

## Unfinished Circlings: Schelling's Hermeneutic History

*Joshua Mousie*

I live my life in widening rings  
 which spread over earth and sky.  
 I may not ever complete the last one,  
 but that is what I will try.

I circle around God, the primordial tower,  
 and I circle ten thousand years long;  
 and I still don't know if I'm a falcon, a storm,  
 or an unfinished song.

Rainer Maria Rilke

In recalling history, in any form, we move in points; or, better put, we move *from* one point to another. There are histories of nations, peoples, philosophies, etc.; in each case, it is not history which remembers and tells itself but humanity, and more specifically, the few who make it their life's work to write the histories of their world and re-inscribe the histories of past times. Yet there is a more fundamental element insofar as the concept of history *is* each individual: each person has his or her own history, and if one wishes to speak of one's self, such a discourse is framed by one's own personal history. In such a way, we speak of ourselves as having been here or there, as having been this or that. From point to point, we trace our own selves through our remembered time, not always working through a linear schematism, but at times noticing similarities and unchanging remnants. In all cases, nonetheless, we differentiate and identify. We speak of such and such a time and place—even if a similarity is acknowledged—as 'then,'

and a present circumstance as ‘now,’ demarcating and recognizing each as its own point.

As such, history can be spoken of as in our hands; although it is true that we belong to history—we are thrown into a world which already has a history—it is just as much the case that history’s being relies on our (re)presentations. *We* write the texts and remember the events that fill both private and public histories, and although it appears that the mighty *Mnemosyne* is literally the wellspring of our life, the *Lethe* is equally so. History is both the forgotten and the remembered at once, and because it is humanity that makes it possible, we can say that it is, in fact, an *act* of individuals. Furthermore, human beings are both free to decide what they tell as history, and bound necessarily to the constraints of their own finitude and the ramifications of temporality. In short, the tension between our freedom and finitude *is* history. History is both open in respect to the freedom of our understanding and closed due to our finite situatedness; it is the epitome of our hermeneutic situation.

In his 1815 version of *The Ages of the World*,<sup>1</sup> Schelling describes the human being and history in a similar manner, and initiates a turn towards the hermeneutic understanding of history that resurfaces in the work of Paul Ricoeur. In what follows, I will focus my attention on how, with Schelling’s new depiction of ‘God’—which is originally founded in his 1809 essay *On Human Freedom*<sup>2</sup>—Schelling is able to discuss the idea of history innovatively because of the manner in which God affects the human being. Because God is made free and ‘living’(becoming) for Schelling, humans are as well, since in this move—which positions God as both Being and Nature (ground and existence)—humans are necessarily within (or ‘under’) God. Rather than depicting humans as unified, however, Schelling speaks of them as separate from God because of their personhood (we could say, ‘personality’). Human beings are able to and must, as finite beings, actively will and negate, whereas God is a constant harmony. This is precisely where humanity is broached, and each and every person is delimited by this situation. Because of the way in which humans are free—as is God—history is seen not as something formulaic and systematic, but as something which is always unfinished. In other words, history is always *open* in some sense because

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Schelling, *On Human Freedom*, in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler, trans. Priscilla Hayden-Roy (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 217–284.

of the *possibility* within human beings that enables them to come in contact with and interpret their world in new ways.

With this point of view sketched out, I aim to show how Schelling is here enacting a turn towards a hermeneutic view of history. I will finish by incorporating some strikingly similar views that come forth in Paul Ricoeur's essay "The History of Philosophy and Historicity."<sup>3</sup> In this essay, Ricoeur specifically says that because we are personal beings, any attempt to configure an absolute history fails. History is such that it *is* the rupture caused by thinkers and artists who come in contact with their "situation," their world, and transcend it by interpreting it—making it—*anew*. Schelling works with these same notions in mind, which is precisely what enables him to construct Being and Nature (God) as always becoming and 'living' with humans from *within*—not as observers glancing in from the outside. Such a move submits history to the manifold and open nature of the human understanding which is fundamentally an activity that simultaneously reifies and interprets.

