doi:10.1017/hgl.2024.19 *Hegel Bulletin*, 45/3, 598–614
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Comments on Dews's Modernist Reading of Schelling and his Basic Operation

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In his ambitious *Schelling's Late Philosophy in Confrontation with Hegel*, Peter Dews sets out to reconstruct the fundamental difference between Schelling and Hegel on the basis of two related claims. The first, *historical* claim is that both are dealing with 'our current historical situation', which Dews identifies with 'modernity' (Dews 2023: 10). The second, *systematic* claim is that their mature systematic thinking is characterized by what he calls throughout the book, with reference to a canonical paper by Dieter Henrich (Henrich 1976), their respective *Grundoperationen* ('basic operations'). He then walks the reader through major positions that Schelling developed over the course of his philosophical career in order to demonstrate how Schelling arrives at a specific genealogical account of modernity. On this account, modernity is understood as a formation of consciousness, which is supposedly not subject to the Hegelian type of dialectic which, according to Dews, is driven by

> a rationalism so comprehensive that the very notion of unwarranted constraints on the agency of human beings or of the oppressive shaping of their consciousness has no place. (Dews 2023: 16)

Dews has written a lucid introduction to Schelling, which will be particularly useful for readers acquainted with the contemporary landscape of post-normative, metaphysical readings of German Idealism. While I agree with many of his expositions of key Schellingian concepts and basic operations, in what follows I will focus on my disagreement with both of his major claims.[1]

I will first argue that the historical claim is wrong with respect to Schelling (and Hegel too, though my focus will be on Schelling). One of Schelling's major points in his positive philosophy (which is spelled out as a *Philosophy of Mythology* on the one hand, and as a *Philosophy of Revelation* on the other hand) is precisely that human consciousness is not involved in 'a transition—doubtless never fully achievable—away from deference to inherited authority and the power of tradition' (Dews 2023: 10). Rather, his late positive philosophy argues that this is a dangerous illusion (one he often associates with Fichte), a mythology that attempts to ground subjectivity in itself. According to Schelling, the idea of autonomy fails in light of

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the kinds of fundamental philosophical (metaphysical, ontological, epistemological) considerations that pave the way for his late 'historical philosophy' (*SdW*: 10–14).[2] While Schelling, like Hegel, is certainly in the business of trying to present his '*own time comprehended in thoughts*' (*EPR*: 21), his answer to what it means to be human in a given historical moment is not at all that humans 'must' (or even can) 'develop the immanent logic' of their 'practices to achieve normative orientation and the legitimation of their forms of life' (Dews 2023: 11). Infamously, for both Hegel and (though this is less well known) Schelling, the institutional infrastructure of the state is quite the opposite of a realm of autonomous self-constitution and emancipation from authority.[3] If anything, both Schelling and Hegel are able to teach us a lesson about the shortcomings of the very (Habermasian) idea that 'our current historical situation' is one of emancipation from religious and other authorities.[4]

In the second part of my reflections on Dews's book, I will focus on his reading of Schelling's basic operation. My disagreement with his systematic claim hinges on details concerning the operations of decompressing unprethinkable being and the relationship between Schelling's theory of the potencies and their historical manifestation in mythological and religious consciousness. I will skip over a deeper engagement with the issues concerning the question of whether there even is such a thing as a Hegelian *Grundoperation* of self-negating negation, though this issue is crucial to the debate between Schelling and Hegel in so far as it ultimately concerns the relationship between Hegel's logic and his *Realphilosophie*.

I. The historical claim

In Gabriel 2006, I argued extensively that Schelling's late philosophy of mythology (and of revelation) ought to be read as a large-scale genealogical demonstration of a transition in human consciousness. Unlike later genealogists, Schelling is fully aware of the fact that the very idea of a genealogy is fundamentally mythological. For him, it harks back to Hesiod and Homer, who presented the human condition as resulting from an engagement with a series of different generations of gods. Mythological consciousness is first and foremost 'God-positing' (*UPO*: 83), as Schelling puts it. This does not mean—in some Feuerbachian fashion—that human consciousness produces imaginary deities and narratives of their coming into being through episodes of social production. Rather, it means that human consciousness fundamentally transcends everything that can be given to it on the level of its perceptual grounding in a more or less immediately accessible sensory scene, and it transcends this givenness in order to experience its life as a manifestation of meanings which it cannot even in principle control.

