

# THE LOGIC OF PRIMAL WILLING IN SCHELLING'S *FREEDOM ESSAY*

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**Abstract:** *Schelling's famous Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom is regularly presented as an enigmatic work that transcends reason and thereby eschews any systematic comprehension. However, Schelling's Freedom Essay neither endorses irrationalism, nor does it call us to abandon systematic thinking. While it is true that the Absolute exceeds the powers of the understanding, Schelling boldly endorses the view that the Absolute is inherently rational and can be successfully known by means of reason. Because Schelling identifies reason as that power in virtue of which we know the absolute, he infers that "Reason is not activity but rather indifference" and "the general place of truth." Since the Absolute is indifference, and indifference is what constitutes reason, the Absolute is reason itself. Far from denying that the Absolute is rational, the truths that Schelling uncovers in the Freedom Essay only appear within the domain of reason. Schelling himself insists upon this, for the "renunciation of reason and science" is "self-castration" that is constituted by a "bleak and wild enthusiasm." I begin by reconstructing the metaphysics of Schelling's logic of "primal willing" from which I demonstrate that the logic of freedom transcends the understanding but cannot transcend reason. Without acknowledging the fundamental difference between the understanding and reason in Schelling's Freedom Essay, we overlook its significance for systematic thinking, and maim his commitment to absolute knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *Philosophy, Schelling, Freedom, Reason, The Absolute*

**Resumen:** *Las célebres Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la esencia de la libertad humana de Schelling suelen presentarse como una obra enigmática que trasciende la razón y, por lo tanto, elude toda comprensión sistemática. Sin embargo, el Ensayo sobre la libertad de Schelling no respalda el irracionalismo ni nos llama a abandonar el pensamiento sistemático. Si bien es cierto que el Absoluto excede las capacidades del entendimiento, Schelling defiende audazmente la idea de que el Absoluto es intrínsecamente racional y puede ser conocido exitosamente por medio de la razón. Dado que Schelling identifica la razón como aquella facultad gracias a la cual conocemos*

*el Absoluto, infiere que “la razón no es actividad, sino más bien indiferencia” y “el lugar general de la verdad.” Puesto que el Absoluto es indiferencia, y la indiferencia es lo que constituye la razón, el Absoluto es la razón misma. Lejos de negar que el Absoluto sea racional, las verdades que Schelling revela en el Ensayo sobre la libertad solo aparecen dentro del dominio de la razón. El propio Schelling insiste en esto, ya que la “renuncia a la razón y la ciencia” es una “autocastración” constituida por un “entusiasmo sombrío y salvaje.” Comienzo reconstruyendo la metafísica de la lógica del “querer primordial” en Schelling, a partir de la cual demuestro que la lógica de la libertad trasciende el entendimiento, pero no puede trascender la razón. Si no reconocemos la diferencia fundamental entre entendimiento y razón en el Ensayo sobre la libertad de Schelling, pasamos por alto su importancia para el pensamiento sistemático y socavamos su compromiso con el conocimiento absoluto.*

**Palabras clave:** *Filosofía, Schelling, Libertad, Razón, El Absoluto*

## Introduction

Schelling's famous *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*<sup>1</sup> is regularly presented as an enigmatic work that transcends reason, and thereby eschews any systematic comprehension.<sup>2</sup> However, Schelling's *Freedom Essay* neither endorses irrationalism, nor does it call us to abandon systematic thinking. While it is true that the Absolute exceeds the powers of the understanding, Schelling boldly endorses the view that the Absolute is inherently rational and can be successfully known by means of reason. We can better appreciate the rationalism of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* by focusing on the place of reason in that essay, and its relation to the Absolute.

By withdrawing in thought from everything relative, thought can fix its mind on what transcends all opposition—the Absolute. By withdrawing from every distinct being—from 'this' and 'that,' one can think what all beings have in common—being as such, what Schelling calls "primal being." The original being [*Ursein*] does not differentiate any being from another. Indeed, "is" does not differentiate this being from that being. Primal being is the unconditioned universal, for there is no being that does not instantiate it. Original being is the "one being [*Wesen*] for all oppositions, an absolute identity." It is "before all duality" and "precedes all opposites" (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 68). Because the opposition-less being applies equally to all without distinction, the beginning is pure "indifference" [*Gleichgültigkeit*], which is "the only possible concept of the Absolute" (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 73). Following the tradition, Schelling describes the primal being as God, for in Exodus God reveals himself to Moses as "I am that I am," a being defined by pure being itself (*Exodus* 3:14).

Since the original being—the Absolute—does not differentiate any beings, it does not differentiate between the knowing and the known. Thus, the knowing of the Absolute truth must take place within the Absolute truth itself. As Schelling states: "That which is true can only be recognized in truth; that which is evident, in evidence. But truth and evidence are clear in themselves and must therefore be absolute and of the essence of God" (Schelling 2010: 34). Since the Absolute itself is pure indifference, and as such it introduces no difference, knowing of the Absolute must also be constituted by pure indifference. Because Schelling identifies reason as that power in virtue of which we know the absolute, he infers that "Reason is not activity but rather indifference" and "the general place of truth" (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 76). Since the Absolute is indifference, and indifference is what constitutes reason, *the Absolute is reason itself*. Far from denying that the Absolute is rational, the truths that Schelling uncovers in the *Freedom Essay* only appear within the domain of reason. Schelling himself insists upon this, for the "renunciation of reason and science"

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1 Henceforth, *Freedom Essay*.

2 For instance, Dale Snow claims that "the argument of Human Freedom has reached a point where, far from the real being the rational, the most real is the least rational." (Snow 1996: 174).

is “self-castration” that is constituted by a “bleak and wild enthusiasm” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 26). The Absolute reveals itself to us in the form of reason because it is rational.

The *Freedom Essay* is an investigation into the Absolute, the truth of which is revealed by means of reason. Since the Absolute is without opposition, and nothing exceeds it, it cannot be determined by anything except itself. For this reason, insofar as the Absolute does not remain merely indeterminate, and possesses determination, it must be *self-determining* of free.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the *Freedom Essay* aims to reveal the rational form (or logic) of absolute freedom. In part two, I reconstruct the metaphysics of Schelling’s logic of self-determination, or what he calls “primal willing.”

After reconstructing the metaphysical form of Schelling’s logic of primal willing, and various concepts central to it, in part three I consider the *epistemological* side of the logic of primal willing. More specifically, I demonstrate that the logic of self-determination transcends the understanding but cannot transcend reason. For the logic of self-determination is revealed by the absolute, which is nothing less than reason itself. Here I defend Mark Thomas’ position that in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling is “not rejecting rationalism”<sup>4</sup> by demonstrating how Schelling’s “indivisible remainder” is no objection to his rationalism or systematic ambitions, but instead functions as a testament to his position that *nothing exceeds the system of absolute reason*. Without acknowledging the fundamental difference between the understanding and reason in Schelling’s *Freedom Essay*, we overlook its significance for systematic thinking, and maim his commitment to absolute knowledge.

