Religious Studies (2025), **61**, 1–15
doi:10.1017/S0034412523000896

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Schelling and the problem of evil

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(Received 8 June 2022; revised 25 August 2023; accepted 28 August 2023)

Abstract

This article contributes to discussions about the problem of evil and Schelling studies by analysing Schelling's conception of the problem in his 1809 *Freiheitsschrift* essay. I explicate Schelling's critical response to four classic solutions to the problem (embodiment, degree, dualism, and divine forms) and outline his positive solution. My thesis is that Schelling offers a unique theodicy by arguing for a dialectical conception of the infinite omnipotence of God. In contrast to traditional notions of the infinite as the opposite of the finite, Schelling claims that God is only truly infinite if also embodied in the finite, an embodiment enacted through the human freedom to do evil. To explore Schelling's project, I draw parallels between his account of God's omnipotence and Hegel's 'good infinite' and situate Schelling's thesis within Mackie's discussion of the problem of evil in 'Evil and Omnipotence'.

Keywords: Schelling; *Freiheitsschrift*; the problem of evil; infinity; theodicy; Mackie

Introduction

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's renowned 1809 *Freiheitsschrift* (*Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*)[1] is a seminal source text for contemporary debates about the problem of evil.[2] My aim here is to contribute to discussions about the source of these debates and to Schelling studies generally by arguing that Schelling has an original solution to the problem of evil, that this solution is best interpreted as a theodicy, and that the brand of theodicy Schelling subscribes to is one which establishes the necessity of evil by rethinking the concept of infinity in God. To substantiate this argument, the first part of this article explicates key passages from the second section of the *Freiheitsschrift* by summarizing Schelling's critical response to four classic responses to the problem of evil (embodiment, degree, dualism, and divine forms), and then the second part presents Schelling's positive solution as a theodicy about infinity. I also situate Schelling's work within J. L. Mackie's important 1955 essay 'Evil and Omnipotence' to give context and show its relevance to contemporary dialogues about the problem of evil. I have three types of readers in mind. Readers who are primarily interested in historical and contemporary debates about the problem of evil can benefit from an examination of Schelling's response to the problem, while readers who are primarily interested in Schelling scholarship can benefit from the specific reading I offer of Schelling's theodicy, which is that God is only truly infinite if equally embodied in the finite through the enactment of the human freedom to choose between good and evil. Readers who are primarily interested in contemporary analytic debates about the philosophy of religion can also benefit from the contrast I present between Mackie and Schelling, which is valuable

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000896 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because it explores the limitations of both Schelling's theodicy and Mackie's refutation of the problem of evil.

The fact of evil has caused a long-standing conceptual problem for any theist who claims that God is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Critics of this traditional view point out that the existence of evil causes a logical inconsistency.[3] If God has unlimited power and at the same time genuinely desires to bring into existence only that which is good, there should be no place for evil in this world. Critics conclude from this that God cannot possibly be all powerful and all good, if evil exists.

The theist has at least three ways to respond to the critic. The theist can concede, defend, or set up a theodicy. (1) The theist can *concede* that the classic definition of God is inconsistent and thereby revise one or another of the three core concepts (omnipotence, omnibenevolence, or evil). Or (2), the theist can *defend* the classic definition of God by claiming that there only seems to be an inconsistency, but that all three core concepts can occur together. On my reading, the theist also has a third option, (3), a *theodicy*. While a theist who defends against the problem of evil attempts to show that there is no logical inconsistency, the theist who sets up a theodicy attempts to show that there is an ultimate reason why evil exists. Leibniz, who coined the modern sense of the term 'theodicy' in his work of the same name (Leibniz 2009), presents one of the most influential theodicies to date with his thesis that 'nothing is without a reason'.[4]

In 'Evil and Omnipotence', Mackie offers a detailed topology of the various solutions to the problem of evil (also see Plantinga 1967; Plantinga 1974; Swinburne 1979; Adams and Adams 1990; Peterson 1992; Peterson 1998; Swinburne 1998; Meister and Moser 2017). Mackie's topology comes in the form of (1) 'a concession' and (2) 'a defence'; however, a discussion of (3) 'a theodicy' is noticeably missing from his analysis. This is either because Mackie simply omits it or, what is more likely, thinks that theodicies are a type of defence.[5] Concerning (1), Mackie claims that all concessions are 'adequate solutions', since the problem of evil is no longer a problem if the theist concedes either that God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent. On the other hand, the variations of (2) are 'inadequate solutions' because 'there is no valid solution to the problem which does not modify at least one of the constituent propositions in a way which would seriously affect the essential core of the theistic position' (Mackie 1955, 212). Any solution the theist adopts, whether adequate or inadequate, comes at a major price. Each response requires a revision of how God has traditionally been portrayed in the West. Of course, there is value to these revisions. One of the primary contributions to debates about the problem of evil make to theological discussions is to produce alternative theological stories and definitions of God. Because they are forced to seriously revise their assumptions about God, theists present various theological accounts of the nature of reality based on how they restate their commitments to avoid the inconsistency.