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Let us call these meanings 'transcendent meanings'. These transcendent meanings specifically differ from the modern idea (present in thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre) that existential meaning is ultimately always an individual affair of making sense of the otherwise meaningless givens of one's life (ranging from one's brute embodiment to one's manifold social identities forged by contingent affiliations, traditions and histories not of one's own making). Rather, such Promethean self-positioning is itself one mythological constellation among others, as no lesser contemporary of Schelling than Goethe had emphasized in his critique of the modern ideal of radical autonomy (as found, for example, in his poem *Prometheus* and *Faust, Part Two,* which, among other things, contain allegorical stagings of Fichte and Schelling).[5]

In particular, Schelling's *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* argues that transcendent meanings in this sense cannot be reduced to illusion-ridden strategies of human consciousness to cope with its immanent natural and social reality. Allegorical readings of mythological expressions think of these expressions as attempts to say something more literal under conditions in which adequate vocabularies have yet to be evolved. For instance, one could think of the various episodes in Homer in which divine forces interact with human decision-making as so many attempts at developing a psychological vocabulary that could account for the non-conscious forces of human motivation, or of the opening verses of Hesiod's *Theogony* in terms of a primitive form of physics that, in the absence of a more scientific understanding, imbues cosmology with personal forces.[6] Similarly, any reading of Greek tragedy, say, in terms of an ideologically clouded engagement with the socio-economic modes of production would count as allegorical in so far as it would have to think of the various divine powers and characters presented as placeholders for secular-scientific explanations that must, in principle, be available.[7]

Against any type of allegorical reading, Schelling introduces his notion of 'tautegory'.[8] To think of mythological expressions in terms of tautegory is to take the lived experience of mythological consciousness literally. This means that one should not assume from the outset that reality is more or less as a modern scientific worldview would picture it, i.e., as a gigantic array of material-energetic structures, ideally fully explicable and predictable in terms of differential equations (within certain boundaries set by quantum mechanics and so on), such that the very issue of human mindedness can ultimately be explained in terms of levels of emergence from meaningless states of affairs. Rather, such a conception of overall reality and our position within it (as evolutionary latecomers on a random planet in a random galaxy) would, by Schelling's lights, itself have to count as a form of mythological consciousness. It too expresses a transcendent meaning, albeit one which betrays the desire to eliminate any transcendent meaning that precedes our individual lives and their collective social organization.

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The *Historical-Critical Introduction* serves the function of justifying the historical, genealogical approach to mythological consciousness. According to my interpretation, it is designed to show that humans are God-positing in the sense that they inevitably rely on some transcendent meaning or other in order to develop specific conceptual, existential, and social resources for their self-constitution. Self-constitution is thus dependent on prior conceptions of how things are and of how we fit into a larger framework of entities and processes.

Now, the next step in the articulation of Schelling's original version of a genealogical method is to recognize that the dependence of self-constitution on the concept of something prior to a self is evidence of a factual dependence of subjectivity on a pre-subjective ground. Throughout his entire career, Schelling articulates this point in different forms and labels the non-self relatum of the relation using different vocabularies. Schelling's final articulation of this point connects late Schelling with his early engagement with Hölderlin, since he invokes 'unprethinkable being' (*unvordenkliches Seyn*).[9] Notoriously, as early as 1795, Hölderlin had pointed out that Fichtean self-positing is a case of being rather than being's overall ground. Reality is not as such or in general grounded in human self-constitution (Hölderlin 1986). To be sure, Fichte originally only argued that subjectivity, and thus egological vocabulary, is epistemologically fundamental, in so far as we need to be able to provide an account of how *we* can know anything whatsoever in any context in which we can make sense of successful cases of knowledge. Knowledge, in short, involves subjectivity, meaning that no ontology of knowledge can eliminate subjectivity (the knower) from its account of how we can know anything about an otherwise largely mind-independent reality.[10] Yet, what Fichte underestimates, according to Hölderlin and early Schelling, is the additional fact that we also need to account for how reality enables the emergence of knowers. In this direction of explanation, subjectivity encounters its dependence on something it cannot have posited. That which both is the ground of subjectivity and, therefore, something that the subject cannot have posited, is not yet something of the same kind as the subject. The pre-subjective conditions for the emergence of subjectivity is what early Schelling calls 'the unconditional in human knowledge' (*SW* I/1: 170). Elsewhere, I have referred to the idea that subjectivity is grounded in something it both cannot have posited and has to posit in order to get a grip on its pre-subjective conditions of emergence, as 'ontonomy' (Gabriel 2006: 6). In this context, I have also argued that Hegel and Schelling share the recognition of this fact and attempt to accommodate it within a transcendental framework. In so doing, they generate a novel, post-Kantian mode of theorizing I have called 'transcendental ontology' (Gabriel 2011a).[11]

