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A reappraisal of Schelling's attempt at a system of freedom in his 1809 Freedom Essay; on the meaning of system, freedom and necessity

Laurens, Christa

Citation

Laurens, C. (2023). *A reappraisal of Schelling's attempt at a system of freedom in his 1809 Freedom Essay; on the meaning of system, freedom and necessity.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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*A reappraisal of Schelling's attempt at a system of
freedom in his 1809 Freedom Essay; on the meaning of
system, freedom and necessity*

Christa Laurens

MA Thesis

Dr. R. Uljée

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Introduction

Despite a recent and still increasing interest in Schelling's works, especially the *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith* (1809), the question of the system does not often form the focal point of scholarly interest when discussing this particular work.¹ That is not to say that it has not been addressed at all. Perhaps the most famous interpretation as to whether Schelling succeeded in the very task he set out to accomplish in the *Freedom Essay* is Heidegger's reply. In the final moments of his lecture series on Schelling's *Freedom Essay*, Heidegger briefly turns to the question as to whether Schelling in fact succeeded at the task of thinking a system of freedom. According to Heidegger, Schelling did not succeed at the task he set out to accomplish and he reasons as follows. Heidegger claims that Schelling mistakenly places the system exclusively within the divine understanding. He then concludes:

But when the system is only in the understanding, the ground and the whole opposition of ground and understanding are excluded from system as its other and system is no longer system with regard to beings as a whole (Heidegger 1985: 161).²

That is to say, according to Heidegger, the very foundation of Schelling's system ultimately slips away from the system itself. To put it differently, Schelling's system fails to ground itself, to provide its own solid foundation. Despite all effort, with Schelling, as with Kant and Fichte, the task of system inevitably founders, or so Heidegger says.

In more recent discussion, scholars are divided as to whether Schelling's attempt at a system of freedom was successful.³ On the one hand, there are many who, in line with the Heideggerian interpretation, contend that Schelling's attempt ultimately failed.⁴ On the other hand, there are some scholars who argue that Schelling's attempt was, in fact, successful. These are, most importantly, Mark Thomas, Markus Gabriel and Daniele Fulvi.⁵ What all of the latter interpretations have in common is that, in defending the claim that Schelling succeeds in the task of thinking freedom systematically, the primary focus lies with Schelling's radically immanent ontology. That is to say, these interpretations carefully explicate how Schelling's original ontology enables a system of freedom. However, on these interpretations the meaning of freedom as it is thought within Schelling's system recedes into the background. Additionally, in recent attempts to make sense of the meaning of Schelling's view on freedom as it is developed in the *Freedom Essay*, this is often not thought in connection to the

¹ Henceforth to be referred to as the *Freedom Essay*. All references to the text are from the translation by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (2006).

² All references to Heidegger's *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* are from the translation by Joan Stambaugh (1985).

³ I should like to point out here that I have limited myself in this thesis to the English-speaking literature on the *Freedom Essay*. Much important work, however, has been done in both German and French concerning the *Freedom Essay*. For a helpful overview of such sources, see Kosch 2006: 90.

⁴ See for instance White 1983: 106-145; Snow 1996: 141-180; Kosch 2006: 87-104.

⁵ See, respectively, Thomas 2013: 424-431; Gabriel 2020: 137-152; Fulvi 2021: 869-887.

overarching question of the success of Schelling's attempt at a system of freedom. The best example of this is Charlotte Alderwick's account.⁶ Alderwick explicitly severs her discussion of the meaning of Schelling's concept of freedom from "the success or otherwise of Schelling's arguments in the *Freedom Essay*" (Alderwick 2021: 164).

The combination of these two tendencies – that is, the tendency to either focus primarily on the ontology or on the resulting view on freedom – has, or so I should like to claim, created a blind spot in the scholarly literature on Schelling's *Freedom Essay*. This blind spot being the appraisal of Schelling's attempt at thinking freedom systematically whilst simultaneously focusing on both the ontology of the work and the resulting view on freedom. In this thesis I hope to make an – albeit small – contribution to the existing literature on the *Freedom Essay* by providing an interpretation of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* that explicitly focusses on the resulting view on freedom in connection with Schelling's overarching attempt at a system of freedom. The central claim that I intend to demonstrate in this thesis is that Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. To this end, the thesis consists of three chapters.

In Chapter 1, I will sketch what I should like to describe as a genealogy of the question of a system of freedom. That is to say, the explicit aim of this chapter is to bring out the way in which the central problem of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* – that is, the task of thinking freedom systematically – is not an isolated phenomenon but rather gradually emerges as the fundamental problem of the philosophical context to which Schelling belongs, that is, of German Idealism. To this end, the chapter is divided in four parts. First, I will discuss Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as a response to prevent the impending crisis of the Enlightenment by the end of the eighteenth-century. Secondly, I will discuss Jacobi's *Briefe*, the ensuing pantheism controversy and Reinhold's tremendously influential response to Jacobi's dilemma. Thirdly, I will discuss Fichte's response to Jacobi's dilemma, Fichte's critique of Reinhold and how, building on this latter critique, Fichte's own *Wissenschaftslehre* attempts to overcome the problematic Kantian dualisms. Lastly, I will discuss the essential elements of the early romantic critique of Fichte and the essential characteristics of the former's own philosophy, namely absolute idealism.

In Chapter 2, I will turn to Schelling's *Freedom Essay*. The central aim of this chapter is to introduce the essential elements of Schelling's attempt at thinking a system of freedom. As will become clear, Schelling claims that only a living philosophy that firmly confronts rather than shies away from the challenge of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity will be able to perform philosophy's necessary task of thinking freedom systematically. Of course, this raises the question of what is necessary for a living, as opposed to a dead, philosophy; what are the demands of a living philosophy? This is the leading question of this chapter. To this end, the chapter is divided in three parts. In the first part, we will turn to Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism.

⁶ See Alderwick 2021: 137-165.

We will see how Schelling carefully disentangles Spinoza's basic concept, that is, pantheism from the many misunderstandings that are often associated with it. For Schelling, this concept is of the highest importance because if correctly understood it can function as the ground of a living system. In the second part, we will examine the concept of human freedom that, according to Schelling, results from his rethinking of the notion of ground, namely the real concept of freedom. As we will see, according to this concept human freedom is the capacity for good and evil. In the third part, we will examine Schelling's formal concept of freedom. As will become clear, the real concept of freedom needs to be complemented by the formal concept of freedom. According to the formal concept of freedom, an individual's decision for good or evil is to be understood as an eternal act outside of all temporal and causal relations by which an individual self-determines her own essence.

In Chapter 3, I will turn to demonstrating the central claim of this thesis: Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. To this end, the chapter is divided in three parts. In the first part, I will argue that, in order to see how Schelling succeeds in thinking freedom systematically, it is vital that one grasps the importance of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. Furthermore, I will also provide my own interpretation of the meaning of Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism; on my reading, it reveals that for Schelling, the contradiction between freedom and necessity is the question of the individual's freedom and independence in the face of its inevitable dependence on a ground. In the second part, I will argue that it is the concept of personality and personal existence that allows Schelling to rethink the notion of ground. I will also argue that Schelling's concept of personality enables a rebuttal of Heidegger's claim that Schelling's system does not succeed in grounding itself. In the third and final part, I will demonstrate how Schelling's concept of real and formal freedom have their place within Schelling's system of freedom, that is, I hope to show that Schelling's view on freedom really does allow for a reconciliation with system, that is, with the demand for the thoroughgoing connection of grounding.

By the end of this chapter, I hope to have shown that, on my reading, Schelling's attempt at thinking freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity in the following way. Schelling's system is not to be understood as a closed totality, springing from a self-evident first principle from which everything follows with mechanical necessity. Rather, Schelling's system is the whole, a whole within which every part is connected to every other part, grounded by the elusive groundless ground of grounds: the *Ungrund*. Within this system, human freedom is not merely freedom of choice, that is, the capacity to choose without a determining ground, merely because it is willed, between either A or B. Rather, human freedom is the capacity for good *and* evil. Each and every individual self-determines her own essence through an eternal act independent from temporal and causal relations. On such a view, freedom and necessity are one. We freely determine ourselves to be the kind of individual that we are, that is, must be. As such, it is not an estranged mathematical necessity that rules Schelling's system. Rather, the contradiction between freedom and necessity, groundlessly

grounded by a fundamental willing, forms the beating heart of Schelling's living system. This is the core of my interpretation of Schelling's attempt at formulating a system of freedom.

Chapter 1 – A Genealogy of the Question of a System of Freedom

Introduction

The central aim of this chapter is to sketch what I should like to describe as a genealogy of the question of a system of freedom. That is to say, the explicit aim of this first chapter is to bring out the way in which the central problem of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* – that is, the task of thinking freedom systematically – is not an isolated phenomenon but rather gradually emerges as the fundamental problem of the philosophical context to which Schelling belongs, that is, of German Idealism. I claim that it is only against the background of this genealogy that it becomes clear what exactly Schelling is trying to achieve in the *Freedom Essay* and in what ways Schelling's response differs from and overcomes difficulties central to for instance the attempts of Kant and Fichte to reconcile system and freedom. To this end, the chapter is divided in four parts.

In part one we will begin with the intellectual background of the end of the eighteenth-century, namely the Enlightenment and how its two fundamental ideals give rise to, most importantly, a tension between the belief in freedom and the use of rational reason. Against this background, we will examine Kant's transcendental or critical idealism as an attempt to prevent the crisis of the Enlightenment and how this relates to Kant's famous claim that "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (Bxxx). In part two we will turn to Jacobi's *Briefe*, the so-called pantheism controversy and Reinhold's tremendously influential response to Jacobi's dilemma between faith and reason. We will examine on what grounds Jacobi claims that all honest and consistent use of reason results in, amongst other things, the denial of freedom. We will also examine the way in which Reinhold attempts to solve Jacobi's dilemma between faith and reason and why this requires the systematization of the Kantian philosophy. In part three we will turn to Fichte's response to Jacobi's dilemma and how, building on his critique of Reinhold, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* attempts to overcome the dualisms that render the Kantian philosophy weak to its critical opponents. In the fourth and final part of the chapter, we will turn to the early romantic critique of Fichte and how their own philosophy, namely absolute idealism, intends to overcome these difficulties.

By the end of this chapter it will have become clear why the task of thinking freedom systematically gradually emerges as the fundamental problem of German Idealism, how Kant, Reinhold and Fichte essentially responded to this difficulty, and why their attempts proved unsatisfactory. This will pave the way for the next chapter, where we will turn to Schelling's own attempt to think freedom systematically in the *Freedom Essay*.

1.1 The Crisis of the Enlightenment and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

In order to understand what Kant hoped to achieve with his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, we first need to have an idea of the intellectual background of Kant's own day and age.⁷ This intellectual background is the Enlightenment and its firm belief in the authority of reason. The two fundamental ideals of the Enlightenment are rational criticism and scientific naturalism (Beiser 2000: 18). These ideals spring from two different ways in which reason was understood during this period. On the one hand, reason was seen as a faculty of criticism, that is, the capacity to examine the truth of our beliefs on the basis of the evidence provided for them. Reason as criticism thus stands for the ideal of rational criticism. On the other hand, reason was understood as a power of explanation. Enlightenment thinkers were firmly convinced that through reason all events could be explained by seeing them as instances of natural laws. Reason as a power of explanation thus stands for the ideal of scientific naturalism.