### **Schelling's *Ages of the World***

Because of the multilayered nature of ideas found within *The Ages of the World*, an explication of this text must proceed in a systematic and careful fashion in order to enable a view of the entirety of Schelling's insight. Thus, to begin, the ground of all the elements discussed should be put into view: God, or what is spoken of as the whole of Being and Nature. In the opening sections of the *Ages*, Schelling develops the concept of a unified, three-tiered God that is aligned with the concept previously evaluated in his 1809 essay *On Human Freedom*. In the language used in the *Ages*, God is found to be No, Yes, and the unity of the two (i.e. negation, will, and synthesis). This forms a threefold being that is inactive, however, because any activity would lend it to one specific tier—either Yes or No.<sup>4</sup>

The divine is Yes insofar as it is continually desiring and wanting, although this desire cannot be fulfilled because such realization lends itself to a particular selfhood. Desire appears when "a being withdraws itself or cuts itself off from other things and is that through which [a selfhood] is exclusively itself."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is precisely as the ground of this Yes that the No surfaces: in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

cutting-itself-off there lies the notion of negation. Just as the desire of the Yes expresses *a* desire, it simultaneously negates and says No to everything else. In short, we can see the dialectical structure of identity and difference paradigmatic of human action in this model of Yes and No. Schelling remarks, however, that the two potencies in God “incline themselves towards unity, or they come together in one and the same because the negating force can only feel itself as negating when there is a disclosing being and the latter can only be active as affirming insofar as it liberates the negating and repressing force ... [the two] posit outside and above themselves a third, which is the unity.”<sup>6</sup>

By way of this unity, God is depicted by Schelling to be that which can at no time present one aspect of its nature over and against another. These three aspects of God exist not as a static, linear development, but as a circular, communal relationship wherein they are always displacing one another. As such, the unity engenders an eternal circularity within the ultimate ground of things, “a rotatory movement that never comes to a standstill and in which there is no differentiation. Even the *concept* of the beginning, as well as the *concept* of the end, again sublimates itself in this circulation.”<sup>7</sup>

As an eternal circularity, we cannot say that God *is* in an actual sense, but it is also problematic to say that God, the ground of all things, *is* nothing because God enables entities to show themselves as they themselves are. In a sense, to deny this ground is to deny everything within the world that we encounter: no entity in the world can *be* by itself. Whenever something *is*, Being itself is in play, showing while hiding. To avoid nihilism, Schelling therefore advances God *as* freedom. He states that freedom, which is the Being of God, is “that which in itself neither has being nor does not have being. Rather it is exclusively the eternal freedom to be.”<sup>8</sup> This freedom is further explained as having “all things under it”<sup>9</sup> and, as such, does not wish to be actualized in any way whatsoever. In this way, Schelling’s depiction of God as freedom can be understood as that which is always possibility itself.

God has a three-fold nature and ‘exists’ *through* these potencies as freedom, and therefore three things are incorporated into this explanation: God, Nature, and Being. This enables an even more expansive threefold structure to arise from the description put forth thus far. As there is a No, Yes, and unity of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 20; emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

the two in God, there is Nature, Being, and God itself. That which is to be the ground of everything else has in itself a ground and a way in which it is, a way of Being, one could say. The Nature of God is seen in the No, Yes, and unitary aspects of God, yet God's Being is that of freedom (absolute possibility). God itself is to be regarded as that which subsumes this entire movement. Commenting on this structure as found in the 1809 essay, Heidegger comments that Nature and Being, as understood by Schelling, can best be spoken of as "ground" and "existence," and in this way they "are to be conceived *in the unity* of this primordial movement. This unity of their circling is what is primordial. But we must not take the two determinations out of this circle, immobilize them and set them against each other in a seemingly 'logical' thinking."<sup>10</sup>