Contrary to other commentaries that view Schelling's theodicy as disinterested in the traditional conception of God as omnipotent and omnibenevolent (for example, Carlson 2018, 443), I argue that Schelling is directly responding to the classic problem of evil. I will demonstrate this by showing how Schelling's theory fits into Mackie's topography. One of the values of Mackie's essay is that he puts every proposed solution to the problem of evil through a rigorous test, which, on his estimation, no solution to the problem of evil can pass. Because of this, Mackie draws the damning conclusion that the problem of evil successfully undermines every conception of an all-powerful, all-good God. But since Mackie collapses the distinction between a defence and a theodicy and does not sufficiently address the possibilities of the theodicy-response to the problem, my project serves the secondary function of questioning the terms and limits of Mackie's test.

While there have been a number of related studies that present specific readings of Schelling's theodicy, there has not yet been a study that claims, as I do, that it is the

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infinity of God that necessitates evil through the enactment of human freedom.[6] Let's briefly outline some of the other commentaries, which in one way or another offer plausible accounts of what makes Schelling's theodicy a theodicy.[7]

One of the best scholarly works about Schelling's theodicy to date is Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt's introduction to their 2006 translation of the *Freiheitsschrift*, entitled 'Schelling's Treatise on Freedom and the Possibility of Theodicy'. They present a series of conceptual stories about the history of theodicy in the modern period from Leibniz to Schelling. According to them, Leibniz's rationalism brings about the birth of modern theodicy with the thesis that evil serves a necessary function in the perfection of God's omnibenevolence (Love and Schmidt 2006, xi). This thesis from Leibniz finds its culmination in Hegel, who claims that evil is an instrument in the production of spirit, history, and religion as a necessary and productive element of cultural and social dialectics (Love and Schmidt 2006, xii–xv). But there is another storyline in the history of modern theodicy. There is the rejection of theodicy by Kant, who, in *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy* (1791) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), argues for a conception of radical evil, wherein evil is a singularly human issue and has a positive character (Love and Schmidt 2006, xv–xvii). Kant thus breaks from the Augustinian and Leibnizian tradition that views evil as having merely a negative character. As Love and Schmidt present it, this storyline leads to Schelling, who borrows aspects of Kant's radical evil – specifically, the positive and moral characteristics of evil – while, at the same time, resurrects theodicy from what had seemed to be its exhaustion in Kant (Love and Schmidt 2006, xix). The central question Love and Schmidt ask is, how is it possible to conceive of a theodicy that incorporates Kant's radical evil? The answer they give is that theodicy must become the source of an argument that results in system contingency (Love and Schmidt 2006, xx).

Other noteworthy readings of Schelling's theodicy come from Olli Pitkänen, John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Liane F. Carlson, and Andrew Shanks. In 'Schelling's Pantheism and the Problem of Evil', Pitkänen claims that Schelling's work is best understood as a pantheism. Schelling's theodicy answers the question of how to think of pantheism as a concept of nature in all things and, at the same time, how to maintain human freedom. On Pitkänen's reading, this causes Schelling to reshape pantheism in a 'naturalistic' way that goes beyond Spinoza (Pitkänen 2017, 368). In 'Thebes Revisited: Theodicy and the Temporality of Evil', Manoussakis proposes that the primary attribute of Schelling's theodicy is teleology and that the problem of evil is overcome if we add temporality into the equation (Manoussakis 2009, 293).[8] In 'Loneliness and the Limits of Theodicy', Carlson makes a case for reading Schelling's *Ages of the World* (1813) alongside the *Freiheitsschrift* as a treatise on theodicy, contrary to most readings that view it as a cosmogony (Carlson 2018, 442). She proposes that when we incorporate *Ages of the World*, conceptual analysis of loneliness becomes one of the main consequences of Schelling's specific brand of theodicy. Schanks's 2018 book *Theodicy Beyond the Death of God* presents another nuanced interpretation of Schelling by claiming that his theodicy is characterized specifically by systematicity. Schelling offers a complex series of systematic stages built around the relationship between the ground and existence of God to achieve a rationale for the necessity of evil, which is also marked by the promise to overcome evil (Shanks 2018, 147–161).

In contrast to but also as a development of these interpretations, I argue that Schelling's solution is to set up a theodicy from the recognition that God can only be genuinely omnipotent if God is able to embody finitude. Schelling's conception of the complexity of God's omnipotence leads to a paradox that is like Hegel's conception of the 'good infinite'. If God is truly infinite, God will have to be understood as both infinite and finite simultaneously. The paradox here is that God only achieves genuine

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limitlessness through the compromise of limitation. Schelling's unique solution to the problem of evil is to recognize that this paradox is constitutive of theological reality. God reaches true omnipotence by embodying finitude through humans, who are in the image of God and are free like God. However, this freedom can only be established through the stark separation of God from man. Human freedom imitates the power of God's omnipotence, but since it can only imitate this in terms of the finite, the human creates like God but creates in God's absence. Evil is the consequence of this freedom.

Schelling's evaluation of other solutions to the problem of evil

A large part of Schelling's discussion focuses on the critical project of exposing the shortcomings of various proposed solutions to the problem of evil in the history of Western thought. Schelling's evaluation of these proposed solutions can be divided into four classic solutions: embodiment, degree, dualism, and divine forms (Schelling 2006, 23–25, 36). Let us look at Schelling's response to these solutions before turning to his own solution.