## 2. The Logic of Primal Willing

“Willing is primal being to which alone all predicates of Being apply; groundlessness, eternity, independence from time, self-affirmation” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 21).<sup>5</sup> Why is the will the essence of primal being? If the Absolute were determined by anything beyond it, it would not be conditioned upon and relative to that determining principle, and would no longer be absolute. Thus, the Absolute must *determine itself*—it must be absolutely free. Since the will is nothing less than the power of self-determination, the will is the primal being.

As Mark Thomas has pointed out, the term ‘ground’ has a variety of meanings in Schelling’s *Freedom Essay*. It can signify the *condition of possibility*, a principle that *determines* something else, or that which *begets* something.<sup>6</sup> Since the will has no conditions upon which it relies, and there is nothing beyond it to determine or beget it, the will is absolutely *groundless* in every sense of the term.

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3 Schelling’s concept of freedom qua self-determination is deeply indebted to Kant. See Kant (1998: 484–489) .

4 See Thomas (2023: 30).

5 Since the original German is “Wollen” I have amended the English translation from “will” to “willing.”

6 See Thomas (2023: 21).

For readers of the late Schelling, it may come as a surprise to learn that in the *Freedom Essay*, this absolute freedom is “equidistant from contingency and compulsion” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 49).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Absolute is groundless exactly because it is not compelled by outside forces. But its groundlessness is not contingent either. To the contrary, it is the very essence of the Absolute to determine itself. Because it is the very essence of the Absolute to determine itself, freedom is not contingently related to the Absolute. Absolute freedom operates “only in accord with its own inner nature” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 50). Freedom is necessary to the Absolute itself such that “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, *Freedom Essay*, 50). For this reason, Schelling identifies “absolute necessity” with “absolute freedom” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 50).<sup>8</sup>

Because the negation of something must be *other* to it, and there is nothing other to the Absolute, the self-determining character of the Absolute is *not* governed by the principle *determinatio est negatio*. If it were determined by its negation, it would not be self-determining, but *other-determined*. According to Schelling, “since the latter [Absolute freedom]<sup>9</sup> is itself one with the position and the concept of its being, therefore it really is the essence in its being” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 50). Because the affirmation of its being does not depend upon its negation, the primal being is “self-affirming.”<sup>10</sup>

Since it has no conditions whatsoever, it is not conditioned upon any temporal processes, and must be independent of time. Finally, since the Absolute is essentially self-determining, it is not determining itself at some times and not others—it is eternally determining itself. At no time is the Absolute not determining itself. At no time is it other to self-determination. In sum, the Absolute is constituted by the will, the eternal power of self-determination, a power that affirms itself and operates independently of time.

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7 It acts according to an “inner” and a “higher necessity.” In these reflections, I apply Schelling’s reflections on formal freedom to God and the Absolute. Although Schelling may be specifically focusing on human freedom in these sections, without applying these reflections on formal freedom to God, we cannot understand *why* the primal will has the predicates which Schelling ascribes to it. What is more, one cannot make sense of the God-human relation without assuming that the structure of self-determination is similar in both cases.

8 Compare Schelling’s view with Spinoza’s definition of freedom in the *Ethics*: “That thing is called free, which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt. I, Definition 7.

9 Author’s insertion.

10 Note the difference with Hegel’s concept of determinate negation. While Hegel applies the principle of determinate negation to the Absolute, *Schelling restricts its application to relative being alone*. Determinate negation is one of the categories of the *Science of Logic*, each of which is a definition of the absolute. See Hegel (2010: 83-88). For Hegel’s employment of the principle in the self-development of absolute knowing, see Hegel (2018:54).

## 2.1 God and Nature

Schelling emphasizes that the absolute is *essentially* self-determining. This means that it does not *become* self-determining. Schelling argues that there is “no transition from the absolutely undetermined to the determined” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 49). If the Absolute were initially indeterminate, and *determined itself* to be self-determined, then it would *always already be* self-determining. For this reason, the Absolute cannot determine itself to be self-determining. In Schelling’s words: “in order to be able to determine itself it would already have to be determined in itself, rather it would have to be its determination itself as its essence” (Schelling 2006: 49).<sup>11</sup>

Because the Absolute is self-determining, it must determine itself. Since the primal will is not responsible for its absolute determination, it can only determine itself by positing itself as a *relative* determination. In other words, since the Absolute must determine itself, but it cannot be responsible for its absolute being, the Absolute must and can only be responsible for its determination *qua relative being*.

Schelling describes the activity of the primal will in Fichte’s terms as an activity of self-positing: “this being [...] it is real self-positing, it is a primal and fundamental willing, which makes itself into something, and is the ground of all ways of being (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 50-51). In order to make itself into something, it must contrast itself with an other. As Schelling notes, God is a “self-revealing being” who can only reveal his relative determination via *opposition*: “For every essence can only reveal itself in its opposite, love only in hate, unity in conflict” (Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 41). For relative beings, determination is constituted by negation. In order to have some relative determinacy as *this*, it cannot be *that*, and without this contrast and mutual exclusion, *this* cannot be revealed as *this*. Thus, primal willing can only determine itself to be relatively determined, and reveal itself as such, by positing another independent being to which its being is opposed and stands in contrast. By positing (or *creating*<sup>12</sup>) an independent being against which it stands in contrast, the Absolute *is not* that independent being, and thereby determines itself to be something—one relative being in relation to another.<sup>13</sup> God creates a being independent of himself, and insofar as *created being is identified with nature*, God is the source of nature.

By dividing itself, a further distinction is introduced between the *unconditioned* and the *conditioned* God. On the one hand, God is the Absolute, and is without any opposition. Since there is nothing outside God, nature must exist *within God*. Since the Absolute has

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11 Again, here Schelling differentiates himself from Hegel. Hegel argues that the indeterminate determines itself to be determinate and self-determining. See Hegel (2010: 59:83).

12 Consonant with his use of theological language throughout the essay, Schelling uses the traditional language of creation to describe the relation of God to the world. See Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 18.

13 Although Schelling gives us reasons why the Absolute will must divide itself, for Schelling it remains an ineluctable mystery *how* the finite opposition arises from what is without any opposition whatsoever. As Schelling states in his 1794 *Philosophical Letters*: “Philosophy cannot make a transition from the nonfinite to the finite” [Schelling 1980: 178].