According to my reading of Schelling's later version of his distinction between *negative* and *positive* philosophy (which predates his late work), the starting point of positive philosophy consists in restricting the type of explanation constitutive of

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the project of transcendental ontology to theoretical reason. In contrast to this framework, positive philosophy is 'historical' in a sense explicable with reference to Heidegger's notion of the event as a series of contingent shifts in our understanding of being from the standpoint of finite agents.[12]

To a certain extent, Dews agrees with the outlines of such a reading when he writes:

> the transition from negative to positive philosophy can be regarded, schematically, as the move from a transcendental ontology, which generates a system of basic forms or natural kinds, to a hermeneutics of the event and its consequences. (Dews 2023: 196)

At the same time, he goes on to wonder how Schelling is capable of avoiding a Hegelian-style pan-rationalism, according to which the concept covers absolutely everything, given that, according to Dews's reconstruction of the basic operation, 'it is the *a priori* dialectic of the potentialities which determines how things will unfold in the natural world' (Dews 2023: 196). His own reply to this objection is that the potentialities play a 'different role' in negative and positive philosophy:

> In the former they function as principles of being, and the results of their interactions, culminating in their stabilization in the Idea, can be worked out in advance, in a process which Schelling describes as the experimental activity of pure thinking […]. In the latter, they have become ontological tendencies or drives which stand in an ongoing relation of tension and conflict. Put in another way, the difference is one between the patterns made by the interacting *concepts* of potentialities, and the results of the interaction of those potentialities themselves, in the course of their actualization. (Dews 2023: 196)

Yet, the construal of the Hegelian objection and the alleged Schellingian reply miss the point of Schelling's form of 'higher empiricism' (*SW* I/10: 198). There just is no '*a priori* dialectic of the potentialities', which is one of the many reasons why Schelling did not write a logic with metaphysical aspirations, but instead offers a theory of predication, which is ontological in a sense absent from Hegelian metaphysics.[13] The sense in which predication is ontological for Schelling (as can be seen from his first writings on Plato's *Timaeus* and in his way of formulating the legacy of Spinozism) draws on the idea of ontonomy: judgement is not truth-apt in virtue of grasping some kind of representational structure (propositions), which is in the business of referring to how things are, such that the representational device is a truth-bearer whose truth-value is a function of its correspondence to reality (however construed in detail). For this reason, for Schelling, the idea of a

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formal or transcendental logic, which covers the forms of thinking (the a priori) that subsequently get related to the real or nature in a second movement (the a posteriori or a *Realphilosophie* of some kind), does not make sense in the first place.[14] Rather, judgement is itself something that takes place in reality, such that being articulates itself through thinking. This is a different, and arguably correct, reading of the Parmenidean identity thesis, one that does not rely exclusively on DK B3, but recognizes the importance of Parmenides' claim that thought is expressed in being.[15] Judgement is a case of being and not a separate realm of the a priori in which the potencies play a different role than they do in the formations of mythological consciousness. For, these formations of consciousness are already configurations of the potency space, which does not reside in a realm separate from nature and history. Schelling avoids the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the empirical—or, rather, he provides an ontological interpretation of it that allows him to dynamize the noumenal and to think of it as drawn into the temporal, contingent unfolding of the potencies that is precisely not subject to an a priori ordering à la Hegelian logic. Such is the very idea of the *System of the Ages of the World,* which precedes Schelling's late articulation of this thought in terms of a philosophy of mythology and revelation.[16]

Before I turn to discuss the systematic claim concerning Schelling's basic operation, it is important to emphasize that the recognition of the unavoidable ontonomy of subjective self-constitution (the dependence of self on being) for Schelling is already a later stage in the history of mythological consciousness. For him, the Eleatic–Platonic statement of thought's dependence on being for its self-constitution is a way for mythological consciousness to get a hold of itself. For this reason, throughout this tradition, including up to Kant and Hegel, ontotheology is the paradigm for thinking about said dependence. In short, ontonomy is itself grounded in theonomy, in thought's relation to transcendent meaning. For, we cannot reduce the being that manifests itself in thought to something that not only precedes and grounds thought, but makes thought's emergence unintelligible. In this context, Schelling (like Fichte and Hegel) wholeheartedly rejects modern naturalism in the sense of the idea that what precedes thought and grounds it is meaningless nature. For, thought's own being cannot meaningfully be derived from natural configurations that achieve a level of structural sophistication (say in the form of embodied, intricate neural machinery) that then correlates with the emergence of consciousness and so on.[17]

Schelling's notion that consciousness is God-positing corresponds to this idea of an unavoidable theonomy that can only be overcome to the extent to which even the monotheistic God himself is involved in a history, a theogony, which is the object of the *Philosophy of Revelation*. To be sure, the transition from the *Philosophy of Mythology* to the *Philosophy of Revelation* raises additional concerns,

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none of which speak in favour of a modernist reading according to which consciousness is involved in a history of emancipation.