The embodiment theory

Any theory that presents God as embodied by the creatures God creates thereby addresses the problem of evil. A theory that recognizes God *in* all things, such as Spinoza's pantheism, directly faces the challenge of how God is omnibenevolent if evil exists. But Schelling also acknowledges that even a theory that only lightly associates God with evil through creatures (think Saint Thomas Aquinas[9]) also faces the problem of evil – in the sense that even if God does not actively produce evil, it is still problematic that the creatures God creates are involved with evil.

Proponents of the embodiment theory claim that because the creatures of God embody God indirectly, God is not fully involved in the worldly affairs of creatures and, therefore, the evil that they take part in cannot be traced back to God. The advantage of this theory is that it would seem to allow for both the existence of evil and the omnibenevolence of God.

Schelling rejects this theory when he writes: 'thus God appears undeniably to share responsibility for evil in so far as permitting an entirely dependent being to do evil is surely not much better than to cause it to do so' (Schelling 2006, 23). Schelling thus collapses the distinction between direct and indirect embodiment. Obviously, the direct version of embodiment, which Schelling attributes to Spinoza, fails to avoid the problem of evil. By collapsing this distinction, Schelling commits proponents of the indirect version of this theory to the same shortcoming that the direct version faces. Even the most distant version of this theory, where God creates creatures who have no further bind to God, nevertheless exposes God to evil through the origin of his having created them.

The degree theory

Proponents of the degree theory claim that evil is merely the absence of good. The degree theory includes moral accounts of evil as pain, where pain is defined as merely a lack of pleasure, as with Bentham's utilitarianism, where pain is a base denomination of happiness. But Schelling has Leibniz in mind at this point in his discussion (Schelling 2006, 36):

> [There is] the assertion that in evil there is nowhere anything positive or, differently expressed, that evil does not exist at all (not even with, or connected to, another positive) but rather that all actions are more or less positive, and the distinction among them is merely a plus or minus of completeness, whereby no opposition is established and, therefore, evil utterly disappears. (Schelling 2006, 24)

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Proponents of the degree theory think they have avoided the problem of evil because, if evil is merely a lack of good, then evil does not really exist. This is the consequence of a purely negative conception of evil. Following Kant's conception of radical evil, Schelling rejects this solution by asserting that evil must be conceived of as a positive quality (for example, see Schelling 2006, 22). Schelling thereby rejects the Augustinian view from the Catholic tradition, along with the Leibnizian view, which sees evil as nothing or as a kind of non-being. Augustine defines evil in the third book of *On Free Choice of the Will* as non-being and claims that it is the expression of unintelligibility and nothingness. Because evil is fundamentally bound up with freedom, Schelling criticizes the thesis that evil is a degree of the good (Schelling 2006, 36–37).

The dualist theory

Proponents of the dualist theory believe that good and evil both have positive value, and that each constitutes a significantly different, independent, isolatable principle. Schelling writes: 'One can be tempted to throw oneself into the arms of dualism. This system, however, if it is really thought as the doctrine of two absolutely different and mutually independent principles, is only a system of the self-destruction and despair of reason' (Schelling 2006, 24). Good and evil do not fully merge or combine, certainly not in the way that they do in the embodiment and degree theories. Instead, the independent forces of good and evil produce a divided world. On Schelling's account, there is an extreme and moderate version of dualism. In the extreme version, good and evil are completely separate, while in the moderate version, which has three sub-variations, evil is the result of an estrangement from the good.

The classic case of extreme dualism is Manicheanism, a view which Augustine defended before he turned to Christianity. God wills the principle of the good but has nothing to do with the principle of evil. Religious stories that include depictions of demons or horrific events without further explanation of their relation to the good, which simply assume that evil is a separate force in the world that exists concurrently but independently of the good, are examples of extreme dualism. Schelling also suggests that such a theory leads to pandemonism, where each individuated thing references an individual spirit or God within a grand system of polytheism (Schelling 2006, 25). Schelling claims that because such a theory projects good and evil as entirely disconnected principles, it is self-destructive, meaningless, and without rationality.

Schelling goes on to list three moderate variations of dualism based on estrangement. In variation (A), 'God estranges things', God wills the estrangement as a violence against things: 'It is . . . an involuntary estrangement on the part of things but not on the part of God in which case they are cast out by God into a condition of disaffection and malice' (Schelling 2006, 25). God shuns things and they fall into darkness and evil. In variation (B), the 'involuntarily estrangement' model, Schelling describes a double-sided, passive form of estrangement: 'Or [the estrangement] is involuntary on both sides, having been caused, for instance, by an overflow of being as some say, an utterly untenable idea' (Schelling 2006, 25). Evil is, in this version, a mistake of being that overflows uncontrollably beyond its designated place.[10] In variation (C), 'things estrange themselves', it is the things, rather than God, that play the active voluntary agents, 'tearing [themselves] away from God', which leads to an 'even deeper abasement' (Schelling 2006, 25) since evil emerges, not only as the final result of the estrangement from God, but also as the initial act of estranging themselves.

Schelling criticizes all three moderate sub-variations by claiming that there is a more originary common bind between things and God that underlies the secondary estrangement of things from God. This original position is a necessary condition for the possibility

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of being estranged. It is merely a dressed-up formulation of the embodiment theory and is, therefore, vulnerable in the same ways to the problem of evil (Schelling 2006, 25).