*eternal* being, God qua opposition-less Absolute does not cease to be with the positing of nature. Insofar as it possesses eternal being, there cannot be a temporal beginning to God's positing or creation of nature—it must be an eternal beginning. On the other hand, God is *something* because he is other to nature. Thus, nature is independent of God and exists outside of him. In this sense, God is *conditioned* by nature. Thus, in virtue of the self-division initiated by the primal willing, God divides himself into conditioned and unconditioned forms. As Schelling himself acknowledges: “The concept of a derived Absoluteness or divinity” is a “central concept of philosophy as a whole” (Schelling 2006: 18).

This distinction maps quite well onto the classical distinction in mystical writings between *Gottheit* and *Gott*: while the former is absolute, the latter is relative to creation.<sup>14</sup> Just like nature, the conditioned God too must exist *within* the unconditioned deity. For this reason, Schelling does not object to pantheism: “Whoever would finally want to name this system pantheism, because all oppositions disappear considered simply in relation to the absolute, may also be granted this indulgence” (Schelling 2006: 71).

To summarize: the Absolute, qua primal willing, divides itself into the dual opposition between God and nature.<sup>15</sup> The primal will “divides itself into two equally eternal beginnings” (Schelling 2006: 70). Each of these beginnings (God and nature) is a kind of *action*: “The one being divides itself in two sorts of being in its two ways of acting” (Schelling 2006: 71). Because the Absolute is eternally determining itself, the divisions themselves must be eternal too. Indeed, they are “two equally eternal beginnings of self-revelation” (Schelling 2006: 59). Each division is also a way of acting, for the primal will is a principle of activity. While the Absolute (*Gottheit*) remains without any opposition, an opposition between God and nature exists within the Absolute itself.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2. Absolute Mediation

As is well known, this division is constituted by “being insofar as it exists and being insofar as it is merely the ground of existence” (Schelling 2006: 27).<sup>17</sup> Nature is the ground: “[the ground] is nature—in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him” (Schelling 2006: 27). Again: “primordial nature” is “the eternal ground of God's existence” (Schelling 2006: 27). Nature is the ground of God, and is contrasted with God “insofar as

14 See Meister Eckhart's “Sermon 52” (Eckhart 1981: 200).

15 Far from simply repudiating his earlier philosophy of identity, Schelling here *dynamizes* it. Rather than deny the existence of finitude, reason as he did in 1801, Schelling argues that the identity must *divide itself* into finite determinations. The dynamizing of absolute identity draws on his earlier insight from 1800 in which Schelling acknowledged the identity of synthesis and analysis in the first principle of transcendental philosophy.

16 This does not preclude understanding ground in a more specific sense, as that which is subordinate qua potency. Nature may be distinctively ground in this sense, but this insight is not in conflict with these broad reflections on the ground in general.

17 Schelling informs us that this distinction has its origin in his *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*.

he exists” (Schelling 2006: 27). Why identify nature as the ground of God? This may seem uncanny, especially in light of the fact that the unconditioned God is the source of the very distinction between God and nature. Because nature is the independent being that is not God, without nature God could not have a *separate* and determinate existence. Thus, nature is the ground or the condition that makes God possible. Nature, as the ground of God, is that which “in God himself is not He Himself” (Schelling 2006: 28). Nature is the ground of God insofar as nature is the condition that makes God possible as a *relative* and determinate being. Nature is *in* the Absolute and unconditioned God [the primal willing], but is external to and a condition of the relative God which it grounds and to which it is opposed. ‘In German, ‘zugrunde gehen’ means not only ‘to go to the ground’ but also ‘to be destroyed.’ When something goes to the ground, it ceases to be. While nature is the ground of God, it is also the negation of God, where God ceases to be God.

As Mark Thomas astutely points out, the term ‘ground’ is not a proper name that only means what it designates. Rather, it is a concept that can apply to more than one particular (Thomas 2023: 33). In Schelling’s words:

In the circle out of which everything becomes, it is no contradiction that that through which the One is generated may itself be in turn begotten by it. Here there is no first and last because all things mutually presuppose each other, no thing is another thing and yet no thing is not without another thing. God has within himself an inner ground of his existence that in this respect precedes him in existence; but precisely in this way, God is again the prius [what is before] of the ground insofar as the ground, even as such, could not exist if God did not exist in actu (Schelling 2006: 28).

Because “all things mutually presuppose each other” nature too must presuppose God. Just as nature is the ground of God, God is also the ground of nature. If God did not exist, then there would be nothing other to nature by which nature would be rendered determinate. Without God, nature cannot exist *as nature*. Thus, God is the condition for the possibility of nature. Just as nature is the ground by which God is God, God is the ground of nature by which nature is nature.<sup>18</sup> In Thomas’ summary: the “two principles are mutually grounding” such that “the two principles in God are mutually dependent and thus reciprocally grounding” (Thomas 2023: 202-204). As is evident, Schelling’s conceives of totality as absolute mediation: God mediates nature, and nature mediates God.

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<sup>18</sup> Although Ian Hamilton Grant is on point to emphasize continuity between the Freedom Essay and his earlier philosophy of nature, the concept of ground cannot be reduced to a “geological eruption.” See Grant (2008: 17). Moreover, even if one can trace an influence from Schelling’s concept of nature as the ground of existence back to Kant’s naturalistic concept of ground as he developed it in his geology, this would not be sufficient to circumscribe the concept of ground. For Grant’s discussion of this influence, see Grant (2008: 7). God—who is neither to be identified with nature nor is anything natural—is equally the ground of nature.



Not only do both God and nature exist, but each also exists as a ground of existence. *Each exists and is grounded by a principle that transcends it.*<sup>19</sup>

Schelling's concept of absolute mediation is translated into the language of predication. In Schelling's theory of the copula, a proposition of the form "this body is blue" does not state a mere tautology whereby being blue is simply *identical* to being a body. Rather, "this body is blue" states a *dependency relation*, whereby "the individual properties contained within the concept of body" "relate to it as antecedent to consequent" (Schelling 2006: 14).<sup>20</sup> Following this reading of the copula, Schelling can affirm both that 'God is nature' and 'nature is God', such that nature is dependent upon God, and God depends upon nature. Since God is absolute freedom, insofar as God is the ground of nature, Schelling not only affirms Fichte's view that nature has freedom as its ground, but the reverse too: "everything real (nature, the world of things) has activity, life, and freedom as its ground, or in Fichte's expression, that not only is I-hood all, but also the reverse, that all is I-hood" (Schelling 2006: 22). In short, in virtue of its free (and necessary) act of self-division, *primal willing determines itself to be constituted by absolute mediation.*

### 2.3 Human Freedom and Nature

Given the central role of absolute mediation in Schelling's account of the absolute, how does human freedom fit into this theory of absolute mediation? Schelling's treatise investigates the essence of freedom, it is not primarily concerned with divine freedom. Rather, the title of the treatise concerns *human* freedom. Human freedom is not only a capacity for self-determination, but "the real and vital concept of freedom is the capacity for good and evil" (Schelling 2006: 23). This capacity is "real" insofar as it is grounded in nature: "because he emerges from the ground (is creaturely), the human being has in relation to God a relatively independent principle" (Schelling 2006: 32). The human being is a creature, and therefore is a part of nature.

