
Seminar on Schelling's Philosophy of Religion

Short Course Description

Schelling's work has often been overlooked in the history of philosophy. According to the standard critique, he was a "Protean" thinker who, never satisfied with any single system that he proposed, kept changing his mind. He thus, so the prejudice goes, produced an innumerable series of systems with no connection between them, including a dynamic theory of nature (*Naturphilosophie*), a theosophical account of creation, and, at the end of his life, a restorative defence of Christianity. The latter was, in fact, 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 Schelling's work is considered at all, typically only his early writings on *Naturphilosophie* are deemed to be of historical and philosophical significance, these offering an important objective and realist corrective to Kant and Fichte's subjective idealism, after which, it is said, he regrettably fell into "mysticism" and ultimately an "outdated," "pre-modern" mode of Christian theology. This course will challenge this mainstream view and show the inner logic of Schelling's thought by concentrating on his philosophy of religion.

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 evil*, which caused him to continually revise his conception of God in order to incorporate his new findings into the nature of the latter. 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. 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 and necessarily develops from mere matter towards life and us, just as an organism unconsciously and necessarily develops 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 the necessary by-product of blind natural laws, thereby rendering us, our freedom, and even acts of evil into *illusory appearances*. After all, in this worldview everything is preordained. But this is something that our everyday experience rejects for three reasons. (1) We crave that our lives have meaning, hoping that we are not just drifting along in a natural universe in which finite things are produced and destroyed in an interminable, necessary chain of cause and effect with no greater purpose. (2) We have a feeling that our personhood and moral behaviour is an achievement, an overcoming of biological drives that can, if not held in check, upset the order of how things should be. (3) Evil cannot be explained away but has to be granted positive ontological value if we are to do justice to our conviction that, say, unforgivable evil deeds demand punishment and did not need to happen.

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To do good on these intuitions, Schelling advances three provocative metaphysical claims. (1) Finitude and the natural universe must *play a role in the life* of a personal God distinct from the world and who bestows upon it a divine purpose. (2) To be *truly alive*, as the *Naturphilosophie* attempted to conceive them, God and the natural universe must be an open-ended process through which order arises from the gradual conquering of chaos, as dark forces are made to serve as the “ground” for the light of “existence.” (3) Evil must be construed as those doings through which we freely decide to refuse to let the darkness in us—the drives that are the obscure source of our lives—give birth to light. Instead, we give ourselves over to it and, in so doing, pervert the emergence of order out of chaos, which is how the natural universe ought to unfold as per God’s intention. Otherwise, in Schelling’s mind, finitude has no metaphysical status à la Spinoza and evil is nothing but radical 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.

We shall investigate how these three claims lead Schelling to develop a new, radical, and heterodox personalist conception of God. For Schelling, to comprehend God as a person, we must first imagine God before creation as in an initial state of “indifference,” analogous to an infant before it is born, during which state there is no differentiation between within it between its unconscious and conscious self, even if it has the potential for it, and during which state both unconsciousness and consciousness are at rest. Subsequently, God, through a slow and painful odyssey, becomes conscious of Himself by disciplining the unconscious drives that precede and make possible His personality once they awaken, just as our consciousness only arises from our taming of our unconscious drives after birth. Once accomplished, however, God stands alone in eternity, yet has a need, like all of us do, for recognition from like-minded creatures. He therefore freely decides to give His drives independence, out of love, so that they may bring forth, through a structurally identical process, the natural universe and us. The coming-to-be of a community of conscious selves that can stand in a personal relationship to God is, for Schelling, the ultimate purpose of the natural universe and the finite things it produces.

The consequence of Schelling’s “theogony” is that creation emerges *out of God (creatio ex Deo)* and is crucial for *His becoming self-conscious*. But because we are free to choose good or evil—to opt to devote ourselves to our inner darkness or structure it for a higher goal, the light—we are free to help God out or turn our backs on him, thus causing the natural universe to not realize its inborn purpose and jeopardizing God’s needs. His audacious thesis is that it is only by participating in the life of a personal God with needs *that can be thwarted by us* that human life has any higher worth. 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 natural universe that cares not for us, making what we do fleeting and meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Put differently, Schelling’s thought from the *Freedom Essay* (1809) to the *Philosophy of Revelation* (1841/42) is an ever-evolving attempt to develop a philosophy of religion that can prevent nihilism. Perhaps this is why he has been overlooked, given the rise and then dominance of secularism in philosophy after Schelling’s life.

In the concluding two weeks of the seminar, we will explore the legacy of Schelling 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 and how Žižek uses him to develop a new dialectical materialism.

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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* of 1809)

Week 6: The “Ground” and “Existence” of God: *Creatio ex Deo* and the Becoming of Creation

- Schelling, *Freedom Essay*

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

- Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, continued

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

- 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*, continued

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

- Participation (10%)
- Presentation (30%)

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- Commentary (10%)
- 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 as well as in that of contemporary theology (Kierkegaard and Engels attended them, while 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 a new understanding of the relation of creation to God. Studying Schelling can help one gain access into these movements, figures, and topics, and/or enrich one's understanding of them.

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 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.