The divine theory of evil

Schelling also discusses a fourth response, the divine theory of evil:

> If one asks from whence comes evil, the answer is: from the ideal nature of creatures to the extent that it depends on the eternal truths that are contained in the divine understanding, but not on the will of God. The region of the divine truths is the ideal cause of good and evil and must be posited in place of the matter of the ancients . . . The understanding yields the principle of evil, although it does not thereby become evil itself, for it represents natures as they are in accordance with the eternal truths: it contains in itself the ground that permits evil, but the will alone is directed toward the good. God did not bring about this sole possibility since the understanding cannot be its own cause. (Schelling 2006, 36)

Proponents of the divine theory claim that although evil exists in the divine forms, God only wills the good. By distinguishing the divine understanding, which includes the possibility of evil, from the will of God, which is always only the good will, this theory attempts to make the existence of evil and the omnibenevolence of God mutually compatible. The theory gives an account of the prevalence of evil in the world since the understanding has the capacity to make use of the eternal forms to produce evil and mix it into the earthly volition of things.[11]

The weakness of this theory, according to Schelling, is that one has to characterize either God or evil *as passive*. God is passive if God simply lets evil exist in the forms. Schelling furthermore objects that to posit evil in the understanding of the forms is to present evil as passive rather than active. By hiding evil obscurely in the understanding of the forms, we end up presenting evil as something that is deprived of real power.

Schelling's theodicy

Schelling's critical analysis of these responses to the problem of evil acts as a nineteenth-century precursor for the more comprehensive analysis that followed later. That Schelling focused on the themes of embodiment, degree, dualism, and divine separation reveals a lot about his own preoccupation with evil as a non-formal, positive condition for human freedom. Let us now look at his positive project.

The problem of evil and the good infinite

Schelling's theodicy begins from the recognition that God's omnipotence is the most significant of the three core concepts that constitute the problem. It is also, for Schelling, a complex concept. Its complexity is rooted in a German idealist insight about the nature of infinity. Because God is omnipotent, God's nature is infinite and limitless. However, God is not truly omnipotent if God's nature is limited to one side of an opposition with the finite. The consequence of this is that to be truly limitless, God also must be able to embody finitude, not only as the creator of the finite, but in the active sense of being finite as well as infinite. How does God achieve this? God achieves this by creating nature, which produces man in the image of God as a God-like being with the ability to choose between good and evil. In this way, because God is expressed through the vehicle of

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man, the opposition between the infinite and the finite breaks down, and God is, then, truly omnipotent. To unpack this, let us turn briefly to Hegel.

Schelling's conception of God's omnipotence shares a lot with Hegel's conception of the good infinite in the *Science of Logic*. In the 'Finitude' chapter of the 'Doctrine of Being', Hegel distinguishes between two types of infinity. There is the type of infinity that common sense wants to uphold, which is characterized by its opposition with the finite. This type of infinity gains its specific determinate quality through its negative definition of *not* being finite. Hegel finds this type of infinity to be quite problematic:

> As thus posited over against the finite, the two connected by the qualitative mutual reference of *others*, the infinite is to be called the *bad infinite*, the infinite of the *understanding*, for which it counts as the highest, the absolute truth . . . This contradiction is present in the very fact that the infinite remains over against the finite, with the result that there are *two* determinacies. There are *two* worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their connection the infinite is only the *limit* of the finite and thus only a determinate, *itself finite infinite.* (Hegel 2010, 111)

When the infinite and the finite are conceived as opposites, a limit is drawn up between the two. Because the infinite is not the finite, it becomes comprehensible as one side of an external relationship with the finite. The paradox here is that the infinite is supposed to be limitless, but if it is posited as one side of an opposition with the finite, it is thus clearly limited and compromised by its status over against the finite.[12] Puzzlingly, this common-sense conception of the infinite is, more accurately, a conception of the finitude of infinity, rather than a true conception of infinity itself. Hegel continues:

> The infinite, thus positioned, is one of the two; but, as only one of them, it is itself finite, it is not the whole but only One side; it has its limit in that which stands over against it; and so it is the finite infinite. We have before us only two finites. The finitude of the infinite, and therefore its unity with the finite, lies in the very fact that it is separated from the finite and placed, consequently, on one side. (Hegel 2010, 114)

The good infinite emerges from the failure of our common-sense conception of the infinite. The bad infinite takes the form of the endless rotation of infinite circularity, but it also takes the form of an infinite that is completely distinct from and is not present with the finite. In both variations, because it stands over against the finite, the bad infinite turns out to be the same as the finite. But this failure is also a developmental path that leads to a genuine conception of the true infinite, a path that the infinite must pass through to reach a limitlessness that is not even constrained by the finite. According to Hegel, the good infinite is a conception of the infinite that has sublated its opposition with the finite and has thereby come to include itself as the finite.

This motif of the good infinite as the unity of the finite and the infinite is one of the most profound philosophical puzzles in Hegel's whole corpus. In *The Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1832, posthumously), the good infinite acts as the motor for Hegel's argument that Christianity is the true religion of freedom. Here, Hegel claims that Christianity is the only religion that effectively merges the finite and the infinite in a way that reveals the limitlessness of infinity. Christianity achieves this through a two-step process, through incarnation and reconciliation. The Christian God is not an abstract, purely transcendent entity posited beyond our everyday world, but is, instead, concrete and personal through the incarnation of God in Jesus, who embodies the infinite as the flesh and blood of God in the finite.