However, by the end of the eighteenth-century it was becoming more and more evident that the Enlightenment was nearing a state of crisis. The cause of the impending crisis were nothing less than the Enlightenment's very own ideals of rational criticism and scientific naturalism.⁸ It seemed that if radicalized, both ideals led to undesirable consequences that very few Enlightenment thinkers were willing to accept. First of all, if radicalized, it seemed that rational criticism necessarily leads to skepticism. One of the most undesirable and unacceptable consequences of radicalized rational criticism is the skeptical outcome that it is impossible to rationally justify our beliefs in the reality of the external world and the existence of other minds. Secondly, if radicalized, it seemed that scientific naturalism necessarily leads to materialism. The Enlightenment operated on a specific model of knowledge, namely mechanism. According to mechanism, all events are explicable according to prior events in time. On such a view, everything can be explained according to mechanical and mathematical laws. However, only what is extended can be subsumed under such laws. Meaning that if one accepts that all events are to be seen as instances of general laws, and these laws are exclusively understood as mechanical and mathematical, then one arrives at the undesirable conclusion that everything that exists is material, that is, one arrives at materialism. Obviously, if one accepts the claim that everything that exists is material, then it becomes impossible to rationally justify the beliefs in the existence of God, an immortal soul and freedom.

To make matters worse, not only did each of the Enlightenment's fundamental ideals lead to undesirable consequences, it seemed that both rational criticism and scientific naturalism also undermine

⁷ In writing this chapter I have made extensive use of Frederick Beiser's excellent work, both introductory and philosophically in-depth, on German Idealism and post-Kantian philosophy. These include Beiser (1987); Beiser (1998); Beiser (2000); and Beiser (2002). Additionally, I have also consulted Pinkard (2002). Naturally, I have used citations when appropriate. However, no amount of citations could represent well enough the way in which these works pervade the entirety of this chapter.

⁸ In identifying as the cause of the impending crisis of the Enlightenment its two fundamental ideals I follow Beiser who provides an excellent overview of the various undesirable consequences of the radicalization of these two ideals. For Beiser's own account, see Beiser 2000: 18-22.

one another. On the one hand, rational criticism ultimately undermines our belief in the reality of the external world, a belief that is crucial to scientific naturalism. On the other hand, scientific naturalism, if driven to its logical extremes, ascribes to the truth of materialism. Materialism, however, does not leave room for the truth of the beliefs in the existence of God, an immortal soul and freedom. As a result of the various inner tensions of the Enlightenment, the authority of reason came under increasing pressure. More and more people were beginning to wonder, if the consistent and rigorous use of rational reason deprives us of some of our most fundamental beliefs – beliefs that concern the existence of the external world, other minds, God, an immortal soul and freedom – why then should we continue to uphold our faith in reason?

It is against this background, that of the impending crisis of the Enlightenment, that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is to be understood. In a nutshell, the central aim of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is to demonstrate the possibility of objective knowledge, i.e. the possibility of the synthetic *a priori*. On Kant's view, the synthetic *a priori* strictly refers to the transcendental conditions of possible experience and these conditions, in turn, involve the pure concepts of the understanding, the pure forms of intuition and the synthetic unity of apperception. Experience is the result of the application of *a priori* concepts, as actively provided by our faculty of understanding, to *a posteriori* intuitions, as passively received by our faculty of sensibility. With this work, Kant hoped to formulate a satisfying response to all the problematic "-isms" that plagued his time whilst at the same time providing a firm and lasting foundation for the authority of reason. In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on some of the most important elements of Kant's critical or transcendental idealism, and how these are a response to the inner tensions of the Enlightenment's two fundamental ideals.

In order to understand how Kant intended to save the Enlightenment ideals of rational criticism and scientific naturalism, we need to take a closer look at the introductory words of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant radically reinterprets the history of philosophy, that is, all previous attempts at answering philosophy's most fundamental questions concerning the nature of reality, God, freedom and immortality. According to Kant's ideal of science, any science has to proceed from certain principles and prove its conclusions strictly *a priori* – i.e. without reference to experience – from them. However, if it uses principles without first subjecting them to rational criticism, this is bound to end in contradictions and controversies. According to Kant, his predecessors have made precisely this mistake: they used the faculty of pure reason *uncritically*, that is to say, *dogmatically*. Kant defines dogmatism as "the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, without an antecedent critique of its own capacity" (Bxxxv).⁹ This has turned metaphysics into a "battlefield [where] no combatant has ever gained the least bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory" (Bxv).

In order to finally bring metaphysics on "the secure path of a science", Kant proposes, we have

⁹ All references to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are from the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (1998).

to subject our faculty of pure reason to a rigorous and systematic investigation in order to determine precisely all that can be known *a priori* (Bix). The two criteria of the *a priori* are “necessity and strict universality” (B4). That is to say, the *a priori* – as opposed to the *a posteriori* – involves that type of knowledge that does not – and cannot – depend on experience for its justification. According to Kant, there are two different types of *a priori* judgments, namely analytic and synthetic ones. In analytic judgments the predicate is contained in the subject and merely explicates something that was already contained within the concept of the subject. An example of an analytic *a priori* judgment is “All triangles have three sides”. This judgment expresses a universal and necessary truth but does not, however, add to our knowledge *a priori* since it is true by virtue of the very definition of what counts as a triangle. In synthetic judgments, however, the predicate is not contained in the subject and thus does add something new to the concept of the subject which was not previously contained in it. Meaning that synthetic *a priori* judgments would be those judgments that express universal and necessary truths, yet which also add to our knowledge *a priori*. For Kant then, the fate of metaphysics hinges on the possibility of the synthetic *a priori*:

The real problem of pure reason is now contained in the question: How are synthetic judgments *a priori* possible? (...) On the solution of this problem, or on a satisfactory proof that the possibility that it demands to have explained does not in fact exist at all, metaphysics now stands or falls (B19).

Of course, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues in favor of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. In addition to mathematics and geometry, Kant argues that we can know *a priori* the conditions of possible experience. This is the transcendental turn in Kant’s thinking. Transcendental philosophy addresses not so much the nature of objects as the very conditions of possible experience, i.e. the conditions that must necessarily hold if it is to be possible for a subject to have a conscious experience of objects. As Kant puts it, transcendental philosophy is concerned “not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*” (B25). However, this requires a shift or, as Kant puts it, a revolution in our way of thinking. Instead of operating on the assumption that our concepts conform to objects, Kant suggests – in self-proclaimed analogy with Copernicus – that it might be better to assume that the objects of experience conform to our concepts. On this assumption, the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of objects – i.e. necessary and universal knowledge of the object of experience prior to any actual experience – becomes possible. If the object of experience conforms to our concepts, then this means that human reason actively provides the very form and structure of experience. This is why Kant famously writes that “reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design” (Bxiii).

This leads us to one of the most important elements of Kant’s transcendental philosophy: the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves. According to Kant, the way in which we experience the world is the result of the joint effort of our passive faculty of sensibility, which provides us with the content of experience, i.e. intuitions, and our active faculty of understanding,

which provides us with the form of experience, i.e. concepts. We know the world only as it appears to us, as it has been actively processed by the synthesizing activities of the human mind. What we cannot know are the things-in-themselves, or the things as they are independent from the synthesizing activities of the human mind. This stands at the core of Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism, which can essentially be understood as the combination of two claims. First, the claim that we have to distinguish between appearances and things-in-themselves. Secondly, the claim that we can know only appearances, not things-in-themselves.

On Kant's transcendental idealism, all experience presupposes the synthesizing activities of the human mind. This is perhaps best exemplified by Kant's notion of the synthetic unity of apperception, a notion of the utmost importance. He even goes so far as to equate the synthetic unity of apperception with the very faculty of understanding itself.¹⁰ The synthetic unity of apperception is Kant's term for the prior act of combination, performed by the understanding, which makes it possible that all of my representations can be accompanied by the "I think". Kant famously writes, "The I think must be able to accompany all my representations" (B131). The necessity of the "I think" expresses the idea that through the act of thinking about a certain representation I become aware of myself as representing the representation in question. By representing a certain representation to myself – such as e.g. the experience of a stone – it becomes something "for me", and this must be possible for all my representations if they are to be mine, that is, if they are to be meaningfully mine. What makes it possible for the "I think" to accompany all my representations is the prior synthetic unity of apperception. Crucially, this means that the fundamental principle of Kant's transcendental philosophy is *human spontaneity*; our capacity to actively combine and order that which we receive passively through our faculty of sensibility. As we will see, it is precisely Kant's concept of human spontaneity that Fichte took to its logical extremes in his 1994 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Before I turn to explicating the way in which Kant's critical or transcendental philosophy intends to dissolve the crisis of the Enlightenment, I should like to point out here one extremely important consequence of Kant's transcendental philosophy, one which is especially relevant to the overarching aim of this chapter. This is the radical separation of the domains of pure and practical reason. Kant puts it thus:

[A]lthough the supreme principles of morality and the fundamental concepts of it are *a priori* cognitions, they still do not belong in transcendental philosophy, for (...) everything practical, insofar as it contains incentives, is related to feelings, which belong among empirical sources of cognition (B28-29).

What we can know by means of pure reason alone turns out to be exclusively the conditions of possible experience, i.e. the pure forms of intuition, the pure concepts of the understanding and the

¹⁰ The oft-cited passage is the following: "the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of the understanding, even the whole of logic and, after it, transcendental philosophy; indeed this faculty is the understanding itself" (B134).

synthetic unity of apperception. Questions relating to God, immortality and – most importantly for us – freedom, fall outside of what can be known through the use of pure reason alone. Rather, they belong to the domain of practical reason. This is not to say that, according to Kant, we are not justified in holding fast to our belief that we are free beings, but this belief is grounded with recourse to practical, not theoretical reason. This means that, in an important sense, the fact of freedom is incomprehensible to human reason. As Kant himself famously admitted: “Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (Bxxx).

How then does Kant’s critical or transcendental idealism intend to solve the crisis of the Enlightenment and reinstate the authority of reason? First, Kant’s transcendental idealism has a proper reply to the skeptic.¹¹ Armed with the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves, Kant is able to counter the skeptic by pointing out that the latter operates on a false assumption, namely the assumption that truth consists in the correspondence of our representations with the things-in-themselves. Since we cannot step out of the circle of our own consciousness in order to see if our representations really do correspond to the things-in-themselves, the skeptic demands the impossible. Instead, Kant proposes that we replace the skeptic’s external standard of truth with an internal standard of truth, one according to which the truth of our representations depends on their correspondence with the universal and necessary forms of consciousness. Secondly, Kant’s transcendental idealism is able to prevent scientific naturalism from collapsing into materialism; it limits the application of these laws to the realm of appearances. This is justified since we cannot know, as materialism naively assumes, that the laws of nature apply to the things-in-themselves. As a result, on Kant’s transcendental idealism rational criticism and scientific naturalism no longer run the risk of undermining each other.