This does not entail that Schelling's historical philosophy is obsolete. On the contrary, it opens up a deeper engagement with the type of metaphysical reading of German Idealism associated with Charles Taylor's classic *Hegel*, which Dews cites approvingly at the outset of his book.[18] Having said that, a serious engagement with Schelling's actual claims in the *Philosophy of Revelation* and with his historico-genealogical methodology would require an extensive discussion of a host of theological and historical details—something far beyond the scope of either this paper or Dews's overall project of elaborating the very idea of a positive philosophy in confrontation with Hegel.

II. The systematic claim

In this section, I want to explore Dews's identification and interpretation of what he sees as Schelling's basic operation (see, in particular, his summary at Dews 2023: 286–88). He identifies a basic operation in Schelling on the basis of a well-known paradox of autonomy familiar from Kant and Kant interpretation. And indeed, it is with respect to this problem that Schelling develops one of his most fundamental philosophical claims concerning the unconditional. For Dews, the overall issue arises from his observation that

> a philosophical system of the German Idealist type cannot insert its conception of freedom at any point subsequent to the founding moment. In Schelling's case, the definition of what it would mean to be truly free must also imply the possibility of unfreedom: namely, an actualization of a potentiality in which potentiality falls under the dominance of freedom. He therefore needs to specify a *Grundoperation* which can allow for both outcomes. (Dews 2023: 286)

From his Hegelian starting point that any *Grundoperation* involves negation, Dews reconstructs Schelling's fundamental philosophical operation as one of 'the potentialization—the *néantisation*—of un-pre-thinkable being' (Dews 2023: 287; for the claim that negation plays a constitutive role within the decompression and, thus, in the context of Schelling's basic operation see also Dews 2023: 185).

I believe that Dews is largely on the right track in his attempt to identify a fundamental problem in Schelling to which he responds with a series of attempts at operationalizing the very problem itself by turning it into a philosophical engine of setting up his system(s). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that

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Schelling thinks of philosophy in terms of a series of systems rather than a single static system so that his own intellectual development is grounded in an insight.[19]

At the same time, however, I think that the main driver of the operation is precisely not negation. So much becomes clear as early as Schelling's first presentation of the problem and the novel solution space he sketches in the *Freedom Essay*. Here Schelling explicitly rejects the Hegelian principle that *determinatio est negatio*, and he does so at a point of his investigation where he explicitly grapples with the paradox of autonomy; namely that it seems to be the case that the will as practical reason is free only in doing the good and unfree in doing evil (due to the interference of egotistic, sensory motives deriving from the empirical position of the subject in the finite world).

> There is, however, no transition from the absolutely undetermined to the determined. That […] the intelligible being should determine itself out of pure, utter indeterminacy without any reason leads back to the system of the equilibrium […] of free will discussed above. In order to be able to determine itself, it would already have to be determined in itself, admittedly not from outside, which contradicts its nature, also not from inside through some sort of merely contingent or empirical necessity since all this (the psychological as well as the physical) is subordinate to it; but rather it would have to be its determination itself as its essence, that is, as its own nature. This is of course not an undetermined generality, but rather determines the intelligible being of this individual; the saying *determinatio est negatio* […] holds in no way for such determinateness since the latter is itself one with the position and the concept of its being, therefore it rally is the essence in its being. (*SW* I/7: 384–85/FS: 49f.)

This is one of the passages in which Schelling begins to introduce the type of solution to his fundamental question that also characterizes his late philosophy. At this stage of the argument, let me emphasize that I do not believe that his fundamental problem is that of the paradox of autonomy. Rather, he grapples with the issue of how to transition from the unconditional to the conditional, from the infinite to the finite. On my reading, he is therefore in the business of answering the question of how there can be anything (finite) rather than nothing, that is, any particular, finite thing. In other words, he deals with the issue of acosmism (on this, see Dews 2023: 77–78). To be sure, the idea of invoking freedom as part of the solution to this problem runs throughout Schelling's work, in which it becomes ever more prominent. Yet the issues surrounding the paradox of autonomy and, therefore, of free will as self-determination are interwoven with the deeper ontological issue concerning the transition from the unconditional to the conditional.