To summarize Schelling's concept of God, and to make it more manageable and tenable, we must at each moment have God conceptualized as that which is only known to the degree that humans and the world reveal themselves as displaying God's attributes: humans and the entities that constitute the world have Being, and have it in particular ways (i.e. each has a nature). God, in this light, can be taken to mean only that which allows all things to be and reveal themselves as they are in themselves. God allows humans to be inasmuch as they act and choose a certain possibility for themselves (whereas God, for Schelling, *is* possibility); and yet, God is also involved in precisely this act, in how a *certain* person's nature is disclosed when one identifies and differentiates one's self against other things (God, if we remember, has negation and will in constant unity, never allowing one to present itself without the other). Schelling remarks that "the Godhead is the highest freedom precisely because it is both of these, and both of these in an equally essential fashion. All of this had to be so that thereby a necessary ground of the world would never be found and so that it would become manifestly that all that is comes exclusively from the most utterly free divine will."<sup>11</sup>

Simply put, any possible 'what' or 'how' found in human beings simultaneously involves God. A particular person is identified, differentiated, and demarcated as a *certain* person, and as a personality one is a *certain* possibility in each moment. A human can, in this way, display the three aspects of divine life. God, however, is the unification of negation and will (Nature) along with possibility itself (Being), a three-layered, cohesive structure. But as Heidegger

---

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), 114.

<sup>11</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 74

reminds us, when speaking of God as the ground of human being, “Schelling does not plan to report on what went on during the creation of the world back then ... this ‘back then’ does not exist at all, because the occurrence is eternal and means also a now-moment (*ein jetzt augenblickliches*).”<sup>12</sup> And, in fact, “what Schelling attempts to grasp here in essence is just the *movement of any living being in general*, the essential construction of the movement of life.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, God is the structure within which human life is said to *move through*. Although the three aspects of God can be uncovered and acknowledged as manifested in a human’s existence, the human being still appears to be lacking when compared to the ground of all things.

Although Schelling will very candidly admit that “everything divine is human and everything human is divine,”<sup>14</sup> this is not to resolve all difference so as to fall into a pantheism that explains each being within the world as tantamount to God (and vice versa). As has been stated, humankind urges itself to actualization in selfhood, whereas God is never actualized but is rather an eternal circulation. Freedom will follow suit: God *is* freedom (absolute possibility) and humans have freedom, in the manner in which they act and create anew the world by actualizing their own possibilities. Schelling likens the acting upon possibilities seen in human action to that of an artist who forms his work of art to *model* Being and Nature.

All of these forms and formations have no actuality by themselves. For nature itself, out of which they arise, has, in comparison with the Godhead, which alone has being, diminished into potentiality, into the relationship of that which, relatively speaking, does not have being and which preserves this relationship voluntarily ... Yet this entire life is not consequently absolutely and completely empty. But, in comparison with the Godhead, it is like nothingness, a mere sport that makes claim of actuality.<sup>15</sup>

Any irrationalism that seems to have been introduced in this passage quickly falls away, however, because Schelling emphasizes that nature is utterly irreducible in relation to the reification of human beings. Existence must contain

---

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–60.

more than reason's determinations, and in that manner, "reality must be recognized as being *more than* rational."<sup>16</sup> Experience and reality—collapsing into one another—are encumbered and bound up in the idea of "knowing reality." People speak of merely sticking to 'real' nature as simply indicating what is objectively there, yet this speaking of "what has been ascertained as objectively present is not yet what is real."<sup>17</sup> We approach nature, which we call "objectively present," with a calculable outlook through which we see the world as displaying rule and law. Thus, we already approach nature with a prejudice in mind and if we are to add an additional prejudice, a certain way or reason why the law is in place, then "that explanation is really thoroughgoing calculability, [and] the demand surfaces of explaining life phenomena in a completely mechanical way."<sup>18</sup> To escape the bonds of such thinking, Schelling posits that God is, in this way, beyond the rational (i.e., what we call reality—our experience—can never be reasonably thought through so as to attain an absolute knowledge with regards to Being and Nature).