As a *mediating* factor between nature and God, Schelling's *Freedom Essay* represents human freedom as essentially connected to both. While we may be inclined not to think of nature as a domain of freedom or self-determination, Schelling's philosophy of nature certainly does. By Schelling's lights, human beings cannot be free unless nature, which is the basis upon which their freedom exists, is also free. As a result, Schelling propounds a view of nature as an autonomous and self-determining system. Freedom as the capacity to choose between good and evil is itself a product of nature as an autonomous, self-de-

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19 The term 'absolute mediation' has its origin in Tanabe Hajime's *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. My own approach to Schelling's concept of Ungrund as absolute mediation has its origin in Tanabe's treatment of the Freedom Essay in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. For more on how Tanabe develops Schelling's concept of absolute mediation, see Gregory S. Moss and Dennis Prooi's "The Legacy of Schelling in Tanabe's Philosophy as Metanoetics." (Moss and Prooi Forthcoming).

20 Schelling further elaborates on the law of identity governing such propositions as essentially connected to the "law of the ground" such that each is "just as original" as the other (Schelling 2006: 17).

termining system. Within the *Freedom Essay* itself, Schelling briefly recounts the story by which nature becomes conscious of itself in human knowledge, and liberates itself from myth in religious and eventually philosophical consciousness (Schelling 2006: 45). Because the human emerges from the ground of nature, which is relatively independent of God, the human being is relatively independent of God. Just as the case of nature, *the human being is not God, but exists in God*. Indeed, the “root of freedom” must be recognized in the “independent ground of nature” (Schelling 2006: 39).

It is true that Schelling does not give any explicit arguments for the view that nature is free in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. However, the position is implied by his position that will is primal being. Since everything that exists is a creation of the free self-determining will, and everything exists as a division and *form of the self-determining will*, nature too must be a form of the self-determining will. Thus, nature is a form of *conditioned freedom*. It is relatively independent of God, and *instantiates* the form of self-determination constitutive of its origin. By no means is the human capacity for self-determination at odds with nature—rather, it is an extension and further development of nature as an agency—*natura naturans*. Indeed, Schelling recognizes nature as a form of “derived Absoluteness” for “such a divinity befits nature” (Schelling 2006: 18).

Schelling transcends Fichte’s subjective idealism by positing nature too as a free and self-developing agency. In Schelling’s words: “The thought of making freedom the one and all of philosophy has set the human mind free in general” such that “one who has tasted freedom can feel the longing to make everything analogous to it, to spread it throughout the whole universe” (Schelling 2006: 22). Indeed, Schelling’s emphasis on the Absolute nature of freedom is not a new development in 1809, but a further chapter and *development* of his original program. Consider Schelling’s letter to Hegel in February of 1795: “The highest principle of all philosophy is for me the pure, Absolute Self; that is, the self insofar as it is merely a self, insofar as it is unconditioned in any way by objects but is rather posited by *freedom*. The alpha and omega of all philosophy is freedom” (Hegel 1984: 32).

Since he already justified the freedom of nature in his *Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799) and his *System of Transcendental Philosophy* (1800),<sup>21</sup> Schelling does not rehearse the proof for the freedom of nature in the *Freedom*

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21 In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) Schelling gives a justification for the autonomy of nature. Like Fichte before him, he holds that “all knowledge is founded on the coincidence of a subjective with an objective.” While the subjective is consciousness or the “intelligence,” the objective is the “unconscious” pole which he identifies with nature. (Schelling 2001: 5). Schelling offers a relatively concise argument for his position on nature. For Schelling, truth is the correspondence of the subject with the object. As such, the subject (the intellect) and object (nature) are each elements of truth. Based on this concept of truth, Schelling reasons that the elements of truth must themselves be true. Otherwise, truth would be constituted by elements that are false. Thus, in order for the subject to correspond with the object, the subject alone must be true, and the object alone must be true as well. But if this is the case, then the object, or nature itself, must be constituted by a correspondence between the subject and the object. Since the correspondence of the subject with the object constitutes the whole of truth, nature alone is the whole of truth. As a result, *from nature alone*, one

*Essay*. Instead, in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling assumes the freedom of nature already developed in the *Outline* even if the *Freedom Essay* diverges from the philosophy of nature in other respects. In his *Outline*, Schelling describes nature as “the cause and effect of itself.” As a *self-cause* it is simultaneously the product and the productivity responsible for the product: “Insofar as we regard the totality of objects not merely as a product, but at the same time necessarily as productive, it becomes *Nature* for us, and this identity of the product and the productivity, and this alone, is implied by the idea of Nature [...] (Schelling 2004: 202). Because nature is the condition that makes human knowledge possible, “It is not, therefore, that we know Nature as a priori, but *Nature is apriori*.” (Schelling 2004: 198). Naturally, though the “root of freedom” is recognized in the “independent ground of nature” nature has a new place in the freedom essay, for nature is now subordinated to the free act of God’s creation.

#### 2.4 Human Freedom and God

Nature, as the ground of God, not only mediates God’s existence as an ontological principle, but also as a *moral agency*. Since human freedom is a further development and realization of the freedom of nature as the ground of God, human will is evil when they will to be a *self-creating ground* whereby they no longer will to exist in any relation of dependency on the God to whom they are indebted for their existence (Schelling 2006: 55). Since God can only reveal himself through *opposition*, God can only reveal himself as *love* if there is a principle of evil against which God can appear, such that God cannot only reveal himself as love except in hatred (Schelling 2006: 41).<sup>22</sup> Just as nature mediates the revelation of God as God, human evil, as a product and feature of the ground, can mediate the revelation of God as good.

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ought to be able to deduce (and thereby make explicit) subjectivity-consciousness or intelligence. Since nature includes both the conscious and the unconscious elements within itself, and everything (including the whole of experience) is either the conscious, the unconscious, or both, nature itself constitutes the totality. Nature cannot be determined by a subject that transcends it, because subjectivity is contained within it. (In other words, If the subject exceeded nature, then nature would not be the unity of the subjective and the objective.) The same holds good for the object. Thus, nature cannot be determined by anything except itself. Hence, nature must be its own cause, and is a free, self-determining agency—*natura naturans*. In his own words, Schelling argues that “If all knowing has, as it were, two poles, which mutually presuppose and demand one another, they must seek each other in all the sciences; hence there must necessarily be two basic sciences, and it must be impossible to set out from the one pole without being driven toward the other. The necessary tendency of all natural science is thus to move from nature to intelligence. This and nothing else is at the bottom of the urge to bring theory into the phenomena of nature.” (Schelling 2001: 6).