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In this context, as I have argued extensively, the model for Schelling's late solution to the problem of the finite has its first clear development in the *Freedom Essay*. In this text, he presents a historical philosophy that is irreducible to any kind of transcendental 'mechanism' or more flexible 'teleology' that somehow necessarily leads through various stages of the production of the infinite's self-consciousness (a model Schelling famously and influentially pursued in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*).[20] According to this model, the starting point of the dynamics of self-constitution (on both grander cosmological and human scales of reality) antecedes any kind of specific determination. It is precisely not determined in opposition to something else and, therefore, not characterized in any negative terms. In the *Freedom Essay*, he refers to this as the 'non-ground' (*Ungrund*) which will later become 'unprethinkable being' (*unvordenkliches Sein*) (Gabriel 2014). For Schelling, this position is necessary, i.e., there is no way of sidestepping being, of somehow leaving reality. Being is and remains a closed (Eleatic–Platonic) sphere, as it were.

Having said that, this is exactly where the basic operation (if any) of decompression, which will be the ground of freedom, kicks in. The idea is this: If there is (a) an underlying ontological necessity, namely, that there is being, and (b) no specific, finite determination defines being (for instance, as being a spatio-temporal material-energetic system that unfolds as a natural universe), then such a brute necessity is not capable of ruling out anything more specific. The non-ground cannot rule anything out, since it does not contain any further determination. This, then, gives room for what Schelling calls an 'ur-contingency' (*Ur-Zufall*) (*SW* I/10: 101) to which we bear testimony in so far as we know that there are finite entities and thus determinations whose specific ontological infrastructure could not have been anticipated from the position of brute necessity. Hence, the empirical fact that there is anything more specific than the brute necessity of the non-ground or unprethinkable being cannot be derived from being alone. There is no logical transition from the brute necessity, or rather, facticity of Eleatic being to a determinate realm of entities; the principle of sufficient reason does not apply here.

Now, once there happens to be something rather than nothing, there is a relationship between the finite and the infinite, a relationship that cannot in turn be governed by the same modal architecture of brute necessity as unprethinkable being. A space of contingency contingently comes into existence.

After the fact or *post festum*, we can retroactively diagnose the contingent coming into being of entities like us which is the modal infrastructure of the type of historico-genealogical explanation we find in Schelling's positive philosophy. In *Transcendental Ontology*, I have called this 'belated necessity' (Gabriel 2011a: 81–101).

This issue bears importantly on Dews's figure 1 (Dews 2023: 182), a diagram with which he attempts to summarize the late Schelling's modal metaphysics. In

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this diagram, he identifies unprethinkable being with 'contingently necessary existing-ness', as he puts it. My disagreement with this identification is that it does not take into account that unprethinkable being is always only partially transformed into something that contingently necessarily exists. Or rather, unprethinkable being does not itself have this modal status, which only applies to the dynamics set in motion by the contingencies.[21] The process that leads to Schellingian 'absolute spirit' (*absoluter Geist*),[22] which is an entirely different concept from that found in Hegel, is one of transcendence from within unprethinkable being that has not yet reached an end. Hence there is still a gap between unprethinkable being and the dynamic structures of the potencies. Otherwise put, unprethinkable being is precisely not one of the potencies. It is rather that which, through the historical dynamics of the potencies, might in the future be transformed into an absolute spirit that has transcended being.

Schelling thereby dynamizes the Platonic–Neoplatonic model on which the One is always already 'beyond being' (Plato 2008: 509b9). His innovation is to think of the One as moving from pure necessity to transcendent freedom without yet having achieved its status of transcendence. Transcendence is transformed from a metaphysical structural fact that can be accounted for from within negative philosophy as 'purely rational' (*reinrationale*) philosophy, into a future goal of historical activity, which cannot be reached by human activity alone. For this reason, Schelling indeed engages in some kind of 'abduction' (as Dews puts it, Dews 2023: 178, 279) definitive of the historical method of positive philosophy.