However, despite Kant’s valiant effort, the crisis of the Enlightenment could not be prevented. A mere four years after the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Jacobi publishes his *Ueber die Lehre von Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), a work which sparked the so-called “pantheism controversy”. This controversy impacted virtually every important intellectual at the time. Thinkers who, either in published works or private notebooks, responded to the philosophical issue raised by Jacobi in his *Briefe* include Herder, Reinhold, Rehberg, Hamann, Wizenmann, Schlegel, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Novalis and Hölderlin, and even Kant himself (Beiser 2000: 26). Furthermore, the pantheism controversy is especially relevant for this thesis because it is precisely Jacobi’s claim of the incompatibility of system and freedom that Schelling carefully responds to in the introduction to the *Freedom Essay*. In the next part, we will examine what was at stake during the pantheism controversy.

¹¹ For a much more detailed discussion of Kant’s reply to traditional skeptical arguments than I can provide here, see Beiser 2002: 48-74.

1.2 Jacobi, Reinhold and the Pantheism Controversy

At first glance, Jacobi's *Briefe* seem to be nothing more than the somewhat shocking revelation that a renowned intellectual at the time – namely Gotthold Ephraim Lessing – admitted to being a committed Spinozist.¹² Jacobi, however, used Lessing's confession of Spinozism to attack the very fundament of the Enlightenment: its belief in the authority of reason. As we know, the two fundamental ideals of the Enlightenment are rational criticism and scientific naturalism. According to the first ideal, it is the task of philosophy to subject all our ordinary beliefs to rational criticism and discard those beliefs for which there is not sufficient evidence. According to the second principle, all events can be explained by seeing them as instances of natural laws. Of course, the very hope that drives us to do philosophy in the first place is that it is in principle possible to justify all our ordinary beliefs on rational grounds, that is, according to rational criticism. Furthermore, ideally this is in harmony with the ideal of scientific naturalism, according to which everything can be explained according to the laws of the natural sciences (coupled with the mechanistic model of knowledge prevalent during the Enlightenment). Jacobi argued that precisely the two fundamental ideals of the Enlightenment cannot be reconciled. According to Jacobi, all rational inquiry ultimately results in a radical skepticism or "nihilism", according to which all that we can ever hope to know is limited exclusively to our own fleeting impressions.

The thrust of Jacobi's narrative in his *Briefe* can be summarized with the following two claims. First, all rational inquiry, if it is only consistent, ends in Spinozism. Secondly, Spinozism inevitably amounts to atheism and fatalism. What argument does Jacobi offer for these claims? According to Jacobi, the guiding principle behind Spinoza's philosophical system is the principle of sufficient reason. This principle states that everything must have a prior cause or ground that determines it in all respects. Or, as Jacobi puts it, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, i.e. "nothing comes from nothing" (Beiser 1998: 83). According to Jacobi, every rational philosophy has to universalize the principle of sufficient reason in the way that Spinoza does, if it is to be consistent. However, the net result of such a universalization, as Jacobi so keenly saw, is that it eliminates any and all possibility of a rational demonstration of our beliefs in the existence of God, freedom and immortality. The reason for this being that the principle of sufficient reason does not leave any room for the concept of a first cause, i.e. a cause that itself is not determined of necessity by a prior cause. Without the concept of a first cause, however, God, freedom and immortality become unthinkable. Thus we are left, Jacobi argues, with a dilemma: either we opt for a rational atheism and fatalism or we side with faith and perform an irrational *salto mortale*.

Perhaps the most influential response to Jacobi's dilemma between faith and reason for the

¹² For a much more detailed account of Jacobi and the pantheism controversy, see Beiser 1987: Chapter 2.

further course of post-Kantian philosophy is Reinhold's response.¹³ In his *Briefe über die kantische Philosophie* (1786-1787) Reinhold claims to have found a solution to Jacobi's dilemma. Against Jacobi, Reinhold argues that we do not have to choose between a rational atheism and fatalism or an irrational faith in God, freedom and immortality. Furthermore, the very place where Reinhold had found his solution to Jacobi's dilemma was no other than Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. This work had convinced him that Kant's doctrine of practical faith offered a way to rationally justify our beliefs in God, immortality and freedom through the practical reason of the moral law, the latter being a requirement of pure reason itself. The mistake that Jacobi, according to Reinhold, had made was that the former had uncritically assumed that reason is exhausted by its purely theoretical use.

According to Reinhold, however, there was one crucial problem with Kant's critical project: it lacked a properly scientific and critical foundation. Reinhold's own so-called *Elementarphilosophie* was intended to provide precisely such a foundation for the critical philosophy. Contrary to the practice of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Reinhold was convinced that his *Elementarphilosophie* could satisfy both Kant's ideal of science [*Wissenschaft*] and of critique [*Kritik*]. It would satisfy the ideal of science because Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* proceeds from a single, self-evident first principle – namely, “the proposition of consciousness” [*Satz des Bewusstseins*] which he formulated thus: “In consciousness, the representation is distinguished from, and related to, the subject and object, by the subject” (Reinhold in Beiser 2002: 227). This principle organizes the individual parts of the system into a single unified whole. It would satisfy the ideal of criticism because only that which has been shown to be a necessary condition of the first principle, itself self-evident, is accepted into the system.

Even though Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* found few followers, it was his immanent critique of Kant that was to have a lasting and formative influence on post-Kantian philosophy; Reinhold's call for a new foundation for the critical philosophy was enthusiastically taken up by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. In the next part, we will examine Fichte's critique of Reinhold, his own response to Jacobi's dilemma and Fichte's attempt to overcome the problematic Kantian dualisms.

1.3 Fichte's critique of Reinhold, Jacobi and Kant or Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

Reinhold's call for a new foundation for Kant's critical philosophy strongly resonated with Fichte. However, Fichte disagreed with Reinhold that the latter's “proposition of consciousness” could fulfill the role that he claimed for it. According to Reinhold, one of the reasons that Kant's critical philosophy lacked systematic unity of thought was because Kant had failed to grasp the idea of the whole; whereas Kant critically examined the various species of representation – i.e. the intuitions of sensibility, the concepts of the understanding and the ideas of reason – he did not examine the whole of which these are only its parts, namely the very concept of representation itself. Philosophy, so Reinhold argued, should thus proceed from an analysis of consciousness in terms of representation

¹³ For a much more detailed account of Reinhold's response to Jacobi and the former's *Elementarphilosophie*, see Beiser 1987: Chapter 8.

proper. The result of such an analysis is expressed, as we know, by Reinhold's "proposition of consciousness".

Importantly, Reinhold's proposition of consciousness amounts to the description of a fact of consciousness. It is precisely this latter point that Fichte takes issue with. Against Reinhold's claim that representation is basic, Fichte makes the following argument. According to the proposition of consciousness, any representation presupposes a subject that is able to distinguish the representation from, and relate it to, herself and the object. This means, however, that the possibility of any representation depends on there being a subject that is able to perform certain acts. But if representations themselves depend on some prior activity of the subject, they simply cannot be basic. In other words, Reinhold's fundamental mistake, according to Fichte, was to assume that philosophy should proceed from something given, that is, a fact. Instead, philosophy's single, self-evident first principle would have to express not a *fact* [*Tatsache*] but an *act* [*Tathandlung*]. It is precisely this original insight that Fichte puts to use in his attempt to overcome the problematic dualisms of Kant's philosophy.

At this point, Fichte found himself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, Fichte recognized that the critical philosophy, at least in its Kantian presentation, was vulnerable to skeptical objections.¹⁴ On the other hand, Fichte was convinced that the critical philosophy formed the only possible solution to Jacobi's dilemma and the skeptical objections of Kant's neo-Humean critics. Fichte thus had to come up with a way to avoid both the mechanistic materialism of Spinozism and the nihilistic consequences of (neo-)Humean skepticism. In the remainder of this part, we will examine Fichte's response to Jacobi's dilemma and Fichte's attempt to overcome the problematic Kantian dualisms. In so doing, I will also take a moment to discuss the fundamental philosophical problem that not only Fichte, but virtually every post-Kantian thinker is attempting to solve, namely the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge.

Fichte's reply to Jacobi's dilemma can be found in the first introduction to his *Wissenschaftslehre*. Here Fichte boldly claims that when it comes to philosophy, there are only two possible positions: "dogmatism" and "idealism". Both systems seek to explain the ground of experience and, in doing so, adopt radically opposed first principles. The dogmatist adopts as his first principle "the independence of the thing" and seeks to explain the constitution of the self on the basis of the principle of sufficient reason of what Fichte refers to as "the principle of causality" (I, 432).¹⁵ This procedure, as Jacobi had so shockingly shown, inevitably results in fatalism and materialism. The idealist, on the other hand, adopts as his first principle "the freedom and independence of the self" (I, 431) and seeks to explain experience on the basis of an act that is "conditioned by freedom" (I, 445).

¹⁴ Fichte's readings of Hume, Jacobi and Kant's so-called "neo-Humean" critics – especially Ernst Platner, Gottlieb Schulze and Salomon Maimon – had convinced him of this (Beiser 2002: 223).

¹⁵ All references to Fichte's first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* are from the translation by Peter Heath and John Lachs (1970).

Since dogmatism does not leave room for human freedom, whereas idealism adopts freedom as its first principle, Fichte thinks that “the resolute thinker will always prefer [idealism]” (I, 447-448). The mistake that Jacobi, according to Fichte, had made was that the former had failed to see that Spinozism does not exhaust our options; there is a viable alternative to the dogmatic procedure of the Spinozist, namely that of the transcendental idealist.

If we remember, the central aim of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is to demonstrate the possibility of objective knowledge, i.e. the possibility of the synthetic *a priori*. On Kant’s view, the synthetic *a priori* strictly refers to the transcendental conditions of possible experience and these conditions, in turn, involve the pure concepts of the understanding, the pure forms of intuition and the synthetic unity of apperception. Experience is the result of the application of *a priori* concepts, as actively provided by our faculty of understanding, to *a posteriori* intuitions, as passively received by our faculty of sensibility. However, it is precisely this possibility – i.e. the possibility of the interaction between understanding and sensibility – that some of Kant’s neo-Humean critics call into question.¹⁶ They point out that understanding and sensibility are two completely independent and heterogeneous faculties; the faculty of understanding is completely active, intellectual and beyond space and time, whereas the faculty of sensibility is completely passive, empirical and within space and time. Even though Kant himself had proclaimed that experience requires “the most intimate interaction between understanding and sensibility” (Kant in Beiser 1987: 291), his critics point out that any interaction between these faculties is quite impossible, given their complete independence and heterogeneity.

I should like to take a moment here to consider the underlying philosophical problem at play: the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge.¹⁷ What exactly is the difficulty involved in explaining the possibility of objective knowledge? The difficulty arises because of the following. On the one hand, it is necessary to *affirm* some kind of dualism between the subject and object of experience. It is simply a given of our ordinary experience that subjects find themselves in a world of objects that resist their will and imagination. That is, if we are to do justice to ordinary experience, then we have to take into account the sheer givenness of the external world. On the other hand, it is also necessary to *deny* exactly such a dualism. Since the production of knowledge requires some kind of interaction or correspondence between the subject and object, it must be the case that there is a point of identity between the subject and object. That is to say, any solution to the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge requires one to simultaneously *affirm* and *deny* a dualism between the subject and object of experience. As Hegel would later phrase it, it is the task of philosophy to think the “identity of identity and nonidentity” (Hegel in Beiser 2002: 14).

Keeping the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge in our mind, we can now turn

¹⁶ It was Maimon in particular who argued that Kant’s dualism between understanding and sensibility renders the critical philosophy vulnerable to traditional skeptical objections. On Maimon’s critique of Kant and his influence on post-Kantian philosophy, see Beiser 1987: Chapter 10.