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The incarnation of God leads to significant consequences. According to the Hegel scholar Jon Stewart, because the incarnation of God unifies the finite and the infinite, it also mends the deeply sedimented alienation that is a product of bad infinite conceptions of Christianity produced from the unhappy consciousness shape in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) (Hegel 2018, 123–135; Stewart 2021, 31–38). The shape of unhappy consciousness is the shape of a divided self, dominated by feelings of being finite, constantly changing, and inevitably perishing, in the face of a perfect, impersonal, immutable, transcendent God. This alienation of the finite from the infinite is overcome through the incarnation of God. This is the religious equivalent of the good infinite, since God is both finite and infinite and thus truly infinite.

Incarnation leads to the further consequence of reconciliation, where the subjectivity of human finitude is elevated by the infinity of God, at the same time as the concept of God's omnipotence is made whole and genuine by the personality and individuation of God. Human subjectivity is no longer something separated from God; the particular is no longer the opposite of the universal; each side, instead, becomes the expression of the other. From the view of unhappy consciousness, human subjectivity is flawed and limited, clouded by personal emotion, separated from truth, and depressed by the inevitable, soon-to-be destruction of the self in finitude. But through reconciliation, human subjectivity becomes the site of genuine freedom and the instantiated expression of the infinite. This has the further consequence that, as God becomes immanent, God is no longer unknowable but appears through revelation as an individual human with personality, instead of as an omnipotent God of the realm above. This has ramifications for the concept of revelation and is one of the principal arguments against interpreting Hegel as a thinker of negative theology.[13]

In what follows, I claim that the incarnation and revelation of God and the parallel reconciliation of humans with God gains new significance when it is framed from the terms of Schelling's theodicy. In the final pages of the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling claims that evil is 'necessary for the revelation of God' (Schelling 2006, 41). Revelation is Schelling's version of the incarnation and reconciliation of God. God is not simply an abstract, transcendent entity posited beyond the human world, but is, instead, concretely embodied with personality (Schelling 2006, 58), discovered through the revelation of God.

What does God's omnipotence look like when it is channelled through the finite vessel of humans? Schelling proposes that evil is the answer to this question. Because evil breaks the limits of finitude but also finds its source in human finitude, it disrupts systematization at its core. At the same time, evil is a necessary by-product of God's perfection when it is refracted by the finite. And yet, it also expresses the infinite, and expresses it in a way that God cannot otherwise be, since it is the omnipotence of God where God is absent, since it is the finitude that completes the infinite and makes it truly infinite.

We might ask why God needs to express the infinite in the finite at all. The answer to this question comes from the argument for the good infinite. If infinity were not equally marked by the contradiction that it itself is the finite, it would then lack something as a boundary over against it. God's omnipotence has to be marked by this productive contradiction.[14] The truly limitless can only fully emerge through the paradox of having to embrace the limits of the finite so that it then claims everything and is everything as true omnipotence.

Ground and existence

Schelling clarifies this point about the complexity of God's omnipotence and the role of the human condition through his discussion of the ground–existence relationship in God and things. God is that being for whom ground and existence are the same: 'Since nothing is prior to, or outside of, God, he must have the ground of his existence in himself.

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All philosophies say this; but they speak of this ground as of a mere concept without making it something real and actual' (Schelling 2006, 27). God is different from all other things in that the ground of God's existence is not posited in something other than God but is rather contained in the selfsame act of existing.[15] In all other forms of being, ground and existence are separate. All finite things have something prior and more fundamental at the ground of their existence. The child has the adult; the tree has the seed; the effect has the cause; the cause has a prior cause, etc. This is explicitly the case in animals, where the source of their existence is in another and their ground is obviously separated from their being. Although this division is more complicated in humans, since they can act as if they are their own cause even though they are not, Schelling claims that the unity between existence and ground is also 'severable' in humans, and that the human's freedom to choose evil demonstrates this.[16]

On the face of it, there is nothing unique about these insights from Schelling. They are part of a long-standing tradition to view God as that being for whom ground and existence are one, and to view all other things as dependent on and subordinate to God as their source. Schelling acknowledges as much when he admits that 'all philosophies say this'. What is unique in Schelling's theory, however, is his rationale for why God creates nature, which then produces man's freedom in the likeness of God's infinity, and yet as something 'real and actual', as a special type of being distinct from animals.[17] The ground–existence distinction is not as straightforward in humans as it is in animals. Schelling claims that the main mark of this distinction for humans comes from *selfhood*. To be a self is to be self-consciously separated from God, but because humans are in the image of God, this also leads to the build-up of spirit.[18] In contrast to other animals for whom the ground–existence distinction is obvious and simple,[19] this distinction is both more pronounced and yet also a lot more perplexing in humans because selfhood carries over to spirit, yet spirit holds within it an energy of the will that attempts to reunite the ground–existence distinction, not as it is primordially unified in God, but in an artificial way where the human is God-like and selfish.[20]

Spirit is both proof of the separation of humans from God and proof of God as ground, as the overflowing of the infinite in the finite. Because Schelling does not view God's infinity to be a mere abstraction, as with the classic conception of a transcendent God standing above and beyond human reality (Schelling 2006, 58–59), the infinite and the finite are not simply opposed to each other but intertwine and merge dialectically. In a contradictory sense, because God is the originary ground (*Urgrund*) of all things, God also embodies things in the finite. Likewise, humans are separate from God in a state of finitude and yet, at the same time, exist *in* God. According to Schelling, this relationship between God and finitude can be interpreted as a post-Spinozistic pantheism,[21] but it is also a productive contradiction of theological reality:

> [Things] cannot become in God, considered in an absolute manner, since they are different from him *toto genere* or infinitely, to speak more correctly. In order to be divided from God, they must become in a ground different from God. Since, however, nothing indeed can be outside of God, this contradiction can only be resolved by things having their ground in that which in God himself is not *He Himself*, that is, in that which is the ground of his existence. If we want to bring this way of being closer to us in human terms, we can say: it is the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself. (Schelling 2006, 28)

This contradiction is played out in the most profound way in terms of human nature. On the one hand, as with other animals, the ground of human existence finds its source in a relation that is outside itself, separate, in another. Because of this, humans depend on

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nature as the ground, and depend on God as the originary ground, of their existence. And yet, on the other hand, in a contradictory way, humans have the unique ability to artificially unify their existence and their ground. Humans are endowed with self-consciousness, rationality, and spirit, that is, with the ability to see and partially correct the separation between their ground and their existence. Their source is in another, and yet because they are formed in nature as the mirror of God, as the embodiment of God in the finite, as if 'the eternal One . . . [gave] birth to itself', they are, at the same time, the ersatz version of the ground–existence unity. God is the perfect unity of ground and existence. Humans share the possibility of this unity as well, but in an imperfect way, which causes them to labour to raise the particular to the level of the universal.[22] This also causes them to be free to choose between good and evil. Schelling describes the human condition as characterized by the omnipotence of God, but by an omnipotence where God is absent.

Evil is a by-product of the freedom that comes from the ersatz omnipotence of humans, who are born independently by nature but in the image of God as a consequence of God's necessity to overcome the limitation of not being able to be finite. The freedom to choose evil is an expression of God's omnipotence when it is projected artificially into humans. Evil is a maligned application of the human's ability to bridge the separation between ground and existence. In this sense, although evil is a necessary component of Schelling's theodicy, God never actually wills evil. God creates nature, and humans emerge from this. The distinction between good and evil only ever comes about in the human. The unity of ground and existence is, in humans, a compartmentalized, half-separated, contradictory unity, which emerges so that God can express omnipotence in the finite. This expression appears as the human capacity to comprehend the universal from the standpoint of the particular. This leads to the capacity for moral conscience, in the sense that one can reflect on one's particular actions and inclinations by asking the Kantian question: can this that I am inclined to do be done universally? But this also leads to the capacity to do evil.

Evil and selfishness

Humans parade around the earth with the God-like ability to appear to be the source of their existence. But this ability is artificial and ineffective. Unlike God, for whom existence and ground are inseparable, because the human produces the ground of existence from the artificial pretence of being God-like, existence and ground are as separable as they are unifiable. This separability produces the difference between the particular and the universal. The human is a particular, finite being who, in the image of God, labours to close the gap and ascend from particularity to universality. To be particular means to find one's existence only in something else. All things are, in this way, particular. The ground of their existence is not self-sufficient, but is, instead, dependent on the existence of something other. In contrast, insofar as it can be viewed as separate from the particular, the universal appears as a ground which is empty of existence. When separated from all particular instantiations of itself, the universal is merely an abstract, transcendent concept. But the rationality of human understanding has the ability to conceive of the particular and universal as a unity. Likewise, human spirit is the ability to raise the particularity of human reality up to the level of the universal, and thereby to reach the infinite in the finite.

Because they are born by nature in God's image, humans are both the particular and the universal at the same time, but unlike God – for whom the sides are inseparable – the unity appears as a contradiction, that of the particular that attempts to fashion itself from the terms of the universal. This leads, on the one hand, to the moral impasse at the heart of Kant's categorical imperative, that is, the impossibility of willing the particular

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indulgences and fancies of the empirical ego from a universal standpoint. In Kant's well-known case of lending money (Kant 2002, 39), a person who asks for a loan while knowing that it cannot be paid back is struck by the disturbing reflection of the universal standpoint. With a pang of conscience, it dawns on this person that the lender would never give out the loan if the intention of not paying it back were made universal.[23] In this case, the advantage is produced only from the manipulation of the universal by the particular, which, on Kant's account, is immoral.

Being in God's image leads, not only to a particular person who is struck by a pang of conscience when the categorical imperative fails, but also to the standpoint, in Schelling's analysis, of attempting to universalize that which is particular, as if one's particular volition could spread everywhere and be everything. This second direction of the ladder between the particular and the universal, the dark counterpart of Kant's categorical imperative, is what Schelling calls the evil of selfishness: 'The general possibility of evil consists, as shown, in the fact that man, instead of making his selfhood into the basis, the instrument, can strive to elevate it into the ruling and total will' (Schelling 2006, 54). Unlike Kant's version, where the particular will attempts to fit the shape of particularity into the shape of universality, Schelling's conception of selfishness attempts to refashion the terms of universal understanding from terms that are only particular. This leads to solipsism, where the empirical ego, conflated with the transcendental ego, acts as the basis for all of reality. Rousseau makes a similar point in *Emile*: 'the good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked man orders the whole in relation to himself. The latter makes himself the centre of all things, the former measures his radius and keeps to the circumference' (Rousseau 1979, 292).[24] Love and Schmidt discuss this quote from Rousseau in detail in their introduction to the 2006 translation of *Freiheitsschrift*, but they attribute this inversion of the categorical imperative to Kant's theory of radical evil rather than to Schelling's selfishness. On my reading, Kant's radical evil comes from the subsumption of the universal to the particular, when we embrace the particularity of inclination while ignoring the pangs of conscience and thereby significantly departing from universal morality. But the position Schelling presents is one where we reshape the particular to be the universal and thereby set everything in terms of us. Here, we see Schelling's divergence from Kant's radical evil. While Schelling follows Kant by situating evil directly in terms of human volition, as a positive, moral character flaw, evil becomes for Schelling a necessary condition of freedom and, at the same time, a different type of inversion of the categorical imperative. Evil also becomes the power to misuse the passageway between the particular and the universal by reframing the universal standpoint from the indulgence of the particular, and thereby bringing into existence the most disturbing register of selfishness, to the extreme point where the particular bends the universal and tries to become the universal in itself.