Having said that, it is important to emphasize that the transition from negative to positive philosophy takes place from within a practical point of view, an important dimension of Schelling's positive philosophy which is unfortunately absent from Dews's discussion. In the crucial presentation of the transition from negative to positive philosophy in lectures 22–24 of his *Philosophical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology of Presentation of Purely Rational Philosophy*, Schelling explicitly announces: 'The domain which we here therefore enter is that of practical philosophy' (*SW* II/1: 534). It begins with the declaration that the finite ego is striving for something beyond being—an idea encapsulated in the phrase: 'person is searching for person' (*Person sucht Person*) (*SW* II/1: 566).[23] Once this practical standpoint of human agency is reached, negative philosophy turns out to be an existential self-positioning of finite human agents rather than a scientific endeavour of providing a full metaphysical explanation of the world in terms of synthetic insights a priori into some modal apparatus. The potencies, too, thereby change their nature from transcendental framework conditions of human mindedness to agents that manifest themselves to mythological consciousness as so many divinities.

In this context, I think that Dews's association of the dynamic modal vocabulary in late Schelling with the Aristotelian causes is misguided, since it presents a

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picture of positive philosophy from the standpoint of negative philosophy. As such, it misses out on the highly original (and admittedly speculative) idea that we should think of the way in which reality appears to transcendental, philosophical thinking in terms of anthropological, historically situated conditions.

Positive philosophy, as I see it, is much closer to an existentialist-anthropological approach. Not only does it anticipate some important insights later articulated by Kierkegaard (who famously attended Schelling's late lecture course in Berlin), which later reverberate in Sartre;[24] it also directly and indirectly influences the development of the projects of historically situated philosophies of mythology developed closer to our own time by thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg (an influence which goes through Jacob Burkhardt, who also attended Schelling's Berlin inaugural lecture, via Nietzsche, to other genealogical approaches explored in the 20th and 21st centuries). The decompression of unprethinkable being into the modalities is not a process driven by an immanent teleology, but rather a series of contingent events which, in retrospect, stand revealed as manifestations of freedom. And that means that they not only could have been otherwise, but also involve transgressions and deviations, with the result that that there is no single line of historical teleology. Any teleological picture that thinks of history in terms of a single timeline would disprove the presence of real freedom in human history, which cannot run in a straight line. If it did, we could not detect the presence of 'the real and vital concept' of freedom as 'the capacity for good and evil' (*FS*: 23).

To be sure, there is a tension in Schelling's late thought. On the one hand, his *Philosophy of Mythology* is open to the deep contingency on which historical freedom is grounded. On the other hand, he believes that there is a pattern in the history of mythological consciousness, which moves from polytheism to monotheism and leads to a future unification of human minds under the banner of a prophetically announced new religion (rather than a new mythology of the well-known Romantic type).[25] He calls it the Johannine church which he (with yet another reference to the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*) also identifies as 'the true church' (*die wahre Kirche*) (*UPO*: 687): 'For the philosopher, the true church is the One, which through all its moments is determined to become the visible church' (*UPO*: 687).[26] The details of Schelling's prophetic visions of such a futuristic church are, to my mind, indigestible, involving, among other things, nationalistic phantasies heavily embroiled in political romanticism.[27] This does not entail that Schelling's basic operation (if there is a single unified operation) or his claim that mythological consciousness is theonomous fail in comparison to Hegel's (alleged) full-blown rationalism. Schelling's political and theological commitments are idiosyncrasies, which do not follow in any systematically interesting way from his idea that there is no rational transition from the indeterminateness of being to a decompressed modal architecture retroactively grounded in human freedom.

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I am pointing out these often-recognized shortcomings in the development of Schelling's late philosophy in order to show the limitations of Dews' critical theory-inspired reading of Schelling. Schelling's late philosophy is not part of an account of the history of liberation that could even possibly have a 'place for social movements' (Dews 2023: 259), let alone a Honnethian account of 'social change' (Dews 2023: 260). In this respect, Schelling and the mature Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* are on the same (reactionary) side, as Dews himself recognizes in his discussion of the question of religious pluralism in Schelling and Hegel (Dews 2023: 276–80). Both are indeed wholeheartedly committed to 'the superiority of Christianity over other world religions' (Dews 2023: 278). At the same time, Dews overhastily jumps to the conclusion of characterizing this commitment as 'unconscionably Eurocentric' (Dews 2023: 278), thereby ignoring, among other things, that Schelling (more than Hegel) identifies relevant moments of the breakthrough 'from cyclical, mythical temporality into a genuinely historical and future-oriented world' (Dews 2023: 278) in the pre- and non-European (whatever 'European' actually might mean) world. One of the reasons for Schelling's awareness of the fact that future-oriented religion antedates Christianity is due to his father's influence on his earliest development, which led him to study Hebrew and thereby enabled him to see the future-orientation of the monotheistic God in the books of the Old Testament and to recognize Egyptian, Indian and other precursors to what would much later become a recognizably 'European' constellation. A full account of the details of Schelling's positive philosophy would require extensive engagement with Schelling's impressive overview of the world religions and their scriptures, as well as with his way of reading the manifestations of the decompression of unprethinkable being in the archives of mythological consciousness. While he certainly reads this history as a form of liberation, it is important to point out that the type of freedom he envisages is ontological or metaphysical, not immanent and political at all—a point already fully recognized by no lesser an interpreter of Schelling than Habermas.[28]