¹⁷ In fact, the entirety of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy can arguably be seen as the history of so many different attempts at solving the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge. On this, see Beiser (1998).

to Fichte's attempt to overcome the Kantian dualism between understanding and sensibility. This is his postulate of the absolute I, which he presents as the first principle of his *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794):

The being (essence) [Seyn (Wesen)] of the I qua absolute subject consists simply in positing itself as existing [als seyend]. It is as it posits itself to be, and it posits itself as it is. Consequently, the I exists purely and simply and necessarily for the I (I, 97).¹⁸

Fichte's concept of the self-positing I unites thinking and willing, knowing and doing; the I freely posits itself, that is, reflects upon itself as an I, and creates itself through this very act. In the act of self-positing, that which acts and the product of this activity, i.e. action and deed, are one and the same. This is why, according to Fichte, the proposition "I am" expresses not a fact [*Tatsache*] but an act [*Tathandlung*] (I, 96). Importantly, Fichte argues that his postulate of the absolute I surmounts the problematic Kantian dualism between understanding and sensibility; the subject and object of experience – the Fichtean "ego" and "non-ego" – spring from a single, unified principle, namely the absolute I (I, 105-123).

For a number of reasons, however, Fichte grants his postulate of the absolute I not a constitutive but a regulative status.¹⁹ As Beiser explains, the crucial difference that this makes is that Fichte's postulate of the absolute ego is not to be understood as providing us with knowledge on the nature or reality of things. Rather, this postulate is to be understood as a moral imperative concerning how we should or ought to act (Beiser 2002: 338). This means, however, that Fichte's explanation of the basic structure of experience remains incomplete without "a concept of the highest significance": the concept of striving [*Streben*] (I, 261-270). According to this concept, the activity of the finite ego – or the subject of experience – consists in an infinite striving to attain the complete independence and self-sufficient reality of the absolute I. The finite ego finds itself in a hostile world and must endlessly exert itself to make the non-ego or nature conform to its own freely determined ends.

In this way, both demands of the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge are met. The possibility of objective knowledge requires both the affirmation and denial of a dualism between subject and object. Through its infinite striving the finite ego is able to diminish the subject-object dualism to the degree that it succeeds in making nature conform to its own will. However, as the finite ego will never succeed in gaining complete control over nature, as such, the subject-object dualism is also retained. Fichte's response to Kant's neo-Humean skeptics then is that they failed to see that knowledge is the result not of *contemplation* but of our *acting* upon the object of experience. In the next part, we will examine the early romantic critique of Fichte and I will also provide a brief characterization of absolute idealism.

¹⁸ All references to Fichte's *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* are from the translation by Daniel Breazeale (2021).

¹⁹ For an overview of these reasons, see Beiser 2000: 30.

1.4 The Early Romantic Critique of Fichte and Absolute Idealism

It is not possible for me here to cover the various complex critiques of Fichte developed by the early romantics, most notably Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel. Rather, I will briefly discuss the three points of criticism that best capture the spirit of the romantic critique of Fichte's idealism.²⁰ First, according to the romantics, Fichte fails to provide a satisfying response to Humean skepticism. One of the consequences of Fichte's concept of striving is that we are caught in a circle:

The fact that the finite mind must necessarily posit something absolute outside itself (a thing in itself) and yet, conversely, must recognize that what it has posited outside itself exists only *for the finite I* (that it is a necessary noumenon) constitutes that circle which the finite mind can expand infinitely, but from which it can never escape (I, 281).

Fichte himself considered this circle a strength of the *Wissenschaftslehre* since it demonstrates that self-consciousness cannot be explained without reference to a force that is completely independent from and opposed to finite beings. However, the romantics argued that Fichte's idealism traps us in the circle of our own consciousness. If knowledge is the result of the finite's ego acting upon the external world and its objects, then either we know only ourselves, i.e. the products of our own activity, or we know nothing at all.²¹

Secondly, Fichte does not resolve the Kantian dualisms but merely replaces them with his own. On Fichte's view, the subject is active, noumenal and purposive, whereas the object is inert, phenomenal and mechanical (Beiser 2000: 32). The romantics point out that the skeptical objection against Kant's critical philosophy that there can be no interaction between such independent and heterogeneous faculties as the understanding and sensibility applies equally to Fichte's own idealism: how can there be any interaction between the Fichtean subject and object given their respective characterizations? Fichte too then, according to the romantics, did not succeed in solving the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge. Third, Fichte's absolute ego, or so the romantics argued, cannot be just that: an *ego*. The reason for this is simply that the concept of the absolute transcends any and all finite determinations. Meaning that that which grounds the determination between the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, cannot itself be subjective. In the remainder of this part, we will trace the outline of absolute idealism by listing three of its essential characteristics.

In the writings of Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel we find the early beginnings of absolute idealism. It is, however, only in the treatment of Schelling and Hegel that absolute idealism receives its systematic treatment and exposition. In order to understand what sets absolute idealism apart from e.g. the transcendental idealism of Kant or the critical idealism of Fichte, we need to consider its

²⁰ In my discussion of the early romantic critique of Fichte I follow Beiser (2000).

²¹ Fichte himself stresses that we cannot know anything about this force that is posited in opposition to the activity of the finite ego: "According to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, therefore, the ultimate ground of all reality for the I is an original reciprocal interaction between the I and something or other external to it, about which the only thing that can be said is that it must be posited in complete opposition to the I" (I, 279).

various intellectual sources. Generally speaking, there are three such sources in total: 1) Spinozism, 2) Platonism and 3) vital materialism (Beiser 2002: 361-368). In what follows I will briefly discuss the most important ways in which absolute idealism was influenced and inspired by these three intellectual sources.

First of all, Spinozism which was a highly important influence on absolute idealism because of its monism. According to Spinoza's *Ethica*, there exists only one substance of which the mental and the physical, the ideal and the real, subject and object, are only two different attributes. The romantics were convinced that Spinoza's monism, if interpreted correctly, could offer a solution to the various dualisms that plagued philosophy ever since Descartes. All of the romantics adhere to some form or other of the doctrine that the opposition between the mental and physical, the ideal and real, disappears in the single reality of the absolute.

Secondly, Platonism which influenced absolute idealism most strongly through its rationalism. Before this point can be appreciated it is important to introduce a distinction between two different meanings of the "ideal" or the "rational".²² According to one meaning, the ideal or the rational is the subjective, mental or spiritual. According to another, the ideal or the rational is the archetypical, intelligible or structural. It is with the romantics that the ideal or rational becomes understood in the latter sense. According to absolute idealism, everything that is, is a manifestation of the absolute or "the one and all" [*Hen kai pan*], that is, of archetypical or rational form. The romantics regarded the Platonic forms as a workable model for the way in which the universal and the particular can be said to be one.

The third and last intellectual source of absolute idealism to be treated here is vital materialism. According to vital materialism, the essence of matter is to be understood not in terms of lifeless extension – as Descartes famously did – but rather in terms of living force. This vitalized concept of matter forms the heart of the *Naturphilosophie* of the romantics. Importantly, it allows for the view that the mental and the physical, the ideal and the real, are not different kinds of things or substances. Rather, they become merely different degrees of development or organization of a single living force; the subjective and objective are to be understood as different manifestations, expressions or embodiments of this single living force. On such a view, the mind is explained as the highest degree of organization and development of the living forces of the body and vice versa; the body is explained as the lowest degree of organization and development of the living forces of the mind. Despite the differences between the various forms of absolute idealism as developed by Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel, each variant is an original synthesis of the previously discussed three theses: monism, rationalism and vital materialism.

²² Hegel was the first to explicitly treat the distinction between these two different senses of the ideal or rational in his *Differenzschrift* (1801).

With the overview of the essential characteristics of absolute idealism, we have come to the end of this chapter. To recapitulate, the central aim of this chapter was to sketch a genealogy of the question of a system of freedom. To this end, I discussed what I consider to be the essential philosophical events and developments that led to the gradual emergence of the task of thinking freedom systematically as the fundamental task of the philosophical context to which Schelling belongs, namely German Idealism. What has become clear from my account is that Schelling's philosophical predecessors – of whom I discussed Kant, Reinhold and Fichte – each in their own way tried to preserve a place for the belief in freedom within a philosophical system, a task which Jacobi argued could never be achieved. I discussed both Kant's and Fichte's attempt at this task; whereas Kant finds a place for freedom within the domain of practical reason, Fichte turns freedom into the very first principle of his system. It also became clear, however, that Kant's and Fichte's philosophical systems are riddled with problematic dualisms and that, according to the early romantics, overcoming these dualisms involves a synthesis of monism, rationalism and vital materialism. In the next chapter, we will turn to Schelling's *Freedom Essay* and see for ourselves the way in which Schelling attempts to think freedom systematically in a way that, true to the early romantic spirit, intends to overcome the Kantian and Fichtean dualisms.

Chapter 2 – Schelling on Freedom, Necessity and a Living System

Introduction

The central claim that I intend to demonstrate in this thesis is the claim that Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. This required me to take the preliminary step of sketching a genealogy of the question of a system of freedom, since I claim that it is only against the background of such a genealogy that it becomes clear what exactly Schelling is trying to achieve in the *Freedom Essay* and in what ways Schelling's response differs from and overcomes difficulties central to for instance the attempts of Kant and Fichte to reconcile system and freedom. This preliminary step was taken in Chapter 1. Armed with this knowledge, we are now ready to examine in this chapter Schelling's own attempt in the *Freedom Essay* to think freedom systematically in a way that, true to the early romantic spirit, intends to overcome the Kantian and Fichtean dualisms.

In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling determines philosophy's fundamental task to be that of thinking freedom in connection to the whole of a worldview (Schelling 2006: 9). This task, Schelling claims, requires one to confront the contradiction between freedom and necessity, without which philosophy would be fully without value and sink into certain death (Schelling 2006: 10-11). In other words, only a living philosophy that firmly confronts rather than shies away from the challenge of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity will be able to perform philosophy's necessary task of thinking freedom systematically. Of course, this raises the question of what is necessary for a living philosophy; what are the demands of a living philosophy? As we will see in this chapter, this has everything to do with the notion of ground. We will see that Schelling's central move to thinking a living, as opposed to a dead, philosophy is to rethink the notion of ground. Additionally, we will examine Schelling's real and formal concept of freedom. This will prepare the way for the third and final chapter of this thesis where I will argue that Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. To this end, the chapter is divided into three parts.