22 Here Schelling’s reasoning follows Boehme: “‘Dear teacher, tell me why must love and suffering, and friend and foe, coexist? Would it not be better to have only love?’ The teacher said, ‘If love were not in suffering, it would have nothing that it could love. However, because love’s being, which is loves, is in suffering and pain, just like the poor soul, love has cause to love its own being, and to rescue it from pain, so that it may be loved again. Further, it cannot be known what love is, if it did not have something that it could love’ (Boehme 2010: 40).

Whether the human being chooses to be good or evil, in each case the human being determines itself. However, Schelling makes the extraordinary claim that acts of human freedom are eternal: ““The act, whereby his life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to serenity: it also does not temporally precede life [because it’s not temporal at all] but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is eternal by nature” (Schelling 2006: 51).<sup>23</sup>

In each act of self-determination, the self that determines and the self that is determined are the same. For this reason, there is *no temporal interval* between the determiner and the determined. As self-determining, the act is *atemporal* or eternal. Thus, although the act occurs *within time*, for Schelling is adamant that each act “goes through time,” the act is *not diachronically* ordered. Each act is eternal *without preceding the act in time*. Each act is “eternal by nature”—“being free and eternal beginning itself” (Schelling 2006: 51).

What is more, because the act of self-determination is not conditioned upon anything outside itself, as self-conditioning it is *totally unconditioned*. Thus, each act of human freedom is not only eternal but absolute. For this reason, Schelling writes that although the human being is “born in time” he is “created into the beginning of the creation.” The human is “created”—they are *natural*. And yet, the human being is also “created into the beginning of creation,” for each act of human freedom is eternal. Here we are not justified in introducing a distinction between the human being as a natural agent, and the freedom of the human being—this would be both artificial and contrary to the spirit and the meaning of the claim. The human being is a *free creature*—a creature with real freedom to choose between good and evil.

Of course, the absolute and unconditioned nature of the freedom of the will does not mean that the human being can realize any possibility that they wish. To the contrary, it only signifies that the form of the free act and every realization of that free act invokes the being of the Absolute. Because human action is such that “as man acts here so he has acted from eternity” (Schelling 2006: 53) *no human action can be free except insofar as it depends upon the free action of God himself*. Put otherwise, only by relying upon the absolute power of God’s unconditioned freedom can human freedom realize itself.

As a form of absolute mediation, the mediating relationship can be formulated *in reverse*: because every act of human freedom realizes itself in virtue of the absolute freedom of God, God too realizes his own capacity for free action through human willing. Human freedom is a form of absolute mediation whereby the human being realizes their own freedom through the power of God, and God realizes his freedom through the human power of self-determination.<sup>24</sup> Human freedom is a *locus of the eternal and temporal*; freedom has

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23 While there are good reasons to consider Schelling’s view on human freedom to be paradoxical, here I only mean to further indicate the way that self-determination operates not only in God and nature more generally, but in *human freedom per se*.

24 Just as the human being mediates God’s power, so do they mediate God’s knowledge. Schelling argues that “Being becomes aware of itself only in becoming.” ([Schelling 2006: 66]. Only by virtue of becoming human, i.e. in Christ, does

the structure of the *Augenblick*, of which Kierkegaard would later make so much. In short, human freedom is *not only* a further potentialization of nature<sup>25</sup>, but it frees itself from nature by *participating in the divine and unconditioned freedom* in which all things exist.<sup>26</sup> If Schelling is right, it is a significant mistake that so many contemporary works on freedom do not invoke the concept of the absolute in their discourses.

Schelling's pantheism does not threaten human freedom. Instead, "only what is free is in God to the extent that it is free" (Schelling 2006: 18-19). If we conceive of human freedom as a power opposed to divine omnipotence, then human beings cannot be free, for human freedom would limit God's power (Schelling 2006: 11).<sup>27</sup> Human freedom cannot exceed God. However, if human freedom itself draws upon the power of God, human freedom is no longer opposed to divine freedom, but constitutes its very realization. Schelling brilliantly overcomes the false dichotomy that God's power precludes human freedom and *vice versa*. In the end, a pantheism of primal willing does not negate human freedom—it makes it possible.

Schelling's *Freedom Essay* is not primarily a text on epistemology, but a treatise about human freedom. However, the question of human freedom is not totally unrelated to the epistemic questions we will consider in the following discussion. In his *Freedom Essay*, Schelling argues for a vision of human freedom as self-determination according to which human freedom is impossible unless it participates in the self-determining power of absolute freedom. In part 3, I argue that while the power of absolute freedom transcends the capacity of human understanding, it does not exceed the absolute power of reason or intellectual intuition, by which the free form of the absolute is revealed to philosophical knowledge. In short, human freedom and human reason are both united in the Absolute, without which neither human freedom nor human reason can exist.

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God come to know himself as love and spirit, namely as the unity of God and nature—light and dark—divine and human. Likewise, only by virtue of the becoming of philosophy in time can God *know himself conceptually*—as the unconditioned and groundless being.

25 This is also evident from Schelling's claim that evil is a "higher potency of the ground active in nature." Since human freedom makes that evil real, one cannot separate human freedom from nature qua ground (Schelling 2006: 81).

26 Schelling is adamant that the human being *qua spirit* in which the human being is "raised from the creaturely into what is above the creaturely:" "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. Since selfhood is spirit, however, it is at the same time raised from the creaturely into what is above the creaturely; it is will that beholds itself in complete freedom, being no longer an instrument of the productive [schaffenden] universal will in nature, but rather above and outside of all nature" (Schelling 2006: 33). The human is a "bond of living forces" (Schelling 2006: 34).

27 "Absolute causality in One Being leaves only unconditioned passivity to all others."

### 3. The Dialectics of the Understanding: The Ungrund and the Indivisible Remainder

The most famous passage from the *Freedom Essay* is Schelling's claims that there is an incomprehensible and infinite remainder lying at the bottom of things:

After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. 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 (Schelling 2006: 29).

Here Schelling claims that reality is ultimately incomprehensible. However, in other places he also decries the falsehood of philosophical views that deny the rational being of the world. How can these views be reconciled? After all, Schelling himself must—at the very least—comprehend the ultimate base of reality *as incomprehensible*.

