure of being in general – seeing parallels to his own approach to Dasein and the question of being (349–54). Nonetheless, I think Höfele's book would have profited from a more sustained treatment of the philosophical foundations of Schelling's anthropomorphism, since it is at the heart of his philosophy of the will.¹⁴ I suspect this would require an assessment of the microcosmic dimension of Schelling's thinking, i.e., the notion that the same ontological structures appear at every level of the system.

What then can we say about the meaning of the language of will when it is applied beyond human beings? For example, Höfele cites the late lecture *Darstellung des Naturprocesses* in which Schelling states that all force of movement is originally will, although such willing is blind in nature (285, cf. SW X, 385). In what sense is this will? I think the question is connected to the more general problem of language in Schelling. He never settles on a fixed set of philosophical terms but is constantly experimenting with language (this is yet another connection to Heidegger). One interesting example of this is the various drafts of the *Weltalter*. In his analysis, Höfele focuses on the first (1811) draft, noting that the anthropomorphic descriptions of the will are less prominent in subsequent drafts (152), but he does not explore why this is the case. Along the same lines, the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, which follow one year after the *Freiheitsschrift*, lack the fully developed metaphysics of will he had introduced the previous year (150). I believe this is evidence, not of radically shifting philosophical positions, but of Schelling's recognition of the imperfection of all language in articulating the realities he is describing – including the language of will. What Schelling says about the absolute seems to apply more generally: "Every human language is too weak to describe that evidence that lies in the idea of the absolute" (SW VI, 27). If this is the case, then Schelling's broad extension of the language of will is an indication that he found this language (mostly) adequate to express the dynamic nature of reality, from the lowest forms of being to the absolute. But we should be mindful of its limitations.

In recognizing the broader limitations of will in Schelling, we could have no better guide than Höfele's book, which is so attentive to both the internal differentiation of willing and the ways that willing and non-willing are combined. Beyond its significant contribution to historical scholarship, the book

14 In a couple footnotes, Höfele discusses Schelling's answer to the charge of anthropomorphism in his 1812 reply to Eschenmayer (115, 164–5).

demonstrates the viability of Schelling's overarching approach: a middle path between an uncritical metaphysics of will and the renunciation of willing in all its forms. Thus, we might even say that Schelling's philosophy of the will – in pointing to Heidegger, and even beyond – proves to be “the heat lightning of a new beginning.”¹⁵

Mark J. Thomas | ORCID: 0000-0001-7472-1538

Central College, Pella, IA, USA

thomasma@central.edu

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung*, 4.