In the first part, we will turn to Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism. At the center of this discussion stands Spinoza's basic concept, that is, pantheism or "the doctrine of the immanence of things in God" (Schelling 2006: 11). For Schelling, this concept is of the utmost importance because "if brought to life and torn from abstraction" it can function as the living ground of a philosophical system up to the task of thinking freedom systematically (Schelling 2006: 20). In order to salvage Spinoza's basic concept Schelling needs to overcome two hurdles. The first hurdle is Jacobi's claim that there is but one consistent philosophical system, namely Spinozism, which is, so Jacobi argued, intrinsically tied to fatalism, that is, the denial of freedom. The second hurdle is what Schelling refers to as "the general misunderstanding of the law of identity or the meaning of the copula in judgment" (Schelling 2006: 13). This misunderstanding of the copula obscures the correct

meaning of pantheism. After examining Schelling's response to these difficulties, I will conclude this first part of the chapter by discussing what Schelling considers to be the correct interpretation of pantheism and how this entails the all-important ontological distinction between "essence-as-ground" and "essence-as-existence" (Schelling 2006: 27).²³

In the second part of this chapter, we will examine what Schelling refers to as "the real concept of freedom". Idealism, though it has provided the formal concept of freedom, has failed to discern the specific difference of *human* freedom (Schelling 2006: 23). Human freedom, as the real concept of freedom informs us, is to be understood as "the capacity for good and evil" (Schelling 2006: 23). On Schelling's view, good and evil are differentiated not materially but formally. That is, the same elements are in both good and evil. However, the relation between these elements is completely different. Good and evil are the result of the relation that, corresponding to the distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence, obtains between the two wills that animate Schelling's system: the will of the ground and the will of the understanding. Whereas good actions are the result of a decision to maintain the fragile equilibrium between the two fundamental wills, evil actions are the result of a decision to shatter this equilibrium, to pervert the relation between the two principles and thus elevate self-will and particularity over the universal.

In the third part of the chapter, we will turn to "the formal concept of freedom". Here it will become clear that the real concept of freedom cannot stand on its own. Although it specifies the unique character of human freedom, namely as an individual's decision for good or evil, the real concept of freedom does not explain *how* this decision is actually made by individuals. This is why the real concept of freedom needs to be complemented by the formal concept of freedom, which explicates how this decision is made: individuals self-determine their own essence through an "eternal" act outside of time and all causal relations. What becomes clear from Schelling's discussion of the formal concept of freedom is that, for Schelling, to be truly free is to will but one thing. To put it differently, to be free is to be able to say "I could not have done otherwise for this is who I am". In this way, Schelling provides an account that unifies freedom and necessity.

2.1 Schelling's Discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and Pantheism

Although Schelling does not explicitly mention him by name, I take Schelling to refer primarily, if not exclusively, to Jacobi, the latter's *Briefe* as published in 1785, and the ensuing pantheism controversy when he writes:

According to an old but in no way forgotten legend, the concept of freedom is in fact said to be completely incompatible with system, and every philosophy making claim to unity and wholeness should end up with the denial of freedom (Schelling 2006: 9).

²³ In translating "*Wesen*" as "essence" I follow Markus Gabriel who has made a strong case as to the correct translation of the term and its essential relation to the title of the *Freedom Essay*. See Gabriel 2020: 137.

If we recall, the general thrust of Jacobi's argument in his *Briefe* is that the rational use of reason inevitably undermines our belief in God, freedom and immortality. Reason, if applied rigorously and consistently, demands the universalization of the principle of sufficient reason according to which everything must have a prior cause or ground that determines it in all respects. The only philosopher to have acknowledged this demand of reason, according to Jacobi, was Spinoza. However, due to the universalization of the principle of sufficient reason, the concept of a first cause or absolute beginning becomes an impossibility on Spinozistic terms. Although Jacobi's argument against the use of reason does not exclusively focus on the (im)possibility of rationally justifying human freedom, its net result is that freedom and system are incompatible; any philosophical system inevitably results in Spinozism and thus fatalism, i.e. the denial of human freedom.

What argument does Schelling offer against Jacobi's claim that all systematic philosophy, given the need to universalize the principle of sufficient reason, eliminates the possibility of justifying our belief in freedom on rational grounds? Against Jacobi, Schelling argues that Spinoza's system involves fatalism for an entirely different reason than its pantheism. As Schelling puts it:

For it is entirely the same for pantheism as such whether individual things are in an absolute substance or just as many individual wills are included in a primal will [*Urwille*]. In the first case, pantheism would be realist, in the other, idealist, but its grounding concept remains the same (Schelling 2006: 23).

Spinoza's system involves fatalism because it is a one-sidedly realist system. Everything within the system, infinite substance as well as finite individuals, is conceived of as a *thing*:

The error of his system lies by no means in his placing things *in God* but in the fact that they are *things* – in the abstract concept of beings in the world, indeed of infinite substance itself, which for him is exactly also a thing. Hence his arguments against freedom are entirely deterministic, in no way pantheistic (Schelling 2006: 20).

In fact, Schelling here repeats the Fichtean response to Jacobi's dilemma between faith and reason. As we know, Fichte's response to Jacobi's dilemma had been to point out that Spinozism does not exhaust our options. According to Fichte, when it comes to philosophy there are not one but two possible systems: "dogmatism" and "idealism". Both systems seek to explain the ground of experience. Whereas the dogmatist adopts as his first principle the independence of the thing, the idealist adopts as his first principle the independence and freedom of the I. According to Fichte, the mistake that Jacobi had made was that the latter had failed to see that there is a viable alternative to the dogmatism of the Spinozist, namely idealism.

Even though Schelling agrees with Fichte's critique of Jacobi, he rejects Fichte's claim that when it comes to philosophy there are only two possible positions. Fichte's two philosophical systems, dogmatism and idealism, for Schelling amount to, respectively, one-sided realism and one-sided idealism. However, neither a one-sidedly realist nor a one-sidedly idealist philosophical system can ever amount to a living philosophy. On such views, the problem or contradiction that takes center stage is the

(problematic) relation of mind and nature. On a realist view, it becomes impossible to think of ourselves as free, self-determining beings. On an idealist view, it becomes impossible to do justice to the sheer “givenness” of external reality. As we have already seen, Schelling considers philosophy’s fundamental task to be that of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity, of thinking freedom in relation to the whole of a worldview. What is necessary then for a living philosophy is the combination of realism and idealism: “Idealism is the soul of philosophy; realism is the body; only both together can constitute a living whole” (Schelling 2006: 26). Importantly, Schelling is convinced that pantheism understood as the doctrine that all things are contained in God can ground a living system (Schelling 2006: 20). According to Schelling, however, this fact remains obscured given the prevalent misinterpretation of the “is” or copula in judgment. This is what we will examine next.

As part of his discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism Schelling discusses what he refers to as “the general misunderstanding of the law of identity or the meaning of the copula in judgment” (Schelling 2006: 13). Schelling discusses three misinterpretations of pantheism. These are respectively the interpretation of pantheism as the doctrine that i) God is all things, ii) God is each and every individual thing and iii) that God is everything, that is, that things are nothing. In each and every case, Schelling shows how the interpretation in question leads to all sorts of falsities and obvious contradictions.²⁴ Schelling identifies as the root of the problem the interpretation of the copula or “is” in judgment as a “seamless sameness” [*Einerleiheit*] (Schelling 2006: 17). Such an interpretation of the copula *denies difference*, an interpretation that Schelling interestingly characterizes as “insensate or lifeless” (Schelling 2006: 17).

In order to clarify what Schelling considers to be the correct interpretation of the copula, he provides a number of examples.²⁵ For our purposes, the most interesting example concerns the proposition (P) “Necessary and free things are explained as one” (Schelling 2006: 13). Interpreting the copula as an empty sameness or logical identity results in either one of two meanings: i) necessary things only appear thus but are really free, or ii) free things only appear thus but are really necessary, that is, governed by mechanistic laws. That is to say, interpreting the copula as an empty sameness leads to the denial of either freedom or necessity. However, the only correct interpretation of the copula, according to Schelling, is one that can do justice to both freedom and necessity. Thus Schelling advances as the correct interpretation of (P): “the same thing (in the final judgment) which is the essence of the moral world is also the essence of nature” (Schelling 2006: 13-14).

According to Gabriel, it is here that we find Schelling’s sketch of a solution to “the identity riddle”, which “results from the paradoxical situation that it is difficult to see how there can be informative and noncontradictory identity statements of the form $A=B$ ” (Gabriel 2020: 139). Schelling’s solution to the identity riddle is that an identity claim of the form $A=B$ “means that there is an x such

²⁴ For Schelling’s full discussion of the various misinterpretations of pantheism, see Schelling 2006: 11-16.

²⁵ For all examples, see Schelling 2006: 13-14.

that x is A and x is B” (Gabriel 2020: 139). If we apply this to (P), Schelling’s meaning becomes much clearer: there is an x such that in one respect it is free and in another respect it is necessary. In other words, there is something that *grounds* the identity of A and B, namely x. It is in this light that we are to understand Schelling when he writes:

The unity of this law [i.e. the law of identity] is an immediately creative one. In the relation of subject and predicate we have already shown that of ground and consequence, and the law of the ground [*Gesetz des Grundes*] is for that reason just as original as the law of identity (Schelling 2006: 17).

I take Schelling here to acknowledge the universality of the law of ground. Everything that is, in order to exist as such, requires a ground from which it must stand out. On this view, everything has two aspects. On the one hand, everything has a ground. On the other hand, everything stands out from its ground and as such *ex-ists*. In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling expresses this by means of the ontological distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence. The domain that unifies the ground and that which stands out from its ground is what Schelling (in)famously coins “the original ground or the non-ground [*Ungrund*]” (Schelling 2006: 68).

Finally, building on the previous insights, it is possible to discern what Schelling advances as the correct meaning of pantheism. Pantheism claims the immanence of all things in God. Given the universality of the law of ground, it follows that God must carry the ground of his own existence within himself. This is nature, “a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him [i.e. God]” (Schelling 2006: 27). It is this insight, the idea that God must contain within himself an independent ground with its own will, that allows Schelling to advocate a dynamic monism or what we might refer to as “neutral monism” with Gabriel (Gabriel 2020: 140). This is the coveted third option between Spinoza’s realism and Fichte’s idealism, what Schelling refers to as a “higher idealism” (Schelling 2006: 22). Schelling’s higher realism does not begin from either subjectivity in the way Fichte’s idealism does, nor does it proceed from objectivity in the manner of Spinoza’s realism. Instead, Schelling proposes a unified system that is animated by the ontological distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence. In speaking of the former, Schelling uses such terms as “the principle of darkness”, “the real principle”, “the will of the ground”, “self-will” or “particular will”. In speaking of the latter, Schelling uses such terms as “the principle of light”, “the ideal principle”, “the will of the understanding”, “the will of love” or “universal will”. In the next part of this chapter, we will see how the interaction between the two fundamental wills of Schelling’s system leads us to the real concept of freedom.

2.2 The Real Concept of Freedom

The central concern of this second part of the chapter is the real concept of freedom defined as “the capacity for good and evil” (Schelling 2006: 23). Previously, we have seen that Schelling advocates a dynamic monism that is animated by the ontological distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence. Schelling explains the possibility of good and evil on the basis of this distinction.

Each and every natural being – i.e. rocks, plants, animals, humans, etc. – carries within itself both principles, that is, the principle of darkness (ground) and of light (existence). However, it is only in human beings, Schelling claims, that the principle of darkness is born into the light, that is, that mere desire and craving is transformed into spirit:

The principle raised up from the ground of nature whereby man is separated from God is the selfhood in him which, however, through its unity with the ideal principle, becomes *spirit*. Selfhood *as* such is spirit; or man is spirit as a selfish [*selbstisch*], particular being (separated from God) – precisely this connection constitutes personality (Schelling 2006: 33).

Personality, for Schelling, is the living unity of forces that results from the connection between the principle of darkness (an independent ground) and of light (the ideal principle).