This conflict is a merely illusory one. In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling never claims that reason is born from what is without reason. To the contrary, he claims that “the understanding is born [...] from that which is without understanding” (Schelling 2006: 29). Like Hegel, Schelling distinguishes understanding [*Verstand*] from reason [*Vernunft*].<sup>28</sup> Because reason is the place of truth, the ultimate base of reality does not exceed reason, but it does exceed the understanding. While reason is the principle of indifference, the understanding knows its object via differentiation (Schelling 2006: 76). Schelling appears to mean that *for the understanding* there will always be an “indivisible remainder” lying at the base of reality.<sup>29</sup>

Why should the understanding always encounter a remainder lying at the base of reality? The unconditioned God—the primal willing—lies at the base of all things, and it

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28 Compare with Hegel's distinction between the Understanding and Reason in his *Encyclopedia Logic*. See Hegel (1975 §79-82).

29 Žižek's claims that for Schelling “the true problem for philosophy is how we can accomplish the passage from senseless existence to reason” (Žižek, 1996: 74). Žižek identifies freedom with contingency and asks how reason could arise from that contingent freedom: “For Schelling, then, the primordial, radically contingent fact, a fact which can in no way be accounted for, is freedom itself, a freedom bound by nothing, a freedom which, in a sense, *is* Nothing; and the problem is, rather, how this Nothing of the abyss of primordial freedom becomes entangled in the causal chain of reason” (Žižek 1996: 16). However, this is a problematic reading of the *Freedom Essay*, for in the *Freedom Essay* reason is without origin, and in this text freedom is not contingent but eschews contingency. This confusion about reason in the *Freedom Essay* is shared by others too. For instance, Snow claims that for Schelling “the most real is the least rational.” (Snow 1996: 174). Because the most real only transcends the understanding, but it does not transcend reason (for reason is the place of truth) in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling continues to hold that the most real is rational. For this reason, Schelling does not reject rationalism, and Dale's view on the rationalism of the *Freedom Essay* cannot be accepted. Mark Thomas is on point when he argues that Schelling is “not rejecting rationalism.” See Thomas (2023: 30).

makes possible the distinction between the conditioned God and nature. Sean McGrath represents it well (McGrath 2005: 3). Consider the following diagram:

$$\frac{A \neq B}{X}$$

‘X’ represents the indifference of the primal willing or unconditioned absolute. ‘A’ and ‘B’ stand for God and nature respectively. ‘≠’ represents the fact that each *mutually excludes the other*, a process of reciprocal determination where each, via an act of negation, grounds the determinacy of the other.

As we noted, because the meaning of the term ‘ground’ is not a proper name, its meaning is not exhausted by any one referent. Rather, it is a universal that can be applied to many things. Accordingly, Schelling calls the being that is “before any duality” the “original ground” (Schelling 2006: 68). Thus, we have *three* terms: *one* original ground, and *two* derivative grounds. Since the understanding operates by the principle that determination is negation, the understanding can only grasp the being of the original ground by positing it as *the negation of the derivative grounds*. Insofar as the original ground is the negation of the derivative ground, it constitutes one side of an opposition, such that  $X \neq (A \neq B)$  (McGrath 2005:3). Since the original ground is the negation of the derivative ground, the derivative ground now operates as the *ground for the determinacy* for the original ground, and *vice versa*. Since the original ground has its ground outside itself in another, it cannot be the original ground, for the original ground has no opposition. Thus, there must be a *second* original ground that grounds all the other derivative grounds. As McGrath depicts it (McGrath 2005: 4):

$$\frac{X \neq (A \neq B)}{Z}$$

In the process of understanding, ‘Z’ too will be determinately related to ‘ $X \neq (A \neq B)$ ’ such that another original ground ‘Q’ must be posited, *ad infinitum*.<sup>30</sup> Thus, *for the understanding*, there must always be an ‘indivisible remainder’ that it fails to comprehend, for it only grasps the being of something in its oppositional relationship to others. Thus, the remainder always remains “eternally in the ground” (Schelling 2006: 29).<sup>31</sup> Put in other words, the understanding is constituted by a will that is always yearning: “it is a will of the under-

<sup>30</sup> Thomas notes that in readings of the Freedom Essay there is a tendency to confuse existence with what exists. See Thomas (2023: 32).

<sup>31</sup> While McGrath’s diagrams are very helpful, in “The Logic of the Freedom Essay” he claims that “Schelling avoids the regress by insisting that where opposition is not qualitative difference, not difference in kind, the deepest grounding is.”

standing, namely yearning” (Schelling 2006: 29). The *yearning for the Absolute* is always incomplete—always striving without end.

### 3.1 *The Understanding and Belated Predication*

Markus Gabriel helpfully presents the dialectic of the understanding in terms of “belated” predication. Regarding the relative determinacy of the absolute, Gabriel observes that “the ontological presupposition of determinacy is not itself subject to determinacy but rather can only be brought under any determinate criterion belatedly.” In other words: “The original ground is a presupposition of all grounding relations, but it can only operate this way “post-actum” (Gabriel 2013: 87). Every grounding relation requires an independent thing which is *grounded* by the ground. If one negates the independence of what is grounded, then “the whole concept [of the ground] would abolish itself” (Schelling 2006: 17-18). However, if this is the case, the original ground can only operate as a ground if the grounded already exists. This means that the unconditioned absolute qua unconditioned is not the ground of anything. Rather, it acquires the predicate ‘is a ground’ *only belatedly*—only on the condition of the existence of the independent being that it grounds. Only “*after* the eternal act of self-revelation,” or the creation of the autonomous being of nature, can the unconditioned absolute be that which *is* the ground of nature.

As Gabriel puts it: “that which is beyond being” is not always already beyond being, but only comes to be through self-mediation” (Gabriel 2013: 93).<sup>32</sup> By positing nature, the absolute transforms itself into the form of the original ground. As the original ground, however, it is already grounded (for it exists in grounding relations with the derivative ground), and for that reason the predicate ‘original ground’ can only be a result or belatedly predicated—it cannot be an original feature of primal willing. In each instance, the understanding discovers that every concept of the original ground that it posits does not correspond to *the unconditioned absolute*. Indeed, by recognizing that the unconditioned absolute cannot be what it is as long as it operates as the ground of God and nature, following Boehme,<sup>33</sup> Schelling calls the original ground the *Ungrund* (Schelling 2006: 70).<sup>34</sup> Every ground exists in relation to *the grounded*. Since the grounded transcends the ground, the grounded is

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(McGrath 2005: 4). However, it seems that McGrath’s view should be *significantly qualified*, for the regress must hold for the understanding, even if it cannot hold for reason itself.

32 Gabriel argues that Schelling’s view of belated prediction engenders a view of being in which everything is fundamentally contingent. Although this is the view of the late Schelling, it is not the argument in the *Freedom Essay*, for here “contingency is impossible.” Freedom is “equidistant from contingency and compulsion” (Schelling 2006: 49).