My critical remarks on some of the major framing claims of Dews's book should not overshadow the fact that his book contains many lucid reconstructions of some of Schelling's most difficult texts. His book is a major contribution to Anglophone Schelling scholarship and for this reason deserves critical scrutiny. In my comments, I have not focused on my many points of agreement with his interpretations, because my goal has been to point out the limitations of any overhasty update of those Schellingian commitments that have rightly been resisted in the renaissance of German Idealism and German Idealist themes in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. My other goal has been to show that the issue of Schelling's basic operation cannot be reduced to an integration of a Kantian paradox of autonomy into the history of mythological consciousness, let alone into modal metaphysics. While this is one feature of the basic operation, the operation

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goes significantly beyond it in so far as Schelling, throughout his career, attempts to solve the metaphysical *ur*-riddle of how there is anything (finite) and not just an infinite, indeterminate, undifferentiated Being-One. His solution is highly original and therefore deserves careful reconstructions, such as those to be found throughout Dews's book.

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Notes

[1] Dews's approach has some deep similarities with my own publications on Schelling. In particular, his focus on the (Sartrean) metaphor of 'decompression' (Dews 2023: 16, 179–85) as a way of reading late Schelling and his use of the term 'transcendental ontology' (Dews 2023: 196) are familiar from my own work, in particular, Gabriel 2006 (on decompression, see: 173, 299, 436, 461) and *Transcendental Ontology* (Gabriel 2011a). In light of these obvious commonalities, his lack of explicit engagement with these and related works is surprising.

[2] Abbreviations used:

Hegel

Briefe = *Briefe von und an Hegel. Band I: 1785–1812*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952).
EPR = *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Schelling

FS = 'Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschliche Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände', in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, I/7 (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta: 1856–61)/*Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. J. Love and J. Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).
UPO = *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, ed. E. W. Erhardt (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992).
SdW = *System der Weltalter*, ed. S. Peetz (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1998).
SW = *Sämtliche Werke*.

[3] On Schelling's late philosophy of the state, see Gabriel 2006, §14. See also Schraven 1989.

[4] As Habermas himself recognized in his work on Schelling since his Bonn dissertation; see Habermas 1954. See also Habermas 2004.

[5] The *dramatis personae* Bacallaureus (who represents a Fichtean subjectivity) and Proteus (a Schellingian evolutionary process ontologist, as it were) as well as certain other symbolic

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constellations and intertextual references are just some of the literary documents of Goethe's engagement with Fichte and Schelling. On certain of the philosophical dimensions of Goethe's influence on Schelling, see Nassar 2010. On Goethe's critical relationship to Schelling, see Hofmann 2000.

[6] For details and references, see Gabriel 2006: §11.

[7] Prominent 20th-century versions of allegorical readings are familiar from Marxist, psychoanalytical, structuralist and poststructuralist reductionism in literary theory, which try to identify the hidden meanings in a given literary work of art that structure and determine the details of the work behind both the author's and the recipients' backs, as it were.

[8] For details and references, see again Gabriel 2006: §11. The term was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge under the influence of Schelling in his 'On the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus'. See Whistler 2015.

[9] For a discussion and references across Schelling's late philosophy, see Gabriel 2011a: 61–80.

[10] For the details of such an epistemological reading, see Gabriel forthcoming.

[11] Incidentally, as I was turning my Heidelberg dissertation on the *Philosophy of Mythology* into a book, I was a post-doc at NYU (2005–6), where I frequently met with Thomas Nagel to discuss just these issues whilst he was working on *Mind and Cosmos*. This explains the otherwise perhaps surprising appearance of the 'objective idealism of Schelling and Hegel' in that book which, on one level, picks up on the Schellingian variation of a *Naturphilosophie* according to which the cosmos achieves an unprecedented form of self-consciousness in our consciousness of it (see Nagel 2012: 17).