In this regard, however, there is a crucial difference between God and human beings. God, as the highest being, carries within himself the ground of his own existence. As we know, this is nature, “a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him [i.e. God]” (Schelling 2006: 27). As a result, the living unity of forces in God is ruled by “the spirit of eternal love” and the bond of forces cannot, therefore, ever be severed (Schelling 2006: 33). Human beings, on the other hand, become in a ground that is completely independent from them, a ground that they do not carry within themselves. In the absence of the rule of the spirit of love, “self-will can strive to be as a particular will that which it only is through identity with the universal will” (Schelling 2006: 33). That is, the bond of forces that is *inseparable* in God is *severable* in human individuals. Precisely the severability of the bond of forces in human individuals, Schelling argues, is the possibility of good and evil.

On Schelling’s view, good and evil are differentiated from each other not materially but formally. Active in both good and evil is selfhood raised to spirit or personality. Good and evil are determined by the spirit that rules the relation of the dark and light principle. The proper relation between these two principles is a relation of accord, of harmony, of eternal love, as is the case in God. The perversion of their relation, its inversion or reversal is evil. Evil amounts to the destruction or collapse of the harmonious relation between the two principles. Given the severability of the bond in human beings, each and every individual herself has to decide between good and evil. To decide for good amounts to upholding the proper relation between the two principles; the will of the ground remains in the ground and serves as the means and medium for the good to reveal itself in. To choose for evil is to destroy the equilibrium of the two principles; self-will and particularity are elevated above the universal, causing what Schelling describes as a “severing of the whole, disharmony, ataxia of forces” (Schelling 2006: 38). What emerges then, is a view according to which the good is something fragile, something which can collapse and dissolve at any given time, as soon as an individual falls prey to the temptation to evil. In the next part of this chapter, we will examine how the real concept of freedom relates to the formal concept of freedom.

2.3 The Formal Concept of Freedom

The central concern of this part of the chapter is the formal concept of freedom. Schelling frames his discussion of the formal concept of freedom with a brief discussion of two opposed systems concerning the issue of freedom: the system of the equilibrium of free will and determinism. On the one hand, the “system of the equilibrium of free will” posits that freedom is “a wholly undetermined capacity to will one or the other of two contradictory opposites, without determining reasons but simply because it is willed” (Schelling 2006: 48). On this view, freedom is defined purely negatively as complete undecidedness or indeterminateness. Schelling points out that this is a completely unacceptable concept of freedom, since it introduces “a complete contingency of individual actions” (Schelling 2006: 48). The reason for Schelling’s resolute rejection of this concept of freedom becomes clear once contingency is understood as pure arbitrariness. For my actions to be completely arbitrary is for me to have absolutely no compelling reasons whatsoever to decide for A or -A in any given situation, a view which is untenable given the lived experience of human freedom. On the other hand, determinism claims “the empirical necessity of all actions because each is determined by representations or causes that lie in the past and that no longer remain within our power during the action itself” (Schelling 2006: 49). On this view, all individual action results from either compulsion or external determination. That is, it amounts to the complete denial of freedom.

Having thus rejected both the system of the equilibrium of free will and determinism, Schelling proceeds with his discussion of the formal concept of freedom. As his point of departure, Schelling introduces the Kantian concept of “the intelligible being” of things (Schelling 2006: 49). According to Schelling, this concept, first introduced by idealism, is indispensable to the doctrine of freedom. The reason for its indispensability is that, given its independence from time and thus from all causal relations, the concept of the intelligible being of an individual accounts for the possibility of an absolute beginning or spontaneity without which the possibility of free action becomes inconceivable. In fact, Schelling describes the intelligible being of an individual as a transcendental condition of possible free action:

[The intelligible being] precedes all else that is or becomes within it, not so much temporally as conceptually, as an absolute unity that must always already exist fully and complete so that particular action or determination may be possible in it (Schelling 2006: 49).

However, there is an important question that, on the Kantian view, remains unanswered. Schelling points out that there can be “no transition from the absolutely undetermined to the determined” (Schelling 2006: 49). That is, the intelligible being of an individual can only be the determining ground within which individual free action first becomes possible if it itself is *determined*. The question then becomes: what determines the intelligible being of an individual? Schelling’s answer is as simple as it is radical:

[T]he essence of man is fundamentally *his own act*; necessity and freedom are in one another as one being [*Ein Wesen*] that appears as one or the other only when considered from different sides, in itself freedom, formally necessity (Schelling 2006: 50).

In other words, it is the individual herself who self-determines her own essence and thus determines the entirety of her individual actions belonging to her life in time. Schelling describes this act as an act that “does not precede life but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is eternal by nature” (Schelling 2006: 51).

Importantly, freedom and necessity are unified according to Schelling’s formal concept of freedom. On the one hand, an individual’s actions are necessary. That is, they are neither arbitrary, nor the result of external determination. Rather, they spring from an inner necessity according to which this individual is precisely this individual and no other. Meaning that she cannot act other than she does for in doing so she would cease to be the unique individual that she is. On the other hand, an individual’s actions are free. They are the result of a free decision, that is, the decision for good or evil that determines the intelligible being of this individual. As Schelling puts it:

Hence, the intelligible being can, as certainly as it acts as such freely and absolutely, just as certainly act only in accordance with its own inner nature; or action can follow from within only in accordance with the law of identity and with absolute necessity which alone is also absolute freedom. For free is what acts only in accord with the laws of its own being and is determined by nothing else either in or outside itself (Schelling 2006: 50).

Given the difficulty of Schelling’s meaning, it will be useful to briefly consider Schelling’s own examples of, respectively, a good and evil person. Schelling finds his example of the good individual in Cato the younger of whom it was said that he “most resembled virtue because he never acted correctly in order to act in that way (out of respect for the command), but rather because he could not at all have acted otherwise” (Schelling 2006: 57). The moral disposition upheld by such individuals as Cato is best described as what Schelling refers to as “religiosity” or “that one act in accordance with what one knows and not contradict the light of cognition in one’s conduct” (Schelling 2006: 56-57). For Schelling, good actions are performed by an individual for whom it has become impossible to do otherwise, simply because she knows that it is the right thing to do. She does not act arbitrarily, nor does she in any way feel compelled to her actions. Rather, she considers her actions to be the only one possible for her, that is, morally necessary.

True to his claim that freedom is the capacity for good *and* evil, Schelling discusses his example of the evil individual in similar terms as he does his example of the good individual. Schelling discusses the evil individual with reference to the biblical figure of Judas. He writes: “That Judas became a betrayer of Christ, neither he nor any other creature could change, and nevertheless he betrayed Christ not under compulsion but willingly and with complete freedom” (Schelling 2006: 51). Paradoxically, an evil individual is both responsible for and thus guilty of her sins as much as it was truly impossible

for her to act otherwise. Both the good and evil individual thus act entirely freely and yet necessarily according to their basic disposition. For both, only one course of action is possible, not because no other possibilities present themselves but because they would not be the unique individuals that they are given their specific moral preferences.

In this chapter, we have seen how Schelling carefully disentangles Spinoza's basic concept from all the problematic misinterpretations related to it. Against Jacobi, Schelling repeats the Fichtean move of pointing out that adopting the independence of the thing as the system's first principle is not the only possible option in philosophy. However, we have also seen why Schelling rejects Fichte's one-sided idealism. A living philosophy has to be able to think the whole and neither a one-sidedly realist nor a one-sidedly idealist philosophy is able to do so. Rather, Schelling's solution to the problem of grounding a living philosophy is to rethink the notion of ground. We have seen how, for Schelling, pantheism can ground a living philosophy if pantheism is correctly understood as revealing the necessity of the distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence. Interpreted in this way, the law of ground dictates that all things depend on an independent ground for their existence. Furthermore, we have seen how, for Schelling, the distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence leads to the real concept of freedom as the capacity for good and evil. Lastly, we saw how the real concept of freedom needs to be complemented by the formal concept of freedom if we are to have an answer to the question how the decision for good and evil is made. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate in what way Schelling's attempt at thinking freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity.

Chapter 3 – The Question of a System of Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith

Introduction

In this chapter I will turn to demonstrating the central claim of this thesis: Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. In order to achieve my goal of demonstrating this claim I intend to take three steps, each of which will be performed in the three individual parts of this chapter. In the first part we will turn to the importance of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. I will argue that, in order to see how Schelling succeeds in thinking freedom systematically, it is vital that one grasps the importance of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. Building on previous insights from Chapter 1, I will show how Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* effects a radical break away from Kant and Fichte. As will become clear, it is because Kant and Fichte accept the truth of the mechanistic paradigm of explanation that their philosophies are animated by the opposition between mind and nature. It is only by virtue of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* that this opposition can be replaced with the contradiction between freedom and necessity.

Furthermore, I will also provide my own interpretation of the meaning of Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism. In Chapter 2, we have already seen how Schelling disentangles Spinoza's basic concept from both i) Jacobi's claim as to the fundamental incompatibility of freedom and system, and ii) the many misinterpretations caused by the dominant misunderstanding of the meaning of the copula. I will argue that this discussion plays an essential role in Schelling's attempt at thinking freedom systematically for an additional reason; it is only against the background of Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism that it becomes clear for the first time what exactly is involved in the task of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity. It reveals that for Schelling, the contradiction between freedom and necessity is the question of the individual's freedom and independence in the face of its inevitable dependence on a ground. This explains why, for Schelling, the concept of a "derived divinity" is the central concept of philosophy.

In the second part we will turn to the importance of Schelling's concept of personality. I will argue that it is the concept of personality and personal existence that allows Schelling to rethink the notion of ground and what it means to take seriously the universality of the law of ground, that is, the idea that everything must be grounded. According to Schelling's concept of personality, all existence requires a dark ground in order to become real. Personality is, for Schelling, the living unity of the ideal and the real principle. This allows Schelling to introduce the concept of human freedom as the capacity for good and evil; it is by virtue of the concept of personality that the real concept of freedom is grounded within the system. I will conclude this part by showing how on my reading Schelling's concept of personality enables a rebuttal of Heidegger's claim that Schelling's system does not succeed in grounding itself.

In the third and final part I will demonstrate how Schelling's concept of real and formal freedom have their place within Schelling's system of freedom, that is, I hope to show that Schelling's view on

freedom really does allow for a reconciliation with system, that is, with the demand for the thoroughgoing connection of grounding. This requires two things. First of all, in order for the system of freedom to be the whole, we need some kind of account as to how human freedom arises within the natural order. Without such an account, freedom cannot be said to have its place within the system, that is, within the whole. I will argue that Schelling's real concept of freedom as the capacity for good and evil allows for the possibility of the inclusion of human freedom within the system. This possibility is guaranteed because human freedom has been shown to have its root in that which grounds the whole, namely the dark ground. Secondly, if Schelling's system of freedom is to be a *system* of freedom, then human freedom as the capacity for good and evil, that is, an individual's decision for either good or evil, demands a determining ground, demands a response to the contradiction of freedom and necessity. I will argue that Schelling's formal concept of freedom provides, in a quite literal sense, the last missing link for Schelling's system of freedom. The formal concept of freedom, understood as a fundamental willing, accomplishes the holding together of the groundless and that which is grounded, of freedom and necessity.

With my discussion of the formal concept as a fundamental willing which succeeds in the holding together of the groundless and that which is grounded, we will have arrived at the end of the chapter. The chapter will be concluded with a brief summary of the most important points of my interpretation as developed in this chapter.