33 For instance, see Jakob Boehme: “And when I further said that whoever finds love finds nothing and everything, this is also true, because that person finds an unground, beyond nature and beyond the senses, that has no place as its abode and finds nothing that is like it. Therefore one can compare it with nothing, because it is deeper than something” (Boehme 2010: 41).

34 Again: “The absolute,” “considered merely in itself” is the non-ground” (Schelling 2006: 70).



independent of the ground, and is *other* to it. However, the unconditioned absolute—primal willing or total freedom—is not opposed or other to anything. Thus, the unconditioned absolute cannot be a ground. Thus, it is the non-ground—the *Ungrund*.

Earlier I noted that in German the ground of something can also be its negation—where it *ceases to be*. Schelling here plays on this sense of the term, for the indifference or the unconditioned absolute is not only what grounds the grounding relationship, but it is *where the ground ceases to be*—it is where the play of determinate opposition ceases to exist. As such, the original ground is also the unground—that which negates the ground. The Ungrund is that “being against which all opposites ruin themselves, that is nothing less than their very not-Being [*Nichtsein*]” (Schelling 2006: 69).

Naturally, for the understanding the unconditioned absolute cannot appear except as a *paradox*. The unconditioned absolute has no other, but the understanding can only grasp its object as a *relative* being that exists in relation to others. As a result, the understanding always *thinks the absolute as non-absolute*. The understanding finds the Ungrund as that which “has no predicate” but simultaneously has the predicate “lacking of a predicate” (Schelling 2006: 68). While the Ungrund transcends all relations of negation, the understanding cannot grasp it except paradoxically, namely as that which is not negatively related to another—that which negates negativity. If the understanding is the only faculty by which to think the absolute, then one simply cannot know the absolute.

### 3.2 Reason in the Freedom Essay

We will remember that Schelling affirms reason as “the place of truth” and the “peaceful site in which primordial wisdom is received” (Schelling 2006: 76). Since knowledge of the absolute is primordial wisdom, reason is the site where absolute knowledge is received. The “triumph of truth” occurs when thought “emerges victorious from the most extreme division and separation” (Schelling 2006: 76). Indeed, it is reason’s vocation to free us from the extreme separation and *stupefaction of the understanding*.

The dialectic of the understanding demonstrated that in every case God and nature are reciprocally determining each other, and no escape from the reciprocal determination of each appears possible. The dialectic of the understanding always engenders new dualities, each of which reciprocally determines the other. On the one hand, while God is the ground of nature, God is also grounded by nature. On the other hand, nature grounds God, and is grounded by God in turn. Thus, each is constituted by *the same determination*—each is both *ground and grounded*. While God and nature each condition the other, the mutual determination of each—the *activity of reciprocal mediation* itself—is not opposed to anything, for it is equally realized in both divisions of being. Thus, what is absolute is not some third term beyond the duality, for that would only re-invigorate the dialectic of the understanding. No, the mediation of each towards the other is what exists without opposition—the unconditioned being is nothing less than the activity of *absolute mediation* whereby each term

in the relation–God and nature–themselves instantiate the unity of the ground-grounded relation. To give a depiction, we might diagram it as follows:

$$A \rightarrow \leftarrow B$$

Each arrow symbolizes one direction of the grounding relation. Since each grounds the other, each arrow points in both directions.

The Ungrund is “in each in the same way” for each operates as the mediator and the mediated term in the grounding relation. Since each operates as both sides of the mediating process, the Ungrund is “in each the whole, as its own being” (Schelling 2006: 70). Because each is equally the ground as well as the grounded, in the Ungrund there is “the absolute *indifference* of both (Schelling 2006: 68). In other words, insofar as each instantiates the same features, neither is differentiated from the other, and the Ungrund is thereby indifferent to them both.<sup>35</sup> God and nature are *not opposed* to absolute mediation, for *each is an equal instantiation of it*. Thus, “nothing hinders that they be predicated of it as non-opposites” (Schelling 2006: 69). Insofar as the Ungrund is not opposed to the duality, but the indifference is constituted by the fact that each is the mediator of the other, the absolute is not an indeterminate emptiness—a night in which all cows are black. To the contrary, the Ungrund or the absolute mediation is *the absolute indifference of the absolute mediation of God and nature*. As a result, absolute indifference is a *plenum of content*; it is the world whole *without remainder*.<sup>36</sup>

For Schelling absolute mediation is not a contradiction. For each only mediates the other because each is *not* the other. Qua ground of nature, God is not nature, and *vice versa*. In virtue of that mutual exclusion which constitutes their grounding relationship, the whole is revealed: *the mutual exclusion itself is what constitutes the totality*, such that each exists “in disjunction” and each is “for itself” (Schelling 2006: 69). Thus, while duality is preserved, it is preserved in the absolute as the *mutual exclusion of each by the other*. Without the non-ground conceived as the mutual exclusion of principles, “there would be no twoness

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35 Schelling’s account of the relation between God and nature in the Freedom Essay parallels the account of the real and the ideal in his earlier transcendental philosophy and philosophy of nature. Because each (God and nature) are determining and determined, each is the whole. Just as nature and spirit are the whole, and one element of the whole united in absolute identity, both God and and nature are the whole and one element in the whole, united in the Ungrund.

36 Schelling describes the relationship of each principle to the other as one of love. Since each principle is the totality of determinations, each is itself independent, yet each is wedded to the other and related to it as its condition. Each is independent, and dependent upon the other. According to Schelling, love “links such things of which either could exist for itself, yet does not and cannot exist without the other.” (Schelling 2006: 70). The description is best apt for agapeic love, for agapeic love is absolute and beyond all relations, but is nonetheless a relation between relata.

of principles” (Schelling 2006: 69).<sup>37</sup> Each is an instance of mutual exclusion or mutual grounding, by which each is the first and last. Far from a contradictory experience, in the intuition of reason, the absolute is revealed as that which *holds the diverse principles together as existing apart*, thereby providing the metaphysical grounding for the validity of the principle of noncontradiction. Because the indifference is not beyond the mutual exclusion as a third term, we can present the mutual exclusion itself as the absolute. Modifying McGrath’s diagram, indifference is best represented simply as the ‘≠’ without any further additions:

$$A \neq B$$

While the understanding is tempted to add a third, reason knows itself as constituted by the mutual exclusion itself.