[12] On a contrast between transcendental ontology as negative philosophy, however carried out, and the starting point of positive philosophy as a precursor to Heidegger's concept of the hermeneutic event, see Gabriel 2011b.

[13] On this, see Wolfram Hogrebe's *Prädikation und Genesis* (1989), whose work Dews refers to, and Manfred Frank's *Reduplikative Identität* (2018), which is one of the remarkable absences in Dews's bibliography. For details on how the theory of the potencies hangs together with Schelling's ontology of predication, see Gabriel 2006: §§ 6–8. See also Thomas Buchheim, *Eins von Allem* (1992).

[14] Arguably, Hegel would agree to a certain extent, though Schelling reads Hegel as committed to a kind of dualism of a priori logical form and real-world application (Realphilosophie). For alternative readings of the relationship between the logical and the 'empirical' in Hegel, see Rometsch 2007 and Gabriel 2016.

[15] DK B3: '… for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be [τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι].' For Schelling's appropriation of the Eleatic One in his later philosophy as a paradigm for negative philosophy, see Gabriel 2006: §12. For details on Parmenides' influence on Plato, later Plotinus, and the Neo-Platonists (who are important sources for Schelling), see Gabriel 2009.

[16] See his *System der Weltalter*.

[17] See Sebastian Gardner's sophisticated account of why Schelling's philosophy of mind cannot be straightforwardly read as addressing the contemporary problem of consciousness in Gardner 2006. Ultimately, the contemporary formulation of the very problem only makes sense against the backdrop of an implicitly or explicitly accepted form of naturalism, where "naturalism" is the

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idea that the being which grounds and precedes thought can be identified with nature in the sense of the target system of modern physics (or the modern natural sciences more broadly construed).

[18] 'In one sense, I regard this enterprise as returning to the path opened up by Charles Taylor's *Hegel*, which was cut off prematurely by the rise of soft-naturalist, "post-metaphysical versions" of Hegelianism.' (Dews 2023: 11). One way of articulating my critique of Dews's historical claim is to say that you cannot have your Habermasian post-metaphysical cake (see Dews 2023: 10) and serve it as a metaphysical dish, even though Habermas himself has recently tried to do so. See his *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Habermas 2019–22).

[19] On this see Gabriel 2011a: 2–34.

[20] For my reconstruction of the various phases of Schelling's development in terms of a plurality of replies to the same basic question, see Gabriel 2015 and Gabriel 2021.

[21] I owe this formulation to Alexander Englander who suggested this clarification.

[22] On Schelling's notion of 'absolute spirit' (*SW* II/3: 291) as 'absolute personality' (*UPO*: 192), see Gabriel 2006: §13.

[23] On this, see the papers in Buchheim/Hermanni 2004 and Gabriel 2006: §15.

[24] On this, see also Gardner 2006.

[25] See Beiser 2012 and, on the overall context of the creation of new mythologies, the comprehensive Frank 1982.

[26] I read the expression 'visible church' here as an implicit reference to the idea of an 'invisible church'. On this, see Hegel's letter to Schelling from January 1795 (*Briefe*: 15–18).

[27] See, for instance, his discussion of the spiritual difference between the Germanic and the Romanic peoples and why the Germans are superior in spirit to other peoples in the 82nd lecture of the *UPO* (691–700). I am not mentioning this to somehow disqualify Schelling's late philosophical thought in general due to its historical and sociopolitical position. Yet, it is important to point out that Schelling (in this respect like Hegel) should not be seen as a modernist, let alone as a precursor to the emancipatory projects of 20th-century critical theory. In his later years he was a staunch monarchist and argued against any type of emerging socialist progressive politics. His rationalization of his political value system is grounded in his Christian triumphalism and his theology, as he believes (throughout most of his work) that the very existence of a state is a punishment for the original sin of self-consciousness and, thus, a system of sanctions directed against the political realization of subjective autonomy. Having said that, it is possible to divorce the arguments for ontonomy and even for theonomy from Schelling's own interpretation of the history of Christianity in particular which is, to say the least, far more biased than his more nuanced history of mythological consciousness. In sum, I think that the prospect of making sense of his philosophy of mythology in contemporary philosophical terms are much better than any attempt at rationally reconstructing his Christian commitments. At the same time, his late philosophy contributed to the development of Marxism and other forms of emancipatory thought, which betrays a tension in his thinking nicely brought out in Karl Jaspers's classic Jaspers 1955. On Jaspers's Schelling, see also Habermas 1971 (first published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in 1955). See also Frank 1992.

[28] See again Habermas 1954.

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