3.1 The Importance of *Naturphilosophie*

The first step to be taken, to my mind, if we are to understand how Schelling succeeds in thinking freedom together with the whole, i.e. systematically, is to grasp the importance of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*.²⁶ If we remember, the net result of Kant's transcendental idealism was the radical split between two domains: the noumenal realm inhabited by the things-in-themselves and the phenomenal realm inhabited by phenomena or the objects of experience. For Kant, the concept of freedom belongs to the noumenal domain and, as such, it is inaccessible to theoretical reason. This is not to say that we are not justified in holding fast to our belief that we are free beings, but this belief is grounded with recourse to practical, not theoretical reason. As a result, the fact of freedom is in an important sense incomprehensible to human reason.

Taking up Reinhold's call for the systematization of the Kantian project, Fichte attempts to bridge the Kantian dualism between the domains of the practical and the theoretical, the noumenal and the phenomenal, the things-in-themselves and the objects of experience. He argues that philosophy's first principle has to be the independence and freedom of the I, since, Fichte claims, it is only in this way that freedom can be theoretically incorporated in the system. However, as his romantic critics, including both Schelling and Hegel, were to point out, Fichte's system struggles with endless

²⁶ For an excellent, much more detailed discussion of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* than I can offer here, see Beiser 2002: 506-528.

contradictions and controversies, as it cannot explain how and why the activity of the I should freely posit the limitation of its own activity by a not-I. On both the Kantian and the Fichtean view, the opposition that takes centerstage is the opposition between mind and nature. They are concerned with the question of the place of the subject within an objective realm: how to account for the freedom of human beings given their belonging to a natural world in which everything is subsumed under causal, mechanistic laws?

The fundamental insight of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is that the opposition between mind and nature rests on a false assumption, namely the truth of the mechanistic paradigm of explanation. According to this model of knowledge, all matter is mere lifeless extension and all objects are subsumed under causal, mechanistic laws. As a result, the very existence of free, conscious subjects within a world of objects becomes a theoretical impossibility. For Schelling, the only way out of this predicament is to replace the mechanistic paradigm of explanation with *Naturphilosophie*. According to *Naturphilosophie*, subject and object, the mental and physical, ideal and real are really only different in degree, not in kind.

In the *Freedom Essay*, this fundamental insight takes the form of the ontological distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence, by Schelling also referred to as the will of the ground and the will of the understanding. In each and every natural being – in rocks plants, animals, human beings alike – these two fundamental wills are at work. However, only in human beings does the dynamic between these two wills result in the “raising of the deepest centrum into light”: “In man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light. In him there is the deepest abyss and the loftiest sky or both *centra*” (Schelling 2006: 32). It is only against the background of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* that we can properly appreciate the philosophical move away from Kant and Fichte. Whereas the latter were preoccupied with the opposition between mind and nature, Schelling shifts our attention towards the contradiction between freedom and necessity.

Before I go on, I should like to say a few words on Schelling's choice to formulate the task at hand as thinking through the *contradiction* between freedom and necessity. What is required of us here? What does it mean to think through a contradiction? Is it not the very meaning of the term “contradiction” that it amounts to a theoretical impossibility? Does the very appearance of a contradiction not indicate the presence of an inconsistency, that we have gone astray in our philosophical reasoning and ought to retrace our steps? Is the appearance of a contradiction not the worst possible outcome? A contradiction is commonly interpreted to announce the incompatibility of its two constituents. In order to solve the contradiction, common sense dictates, either one of its constituents has to be relinquished.

Schelling, however, offers his own – rather provoking – interpretation of the appearance of the contradiction between freedom and necessity.²⁷ For Schelling, its appearance does not indicate a logical

²⁷ For an interesting take on the *Freedom Essay* as a series of “provocations” that drive the movement of the text, see Freyberg 2008.

inconsistency. Rather, the contradiction between freedom and necessity is what philosophy derives her life and livelihood from. Neither freedom, nor necessity can be relinquished. The first option would result in succumbing to the worldview of the modern sciences according to which the experience of freedom is nothing but an ingenuous trick of the mind. The second option would allow us to retain freedom at the cost of the credibility of all rational and philosophical use of reason (as Jacobi would have it). The reason that I want to remark this here is that the difficulty of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity pervades the entire text. Taking seriously the fact that Schelling's attempt at a system of freedom is an attempt to think through a contradiction will, I think, help us keep in mind that Schelling's goal is and never was to dissolve the contradiction.

As indicated previously, Schelling shifts our attention away from the opposition between mind and nature and, instead, redirects our philosophical efforts towards the contradiction between freedom and necessity. If we recall, Schelling spends great time and energy carefully discussing Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism. Although Schelling does not explicitly inform his readers as to why these matters are so important to his overall philosophical project, I hope that my discussion of the introduction has made the following clear.²⁸ Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism is important because Spinoza's system is a system that takes seriously the universality of the law of ground. Within Spinoza's system, everything is grounded in the system's infinite substance, namely God. Every individual thing that exists, exists by virtue of its dependence on the infinite substance and, as such, is a modification of God. In this way, all the individual parts of the system are gathered up into a unified whole and Spinoza's system can be called a *system* in the genuine sense.

However, the fatal flaw of Spinoza's system is that it is an absolutely fatalistic system; given the absolute causality of its infinite substance, all finite individuals within the system are subjugated to the absolute rule of causal, mechanistic laws.²⁹ Hence, Spinoza's system is utterly devoid of all freedom. It is in this sense that Heidegger was correct when he observed that “[i]f Schelling *fundamentally fought against* a system, it is Spinoza's system” (Heidegger 1985: 34). However, one should be careful not to underestimate the importance of Spinoza's system for Schelling's thinking. It is only against the background of his discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism that the central task of the *Freedom Essay* acquires definite shape. Its central task is to think freedom systematically and Schelling announces at the very beginning of the work that this involves confronting not the opposition between mind and nature, but the contradiction between freedom and necessity. Against the background of the discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism, it becomes clear for the first time what exactly is involved in the task of thinking through the contradiction between freedom and necessity. The contradiction between freedom and necessity is the question of the individual's freedom and independence in the face of its inevitable dependence on a ground. In other words, it is the question of the concept of a “derived

²⁸ See Chapter 2.1.

²⁹ One might very well wonder whether this is in fact a fair interpretation of Spinoza. For a critical discussion of Schelling's interpretation of Spinoza, see Knappik 2019.

absoluteness or divinity” which is for this reason “the central concept of philosophy as a whole” (Schelling 2006: 18). In the next part, I will argue for the importance of the concept of personality for Schelling’s rethinking of the notion of ground.

3.2 The Importance of the Concept of Personality

To recapitulate, Schelling intends to accomplish a system of freedom. This requires Spinoza’s basic concept, that is, pantheism which recognizes the universality of the law of ground. How then does Schelling overcome Spinoza’s fatalism? How does Schelling guarantee the freedom and independence of the individual parts of the system, itself an impossibility on Spinozistic terms? I argue that Schelling’s pivotal move is to introduce the concept of personality. On my interpretation, it is the concept of personality and personal existence that allows Schelling to rethink the notion of ground and what it means to take seriously the universality of the law of ground, that is, the idea that everything must be grounded. How exactly does the concept of personality guarantee the freedom and independence of that which is itself dependent? How does the concept of personality help us solve the riddle of an independent dependent, that is, of a “derived absoluteness or divinity”? In order to answer these questions, we need to know a bit more about the meaning of Schelling’s concept of personality.

On my reading of Schelling’s *Freedom Essay*, personality amounts to a unity, namely the unity of the independent dark ground and the principle of light or that which, in connection with the ground, gives rise to spirit and consciousness. In order to become real existence, everything requires the principle of the ground or that which in God is not he himself, namely nature. Furthermore, the same forces are at work in all beings, namely the contractive force of the ground which wills only differentiation and particularity and the expansive force of the light which wills only order and unity. In animals, the will of the ground rules, not yet giving birth to spirit and consciousness. As a result, animals are unable to assert their independence from the ground. That is to say, in animals the contradiction between freedom and necessity does not yet come to light, but remains hidden in the ground. Through them, the will of the ground manifests itself not as mechanical necessity but as a blind willing and craving.

In human beings, however, the connection between the ground and the principle of light bursts forth in such a way that a genuine, namely personal unity arises. In contradistinction to animals, human beings are able to assert their independence from the dark ground. Through human beings, it is no longer the will of the dark ground that reigns supreme but the struggle between the will of the ground and the will of the understanding that unfolds. In other words, it is in human beings that the contradiction between freedom and necessity first comes to the fore. Schelling’s fundamental insight is that there can be no real existence without the existence and activity of the dark ground. Personality can only arise from its dependence on a dark ground. It is in this sense that I understand Schelling’s notion of the “indivisible remainder”:

This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground. The understanding

is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance (Schelling 2006: 29).

Some scholars, such as for instance Dale Snow, have gone so far as to attribute to Schelling a view according to which “far from the real being the rational, the most real is the least rational”.³⁰ According to Snow, this is so in two important ways. First of all, since the act by which an individual self-determines her own essence produces that very essence for the first time, Snow interprets the eternal act as fundamentally nonrational. It is fundamentally nonrational in the sense that “[t]o ask for reasons in this connection is to misunderstand what kind of entity man is – one that is its own beginning and origin” (Snow 1996: 175). Secondly, since God is not a god of the dead but of the living, Snow argues that Schelling must necessarily conclude that “God is not a system but a life” (Schelling in Snow 1996: 175). Whereas a system, according to Snow, can be completely grasped in terms of rational concepts, a life is only possible in terms of its birth from a dark ground (Snow 1996: 175).

Although I fully agree that Schelling does indeed grant a fundamental presence and independent activity to the nonrational or irrational within his philosophical system, I do not agree with the claim that, for Schelling, the most real is the least rational. Rather, on my reading, for Schelling, what is *personal* is the most real. Importantly, I would like to argue that it is the concept of personality that allows Schelling to disclose the structure of a system of freedom. A system in the genuine sense needs to be the whole and the whole cannot be what it is if it does not include within itself its own ground. That is to say, an essential characteristic of system is that it needs to be self-grounding. If we recall, the sting of Heidegger’s critique derives from the claim that Schelling’s system of freedom fails to do precisely this; it fails to include its own ground, it fails to be self-grounding.

However, I should like to argue that Schelling’s system of freedom succeeds in grounding itself through the concept of personality.³¹ The concept of personality introduces the ineliminability of the dark ground. Nothing whatsoever can come to be without its dependence on this ground. In and through their dependence on this dark ground finite things come into existence including inanimate things, plants, animals and human beings alike. All beings are by virtue of their dependence on the ground. Thus recognizing the universality of the law of ground Schelling concludes:

All existence demands a condition so that it may become real, namely personal, existence. Even God’s existence could not be personal without such a condition except that he has this condition *within* and not outside himself (Schelling 2006: 62).

Crucially, God as the whole of beings includes within itself his own ground. That is, the concept of personality understood as the unity of the dark ground and that which, in connection with the ground, gives rise to spirit and consciousness allows Schelling to articulate a system of radical immanency.

³⁰ See Snow 1996: 174-180.

³¹ In this regard it is noteworthy that Heidegger’s interpretation of Schelling’s *Freedom Essay* includes virtually no critical discussion of Schelling’s concept of personality, see Heidegger 1985.

