

JOSEPH CAREW

SCHELLING

Short Course Description: The work of Schelling has often been overlooked in the history of philosophy. As the standard critique goes, he was a “Protean” thinker who, never satisfied with any one system that he proposed, kept changing his mind. He thus produced an innumerable series of systems with no connection between them, including a dynamic Spinozism, a theosophical account of creation, and, at the end of his life, a restorative defence of the truth of Christianity commissioned by the King of Prussia to eradicate “the dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism and the vapid spouting of knowledge” that putatively was ravaging his country—the King being desperate to secure his divine rule in the aftermath of the Napoleonic restructuring of Germany. Indeed, when considered at all, Schelling’s early writings on *Naturphilosophie* are seen as an important objective corrective to Kant and Fichte’s subjective idealism, after which, it is said, he regrettably fell into “mysticism” and ultimately a now “outdated,” “pre-modern” mode of Christian theology. This course will challenge this mainstream view and show the inner logic of Schelling’s thought.

Thematic Course Description: What we will see is that the evolution of Schelling’s “systems” is best understood as an attempt to come to terms with *the reality of finitude and human evil*, which caused him to continually but rationally revise his conception of God. At first, following the insight that Kant and Fichte’s subjective account of human freedom must be able to show how our freedom is compatible with a naturalist conception of the objective world, he offered an explanation of nature as the ultimate horizon of human existence. But contra the then-prevailing mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment, he argues, drawing on Romantic science, that nature is a God-like, living process that unconsciously develops from mere matter towards life and us, just as an organism unconsciously develops itself from an undifferentiated cell into a complex, higher life-form.

However, Schelling comes to argue that such a pantheist conception of God is rationally unsatisfying. It makes everything into a necessary by-product of natural laws *over which we have no control*, thereby making us and evil into illusory appearances. But this is something that our everyday experience rejects. On the one hand, we have a feeling that our consciousness is a contingent, but irreducible achievement, an overcoming and ordering of irrational, unconscious drives that could, at any moment, upset the order of our conscious life. On the other hand, the experience of evil is something so violent that it puts into question the meaning of existence. If God is to be conceived as a living process, as the *Naturphilosophie* tried to do, Schelling now asserts that to be *truly* alive (1) God and the universe must be an open-ended process of *becoming* and (2) evil must *threaten* both the life of God and that of the universe. Otherwise, finitude has no positive ontological value à la Spinoza and evil is nothing but the “dark hues” that contribute to the rational beauty of the universe à la Leibniz, natural egoism à la Kant, moral stupidity à la Fichte, or a dialectical moment of history that serves a purpose: more progress in human rights à la Hegel.

These experiences are what pushes Schelling’s mature thought. To ground them, he envisages a new and radical personalist conception of God. According to him, we must imagine God before creation as in an initial state of “indifference,” like when we were born, but after which, through a slow and painful odyssey, He *becomes* conscious of himself by disciplining the unconscious drives that *precede* His personality, “the dark ground of His existence,” just as we do in our lives. Once this is accomplished, however, God stands alone

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in eternity, but has a *desire* or *need* for recognition from like-minded creatures. He therefore freely decides to let these drives go, out of love, so that they may give birth, through a similarly slow and painful cosmic process, to the universe and ultimately us, through which a community of conscious selves who celebrate one another *should* come to be.

The consequence of Schelling's "theogony" is that creation emerges *out of God* and is crucial for *His becoming self-conscious*. This, for Schelling, is the ultimate purpose of creation. But because we are free either to choose good or evil, as God was to create or not, we are free to help realize this purpose—or to self-assert our own being for its own sake, turning our back from God. His audacious thesis is that it is only by participating in the life of a personal God with desires or needs *that can be thwarted by us* that human life has any higher worth. For if this cannot be proven, then we are, as he puts it at the end of his career, mere specs of dust in a merely physical universe that cares not for us or anything, making what we do fleeting and meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Schelling's thought from the *Freedom Essay* (1809) to the *Philosophy of Revelation* (1841/42) is thus, to sum up the course, an ever-evolving attempt to develop a *philosophy of religion that can prevent nihilism*—and this is why he has been overlooked.

In the concluding two weeks of the seminar, we will explore the legacy of Schelling's mature philosophy in continental thought to show how he, while ignored during most of the 19th and 20th century, is still of relevance. In particular, we will look at how Heidegger claims that Schelling enacts the end of classical metaphysics, thus setting up continental thought as we know it, and how Žižek uses him to develop a new dialectical materialism.

Class Schedule

Week 1-2: The Pantheism of *Naturphilosophie*: Nature as a God-like, Living Organism

- Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) (excerpts)

Week 3: Identity Philosophy: Pantheism Revisited

- Schelling, *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801)

Week 4: The Discovery of the Problem of Finitude and Evil

- Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion* (1804)

Week 5: The Critique of Pantheism

- Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (the so-called *Freedom Essay* or *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809)

Week 6: The "Ground" and "Existence" of God: God's Life and the Becoming of Creation

- Schelling, *Freedom Essay*

Week 7: Evil, the Overturning of Creation, and Theodicy

- Schelling, *Freedom Essay*

Week 8: Expanding on the Slow, Painful Birth of God as a Person (The Past)

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- Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (Second Draft of 1813)

Week 9: Expanding on The Creation of the World (The Present)

- Schelling, *The Ages of the World*

Week 10: The Late Critique of “Negative Philosophy”: The Limits of Philosophical Systems

- Schelling, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1841/42) (excerpts)

Week 11: “Positive Philosophy”: Nihilism and a New Historical Proof of God’s Existence

- Schelling, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (excerpts)

Week 12: Heidegger on Schelling and the End of Classical Metaphysics

- Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (excerpts)

Week 13: Žižek on Schelling’s Theogony as a Myth for the Birth of Subjectivity out of Matter

- Žižek, “F.W.J. Schelling, or, at the Origins of Dialectical Materialism,” *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*
- Carew, *Ontological Catastrophe: Žižek and the Paradoxical Metaphysics of German Idealism* (excerpts)

Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

1. Participation (10%)
2. Presentation (30%)
3. Commentary (10%)
4. Term Paper of 5000 words (50%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with one of the most important thinkers in the history of philosophy, albeit he is often not given credit as such. Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and Identity Philosophy were not only fundamental to the history of German Idealism; his late lectures *The Philosophy of Revelation* also played a pivotal role in the development of existentialism and dialectical materialism (Kierkegaard and Engels attended them) as well as in that of contemporary theology (Tillich wrote his dissertation on them). Indeed, he also exerted a “subterranean” influence on continental philosophy (Merleau-Ponty wrote on Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and Deleuze and Derrida make reference to his late lectures). But beyond mere historical impact, Schelling also made noteworthy contributions to the philosophy of religion, including critiques of modern and German Idealist accounts of evil and developing a new methodology for practicing it. To study Schelling is to gain knowledge of all these things at once.

The presentation and commentary, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts from different periods of Schelling’s thought and respond to one another’s readings, give students the opportunity to be “experts of the day.” As such, these are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized the central ideas of his philosophy for their future studies and give them training in oral presentation and leading discussions. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting

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them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical thinking best learned in practicing it.