Because they are free and are thus capable of doing evil, humans express the good infinite of God, an infinite which does not stand over against the finite, but is complete and genuinely infinite because it is also finite. Schelling's theodicy has the distinctive character of uncovering the complexity of God's omnipotence. According to Schelling, evil exists because humans express the freedom and omnipotence of God in the finite, so much so that they can, partially, merge the particular with the universal, and thereby merge their existence with their ground. Yet, since humans do this inconsistently from the terms of the finite, evil is a necessary result.

Conclusion

Critics of Schelling's theodicy will point out that if evil is a by-product of human freedom, then God is not truly independent. Even if God is not directly involved with evil, the

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theological story Schelling tells appears to make God indirectly dependent on evil. But we can also interpret Schelling to be saying that God's dependence on the human ability to choose between good and evil is not really a restriction of God's power but is, instead, simply an effect of omnipotence when it is mediated through limitation. God is so powerful and so present that God reaches even the unreachable place where God is absent. God is, in one sense, absent from human existence. Humans are totally free. They can contemplate the universal and can attempt to make their own particular existence fit the frame of the universal. God does not do this for them. They are left alone to search for the source of their existence and in a creative way merge their existence with this source so that it is fashioned together as if it were one, as a temporary unity that appears in a fleeting and unsustainable way to be like God's perfect unity of ground and existence. By labouring to unify their existence with the ground of their existence, this human activity, which seems independent of God, is actually the fulfilment of God's omnipotence. God achieves true omnipotence by expelling the seemingly insurmountable limitation that the infinite is not able to be finite. God achieves this only by being absent, and yet this absence makes God completely omnipotent, since God thereby realizes the good infinite through the embodiment of humans.

Let us now return to Mackie's criticism of the problem of evil and see how Schelling fits in. If in general a theodicy is to be interpreted as a type of defence, then Schelling's theodicy goes down as one of the most sophisticated solutions to the problem of evil that, nevertheless, fails Mackie's test. But, on the other hand, if we interpret Mackie as proposing a false dichotomy by admitting that there are not only two possible solutions to the problem of evil – concessions and defences – but also a third – a theodicy as distinct from a defence – we thus lay the groundwork for a critical discussion of whether Mackie's test really does meet the criteria of an all-encompassing proof, while, at the same time, exploring the ramifications of Schelling's thesis about God, evil, and human freedom.[25]

The term 'theodicy' is conspicuously absent from Mackie's discussion of the problem of evil. There are good reasons for this. A theodicy presents a rationale of some sort for why evil is necessary. In the case of Love and Schmidt's reading of Leibniz, the rationale is that evil is a necessary by-product of God's *omnibenevolence*. Evil is part of the harmony of the perfection of God, who chooses the best of all possible worlds from an infinite variety of less perfect worlds. In contrast to Leibniz, Schelling's theodicy works from the rationale that evil is a necessary by-product of God's *omnipotence* when viewed from the terms of the German idealist's insight that infinity must encompass the finite to be truly infinite. Because he subsumes all theodicies under the heading of a defence, Mackie thereby challenges Schelling by questioning whether his theodicy is merely a dressed-up variation of a defence, in which case it fails Mackie's test, just like all the others.

The question comes down to this: does the rationalization of evil simply trigger a more complicated type of defence that nevertheless still causes an underlying inconsistency in the classic definition of God? Or is a theodicy categorically different from a defence? Rather than causing a conflict between the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God, which, as Mackie points out, is the endgame of all defences, do theodicies, instead, present evil as co-operating and even enhancing that long-standing tradition of viewing God as all powerful and all good? Proponents of a theodicy, who claim that it is significantly different from a defence, claim that the point of a theodicy is to rethink the nature of evil, rather than to defend against the logical inconsistency of the classic definitions of God. It is then not a question of a concession or defence, but a way of reforming our concepts of evil through arguments that more emphatically demonstrate the classic definitions of God. Schelling's version of a theodicy does this by uncovering the complexity of the infinite, which requires that it be both itself and its opposite, both itself and the finite.