According to my view then, Schelling's system of freedom is the whole in the sense that it is a personal whole, owing its existence to the presence and independent activity of its dark, incomprehensible ground.

3.3 A Reconciliation of Freedom and Necessity

It is important to clearly keep in mind the difficulty that Schelling is confronting in the *Freedom Essay*. Heidegger puts it succinctly when he writes:

Freedom excludes the recourse to grounding. The system, however, demands the thoroughgoing connection of grounding. A "system of freedom" – that is like a square circle, in itself it is completely incompatible (Heidegger 1985: 21).

In fact, there is a moment in the *Freedom Essay* where Schelling explicitly affirms the necessity of grounding or the thoroughgoing connectedness of parts, namely when he denies the possibility of contingency [*Zufälligkeit*]. Contingency is to be understood as arbitrariness or randomness, as things happening for no reason whatsoever. To put it differently, contingency indicates that something is the way it is without a prior determining ground. Schelling states in no uncertain terms that contingency is to be denied:

[C]ontingency is impossible; it contests reason as well as the necessary unity of the whole; and, if freedom is to be saved by nothing other than the complete contingency of actions, then it is not to be saved all (Schelling 2006: 48-49).

A system of freedom, in order to be a system, demands the thoroughgoing connection of grounding or what I have previously referred to as the universality of the law of ground. Meaning that freedom, more specifically, human freedom cannot simply be conceived as a lack of grounding or isolated spontaneity. Of course, Heidegger claims that this is an impossible task; the system of freedom is, like a square circle, nothing but a *contradictio in terminis*. Heidegger and Schelling, however, draw very different conclusions from this. Whereas Heidegger concludes that it is simply impossible, Schelling concludes that this is the perennial task of philosophy. The moment philosophy lets go of this task, for whatever reason, she sinks into certain death. In the remainder of this chapter I will demonstrate how Schelling's concept of real and formal freedom have their place within Schelling's system of freedom, that is, I hope to show that Schelling's view on freedom really does allow for a reconciliation with the demand for the thoroughgoing connection of grounding.

To my mind, there are two central problems that Schelling's concept of, respectively, real and formal freedom need to solve. First of all, in order for the system of freedom to be the whole, we need some kind of account as to how human freedom arises within the natural order. As I have argued previously, Schelling provides this account through his ontological distinction between two fundamental wills – the will of the ground and the will of the understanding – and his concept of personality. The latter concept does the important work of offering a unified account of how each different finite being

– inanimate objects, plants, animals and human beings – comes into being as a result of the dynamic interaction between the will of the ground and the will of the understanding. All existence is personal existence in the sense that it requires a dark ground in order to be. Importantly, however, there is no conscious awareness of the struggle between the light and dark principle in any being but the human being. Without this awareness beings are unable to assert their independence from the ground as are inanimate objects, plants and animals. In human beings, however, the contradiction between freedom and necessity is driven to the surface and each and every human individual is thus free.

Here freedom is to be understood as real freedom, that is, the capacity for good and evil. The way in which human beings can assert their independence from the ground is that they themselves decide the way in which the two principles at work in all beings relate to each other. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Schelling distinguishes between two possibilities. On the one hand, an individual can uphold the proper relation between the two principles where the will of the ground remains as ground, thus functioning as the means and medium in and through which the will of the understanding can manifest itself. This amounts to the good. On the other hand, an individual can reverse or inverse the proper relation between the two principles, thus transforming what is supposed to remain in the ground into the center and distorting the whole. This amounts to evil. Importantly, Schelling's real concept of freedom as the capacity for good and evil allows for the possibility of the inclusion of human freedom within the system. This possibility is guaranteed because human freedom has been shown to have its root in that which grounds the whole, namely the dark ground.

However, there is a second difficulty that Schelling's view on freedom needs to respond to if his attempt at a system of freedom is to be called successful. The possibility of human freedom understood as the capacity for good and evil does not yet accomplish the task of a system of freedom. That is to say, it leaves unanswered a question of the utmost importance: how is an individual's free decision for good or evil thoroughly connected with the whole? That is, the question of grounding and with it the contradiction between freedom and necessity returns one final time. In Chapter 2, I have discussed Schelling's view on freedom as the complementary view of the real and formal concept of freedom. Whereas the real concept of freedom provides us with an account of the content of a free decision, namely good or evil, the formal concept of freedom provides us with an account of how this decision is actually made. We also saw how this involved Schelling's concept of an individual's eternal act by which she self-determines her own essence, for good or evil.

Now, at this point of our investigations into the matter of Schelling's success at the task of thinking a system of freedom, the importance of the formal concept of freedom stands in a new light. Not only does the formal concept of freedom provide an account of how the free decision for good or evil is made, the formal concept of freedom provides, in a quite literal sense, the last missing link for Schelling's system of freedom: it informs us of how Schelling thinks freedom in connection with the whole. Here, the echo of Heidegger's words concerning the inherent incompatibility of "a system of freedom" might spring to mind. The incompatibility arises due to the tension between freedom, which

demands the absence of grounding, and system, which demands the universality of grounding. If freedom is truly to have a place within the whole, then individual free actions require a determining ground (we have already seen that, for Schelling, contingency and its implication of severing the whole is not an option here). But how to ground that which demands by its very nature to be groundless? It is precisely at this point that the innermost difficulty of a system of freedom becomes almost painfully clear. If it is to be a *system* of freedom, then human freedom as the capacity for good and evil, that is, an individual's decision for either good or evil, demands a determining ground, demands a response to the contradiction of freedom and necessity.

How then does Schelling ultimately think through the contradiction between freedom and necessity? How does Schelling think freedom together with the whole? How does Schelling simultaneously acknowledge the groundlessness of freedom and the universality of the law of ground according to which everything requires a ground, without which there can be no system in the true sense? I think that Schelling's final response to this difficulty can be found in his (in)famous claim that "Will is primal Being":

In the final and highest judgment, there is no other Being than will. Will is primal Being [*Ursein*] to which alone all predicates of Being apply: groundlessness, eternity, independence from time, self-affirmation. All of philosophy strives only to find this highest expression (Schelling 2006: 21).

Schelling finds his resolution to the contradiction between freedom and necessity in the faculty of the will. What grounds and thus guarantees our freedom as independent dependents or derived divinities is the eternal act, itself a fundamental willing, by which we self-determine our own essence.

In Kantian terms we could say that Schelling's eternal act is to be understood as a transcendental condition of possible free action. Without this concept, either freedom flees us or the system again slips away. Importantly, "will" and "willing" is here not to be understood in terms of our everyday experience of ourselves. Rather, Schelling describes this willing as "a primal and fundamental willing, which makes itself into something and is the ground of all ways of being [*Wesenheit*]" (Schelling 2006: 50-51). In this fundamental sense, it is the will and willing which, for Schelling, can accomplish the holding together of the groundless and that which is grounded, of freedom and necessity. To my mind, this is how Schelling succeeds in thinking a system of freedom, that is, freedom as groundlessly grounded within the whole.

On the resulting view, the meaning of system is not to be understood as a closed totality, springing from a self-evident first principle from which everything follows with mechanical necessity. Rather, Schelling's system is the whole, a whole within which every part is connected to every other part, grounded by the elusive groundless ground of grounds: the *Ungrund*. Within this system, human freedom is not merely freedom of choice, that is, the capacity to choose without a determining ground, merely because it is willed, between either A or B. Rather, human freedom is the capacity for good *and* evil. Each and every individual self-determines her own essence through an eternal act independent from

temporal and causal relations. On such a view, freedom and necessity are one. We freely determine ourselves to be the kind of individual that we are, that is, must be. As such, it is not an estranged mathematical necessity that rules Schelling's system. Rather, the contradiction between freedom and necessity, groundlessly grounded by a fundamental willing, forms the beating heart of Schelling's living system.

Conclusion

In this thesis I aspired to contribute to the existing literature on Schelling's *Freedom Essay* by providing an interpretation of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* that explicitly focusses on the resulting view on freedom in connection with Schelling's overarching attempt at a system of freedom. The core of my interpretation amounts to the claim that Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. In order to demonstrate this claim the thesis was divided in three chapters.

In Chapter 1, I provided what I have referred to as a genealogy of the question of a system of freedom. The explicit aim of this genealogy was to bring out the way in which the central problem of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* – that is, the task of thinking freedom systematically – is not an isolated phenomenon but rather gradually emerges as the fundamental problem of the philosophical context to which Schelling belongs, that is, of German Idealism. To this end, I discussed, against the background of the inner tensions of the Enlightenment, the various roles of Kant, Jacobi, Reinhold, Fichte and the early romantics. What became clear from my account is that Schelling's direct philosophical predecessors each in their own way tried to preserve a place for the belief in freedom within a philosophical system, a task which Jacobi argued could never be achieved. It also became clear that, according to the early romantics, the only way to overcome the Kantian and Fichte dualisms would require a synthesis of monism, rationalism and vital materialism.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the essential elements of Schelling's attempt at thinking freedom systematically in the *Freedom Essay* through the lens of the question of a living, as opposed to a dead, philosophy. To this end, I discussed i) Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism, ii) Schelling's real concept of freedom as the capacity for good and evil and iii) Schelling's formal concept of freedom as the eternal act by which an individual self-determines her own essence. The net result of my discussion can be summed up in the following way. First of all, the importance of Spinoza's basic concept, for Schelling, is that it points to the necessity of the ontological distinction between essence-as-ground and essence-as-existence. Secondly, the latter distinction grounds Schelling's real concept of freedom, according to which good and evil are differentiated not materially but formally. Thirdly, the real concept of freedom cannot stand on its own but must be complemented by the formal concept of freedom. Lastly, the formal concept of freedom gives us an initial sense of the meaning of Schelling's claim that freedom and necessity are one.

In Chapter 3, I turned to demonstrating my interpretation's central claim, namely that Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the very meaning of system, freedom and necessity. To this end, I argued for the following points. First of all, that it is only against the background of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* that we can properly appreciate the philosophical move away from Kant and Fichte. Secondly, that it is only against the background of Schelling's discussion of Spinoza, Spinozism and pantheism that it becomes clear for the first time that, for Schelling, the

contradiction between freedom and necessity is the question of the individual's freedom and independence in the face of its inevitable dependence on a ground. Thirdly, that the concept of personality is what ultimately enables Schelling to think a radically immanent system. Lastly, that it is the will and willing which, for Schelling, can accomplish the holding together of the groundless and that which is grounded, of freedom and necessity.

On my interpretation as developed in this thesis, Schelling's attempt to think freedom systematically transforms the meaning of system, freedom and necessity in the following way. The meaning of system is not to be understood as a closed totality, springing from a self-evident first principle from which everything follows with mechanical necessity. Rather, Schelling's system is the whole, a whole within which every part is connected to every other part, grounded by the elusive groundless ground of grounds: the *Ungrund*. Within this system, human freedom is not merely freedom of choice, that is, the capacity to choose without a determining ground, merely because it is willed, between either A or B. Rather, human freedom is the capacity for good *and* evil. Each and every individual self-determines her own essence through an eternal act independent from temporal and causal relations. On such a view, freedom and necessity are one. We freely determine ourselves to be the kind of individual that we are, that is, must be. As such, it is not an estranged mathematical necessity that rules Schelling's system. Rather, the contradiction between freedom and necessity, groundlessly grounded by a fundamental willing, forms the beating heart of Schelling's living system.

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