Why is reason able to comprehend this truth while the understanding cannot? “Reason is in man that which, according to the mystics, the *primum passivum* [first passivity] or initial wisdom is in God in which all things are together and yet distinct, identical and yet free each in its own way (Schelling 2006: 76). Via the dialectic of the understanding, the whole is revealed as *absolute mediation*—a form that transcends the understanding, but is accessible to reason. For reason is the form of immediate cognition, or “indifference,” and since both nature and God instantiate absolute mediation, it is indifferent to both. Thus, reason can know the absolute—reason is that faculty whereby the truth of the mutual disjunction (and the Understanding) is revealed—the mutual exclusion of both principles that unifies them in their mutual negativity.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The logic of primal willing at work in the *Freedom Essay* denies Hegel’s principle that all determination is negation. By restricting this principle to relative being and the under-

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37 One might worry that if the absolute is in relation with nothing, but the Ungrund is a mediating principle, then it would be in relation to something, and would no longer be absolute. However, if we read the Ungrund as *absolute mediation*, it is not in relation to anything outside itself. To the contrary, absolute mediation contains both grounds (God and nature) without reducing one to the other. It is *the absolute gap that preserves the twoness of principles*. By this reading, there is nothing with which Ungrund as absolute mediation stands in relation. However, as I indicate in my concluding remarks, later in 1842 Schelling would object to this view by arguing that one cannot discursively grasp this truth without opposing the understanding and reason. As a result, in the end the Absolute is always outstanding, and the indivisible remainder must apply not only to the understanding, but also to reason itself.

38 As this explication of the text has demonstrated, (on Schelling’s own terms) there is nothing inherently irrational about the non-ground. For this reason, we cannot agree with Yates that “Echoing his own characterization of ‘spirit’ circa. 1797, he calls the non-ground “the absolute considered merely in itself” [70/408]—that which overrides all the inadequacies of a rational system.” See Yates (2013: 92). The non-ground is inherently rational, for it is the absolute indifference that is characteristic of reason itself. While the non-ground overrides the inadequacies of the Understanding, nowhere does Schelling identify the non-ground as that which “overrides” the rational system of the world.

standing, the absolute and the rational form of knowledge is conceived according to purely affirmative principles. If the absolute were governed by this principle, it would be relative—a contradiction that Hegel endorses but Schelling is loath to avoid.<sup>39</sup> Since the first principle is purely affirmative and devoid of negation and difference, in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling never attempts to explain *how* relative being is posited by the absolute.<sup>40</sup> As Auweele astutely observes, while the many versions of his famous *Ages of the World* would continue to investigate this question, Schelling would ultimately recognize that “Our truth at any point is never the whole truth.”<sup>41</sup>

In the *Freedom Essay* he is content to demonstrate *that* the absolute must determine itself, and to elucidate the grounding structure that constitutes the logic of absolute being and knowledge. Although the absolute is purely affirmative, it is not empty, for Schelling holds that the absolute contains all difference and negation without itself being burdened by any external negation that would compromise its oppositionless nature.

While the understanding inevitably falls into paradox whenever it attempts to think the primal willing, by failing to grasp the absolute, and always stumbling upon an indivisible remainder, it realizes that it cannot know the absolute. However, this knowledge that the understanding cannot know the absolute is itself absolute knowledge, and constitutes rational insight. By successfully thinking the Absolute, human reason participates in Absolute freedom and thereby liberates itself from the chains of the understanding—chains that trap philosophy in the unfreedom of determinate negation.

Insight into the indifferent form of the totality—the plenum of primal willing—is achieved in virtue of the recognition of the limits of the understanding and its dialectical process. Indeed, the only reason we know that the understanding fails to know the absolute is because we already have an archetype of absolute knowledge granted to us by reason itself. As Schelling himself acknowledges, reason gives us the “archetype [Urbild]” by which the “understanding should develop. The understanding “shapes things in conjunction with the archetype by which it steers itself” (Schelling 2006: 76).

The *Freedom Essay* stands between the System of Identity and his mature positive philosophy. In the *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801) Schelling denies the very existence of finitude, while in the *Grounding of the Positive Philosophy* (1842) the existence

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39 Because Hegel endorses the view that all determinacy is constituted by determinate negation, even absolute determinacy must be constituted by determinate negation. As a result, the absolute can only be absolute if it is not relative. But this means that the absolute must be relative to relativity, and must exist in a state of self-contradiction. Accordingly, Hegel proclaims that every “All things are in themselves contradictory. See Hegel (2010: 381).

40 Schelling long recognized the impossibility of explaining how the finite arises out of the infinite. As he writes in his *Philosophical Letters* from 1794, “No system can fill the gap between the non-finite and the finite.” Schelling (1980: 177).

41 For more on Schelling’s approach to this question in the *Ages of the World*, see Dennis Auweele’s *Exceeding Reason: Freedom and Religion in Schelling and Nietzsche* (Auweele 2020:223).

of finitude is a *contingent fact* that has its origin in a *contingent act* of absolute freedom.<sup>42</sup> For the Schelling of 1809 there is finitude and difference, but absolute freedom is devoid of contingency.

*The Freedom Essay* does not represent the apex of Schelling's thought, for he would eventually recognize that philosophy is fundamentally incomplete. Given that reason, qua absolute indifference, is without opposition, but the understanding always exists in opposition, reason and the understanding exist in opposition to each other, such that the absolute knowing of reason must be conditioned by the understanding, and thereby rendered relative and *incomplete*. The principle of determinate negation would revenge itself on the absolute, thereby pitting the oppositional against the oppositionless. Ironically, the very fact that reason is distinguished from the understanding and thereby escapes its limits is exactly what undermines its absolute character. Thus, in the *Grounding of the Positive Philosophy* (1842), Schelling would acknowledge that philosophy can never complete the system of absolute knowledge—the indivisible remainder must remain—even *for reason itself*, such that “reason is set *outside* itself” (Schelling 2007: 162/203). There Schelling will conclude that philosophy never stands in possession of the wisdom that it seeks—it remains a *love of wisdom*.<sup>43</sup>

The *Freedom Essay* is one significant stage by which Schelling's concept of the absolute is transformed from a constitutive into a regulative ideal—always present as an *ought-to-be* that continues to light the torch of philosophical inquiry. The rift between the infinite and the finite—a rift Schelling acknowledged early on—would blossom into the full contingency of being—a contingency that would humble the systematic thinker and call him to rest content with the platonic *Eros* that always animated his thinking. Although many objections might be raised against Schelling's *Freedom Essay* from philosophical perspectives in other periods of Schelling's own oeuvre, the text deserves to be read on its own terms, and with an eye to its essential commitment to rationalism and the systematic ambitions characteristic of Classical German Philosophy. Once when we begin to think with the *Freedom Essay* on its own terms, only then can we even begin to address the success or failure of his arguments.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Schelling proclaims that “everything that is, insofar as it is, is infinity itself.” See Schelling (2001: 353). Contrast this with the contingent facticity of existence in Schelling (2007: 60/130).

43 See Schelling (2007: 181).

44 I would like to thank Mark Thomas, Attay Kremer, Daneil LeBlanc, and Christopher Satoor for their very helpful comments on the penultimate draft of this essay.

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