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Notes

1. The discussions of the *Freiheitsschrift* in Heidegger (1985) and Žižek (2007) have boosted the popularity of Schelling's work in the continental tradition. The resurgence of the problem of evil in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has also prepared the way for new readings of Schelling's work.
2. Schelling also discusses the concept of evil five years earlier in his 1804 work *Philosophy and Religion*. See his chapter 'The Origin of the Finite Things from the Absolute and Their Relationship to It', where he asks, 'What is the cause of all evil'? (Schelling 2010, 17; Schelling 1804, 18).
3. The problem of evil is often interpreted to have two branches. The logical branch contains deductive arguments against the conventional definitions of God based on contradiction and logical inconsistency. In contrast, the evidential branch contains inductive arguments, which point to the factual existence of evil as probable evidence against the existence of a wholly omnipotent, omnibenevolent God. I will focus primarily on the logical branch.
4. This is the catchphrase that Love and Schmidt attribute to Leibniz's theodicy in the introduction to their translation of Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* (Love and Schmidt 2006, xi).
5. Pitkänen notes that contemporary theists often collapse the distinction between a defence and theodicy. I am sympathetic of Pitkänen's position of upholding the distinction. Pitkänen claims that the difference between a defence and a theodicy is that a defence tacitly relies on faith while a theodicy presents a rationale beyond faith for the existence of evil (Pitkänen 2017, 362).
6. Schelling can be viewed to have modified and developed Augustine's classic free-will solution to the problem of evil (Augustine 1993, 16–17). Analysis of the free-will solution has been developed further in the twentieth century (Plantinga 1967 and 1974). Although the primary claim of this solution – that God allows evil to exist because it is a necessary by-product of man's freedom – is similar in Schelling, Schelling's specific conception of the problem of evil as a problem about the complexity of God's omnipotence is unique to his theory.
7. I have chosen specific commentaries of Schelling that directly address the character of his theodicy. Beyond this scope, there is also generally a lot of good secondary literature on Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*: for comparisons of Kant and Schelling on the relationship between evil and reason, see Coble (2001); Gardner (2017); and Auweele (2019); for high quality studies that explicate Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* or situate his essay within his corpus generally, see Bowie (1993), Freydberg (2008), and Alderwick (2021); for discussions of Schelling's conception of freedom and finitude, see Alderwick (2015) and Fulvi (2021).
8. Manoussakis sketches this argument about how to read Schelling only very briefly, using it as background for his main project of doing a close reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.
9. For example, see Aquinas (1963, 47–71 and 79–87). Also see Franke (2007, 249–274).
10. That evil comes from an overflow of being can be attributed to Plotinus, who, in response to Plato's discussion of the One in *Parmenides,* argues that being must be limited to be definite, that the One transcends the limitations of being, and yet is the source of all determination. Schelling mentions Plotinus (Schelling 2006, 25). Also see Plotinus (1991, V.v.6). Also see Franke (2007, 49–61).
11. It is not clear from the text whether Schelling is suggesting that there are eternal evil forms – which would run contrary to the Platonic tradition, where the forms are always good – or whether he means that the forms themselves are good but that the understanding has the capacity to reshape the forms as evil.
12. Mackie also discusses a similar paradox about God's omnipotence (Mackie 1955, 210–212). Because he seems determined to overcome the paradox, rather than view it as a constitutive and productive contradiction, Mackie misses some of the depth and complexity of the paradox as Schelling presents it. The political example Mackie turns to about sovereign power also obscures his analysis.
13. For a persuasive argument against viewing Hegel as a thinker of negative theology, see Franke (2014, 23–79). For a discussion that explores the complexity of this debate, see Brown (2017) and Hass (2017).
14. Contradictions are usually assumed to be bad and something to avoid, but German idealists such as Hegel and Schelling sometimes talk about productive contradictions, which act as a motor for dialectical reasoning and dialectical ontology. For discussions of this in Hegel, see for example Pippin (1978); Priest (2002, 102–110); Hahn (2007); De Boer (2010); and Brown (2020, 73–103).
15. Schelling emphasizes but also complicates this point when he writes: 'God has in 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 in so far as the ground, even as such, could not exist if God did not exist *actu*' (Schelling 2006, 28).
16. 'The same unity that is inseverable in God must therefore be severable in man – and this is the possibility of good and evil' (Schelling 2006, 33).
17. 'The human will is the seed – hidden in eternal yearning – of the God who is present still in the ground only' (Schelling 2006, 32).
18. '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*' (Schelling 2006, 33).

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19. 'Indeed, this dark principle is active in animals as well as in all other natural being, yet it is still not born into the light in them as it is in man' (Schelling 2006, 40).
20. 'Selfhood *as* such is spirit; or man is spirit as a selfish, particular being (separated from God)' (Schelling 2006, 33).
21. 'Whoever finally would 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).
22. 'Self-will can strive to be as a particular will that which it only is through identity with the universal will' (Schelling 2006, 33).
23. 'I see right away that it could never be valid as a universal law of nature and still agree with itself, but rather it would necessarily contradict itself' (Kant 2002, 39).
24. As quoted in Love and Schmidt (2006, xvii).
25. I realize that this is a live debate: some will feel that a theodicy is merely a stronger version of a defence, that it sets a higher bar, but that it is only successful if it is also successful as a defence. I offer an alternative reading, however, by arguing that, while a defence attempts to solve the problem by preserving the classic definitions of God, a theodicy is categorically different in that it works around the problem by rationalizing evil and showing its necessity.

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Cite this article: Brown N (2025). Schelling and the problem of evil. *Religious Studies* **61**, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000896

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