Human knowing is developed by Schelling as that which is demonstrative of the human situation *par excellence*. On the one hand, human beings persistently possess knowledge, yet this knowledge is not absolute. Ironically, human knowing is such that it yearns for true and undoubted knowledge; we grasp for Being itself, true identity. Commenting on this condition, Schelling states in his 1809 essay that "[Humans] never obtain control of this condition, although in evil [a person] strives to do so; it is only loaned to [them], is independent of [them]; thus [their] personality and selfhood can never rise to perfect act."<sup>19</sup> Yet insofar as knowledge in human beings is always in a state of development, it can acknowledge not only that God is therefore a living and becoming Being, but that humanity's knowledge changes and ruptures in reactive and responsive ways, allowing for history to present itself as each rupture forms crevices wherein difference is conveyed. As Schelling observes, "[knowledge's] true representation is that it is the development of a living, actual being (*Wesen*) which presents itself in it."<sup>20</sup> In other words, God is presented in knowledge since it is Being and Nature that enable presence; and, for that matter, as knowledge becomes and

---

<sup>16</sup> Paul Collins Hayner, *Reason and Existence: Schelling's Philosophy of History* (Netherlands: EJB Press, 1967), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>19</sup> Schelling, *On Human Freedom*, 270.

<sup>20</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, xxxv.

transforms—to some degree—God does as well. This development is history, but history as such can never be assumed as something that is known and fixed within us; it too is a living being and is articulated in varying ways in each utterance. In a revealing passage, Schelling explains:

Everything known, in accord with nature, is narrated. But the known is not here something lying about finished and at hand since the beginning. Rather, it is that which is always first emerging out of the interior through a process entirely specific to itself. The light of knowledge must rise through an internal cision and liberation before it can illuminate. What we call knowledge is only the striving toward *anamnesis* [*Wiederbewusstwerden*].<sup>21</sup>

Not only does each present moment present us with a new birth of experience and Being, but each past that we remember is just as much subject to—and is, respectively—a new beginning. We can understand this in quite a simple manner when we notice that it is always a becoming self that is remembering some past; and as living, changing beings, we are always altered in each subsequent remembering. A past is known and narrated by a different understanding each time it is (re)presented, and while it is detrimental because of our inclinations to forget aspects of the past, it is at the same time to our benefit because the significance of a certain moment or understanding in our history may come years after its original inception.

Still, in all of our ways of being, the restoration of experience and God *is* our way of being: the thoroughgoing movement of our (re)presentations of ‘reality,’ which delimit certain moments accordingly, forming before and after a (re)presentation—history. This is definitive of our circular situatedness as finite beings. Schelling insists that at each moment human beings “cannot leave the longing for actuality and again they fall prey to the contracting potencies.”<sup>22</sup> Even more so does God appear in the human at this moment because this drive is the “beating heart of the Godhead, which, in incessant systole and diastole, seeks rest, but does not find it.”<sup>23</sup> Completeness, a system, *true* identity—these are substrate inclinations of the human being, for Schelling, which stretch forth and act upon the compulsion for actuality by making their works of art emulate the unity of true

---

<sup>21</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, xxxvii.

<sup>22</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

actuality in God. This means only that human action is where the work occurs: action, as the base of the artwork, not only understands a world in its performance, but is the very movement of understanding which is, at each moment, that which discloses God when it identifies, differentiates, and synthesizes its own understanding. Human action is itself a playing out of Being and Nature, in that it has an understanding of how and what things are. This, of course, incorporates some basic understanding of the world as a whole, even if the understanding is not immediately in sight.

As Schelling sees it, the directedness of the human mind towards thinking in terms of actualities is exactly the grounding of history. The human, when he or she identifies and differentiates, (re)presents the world in an always unique fashion. These ruptures, which are caused by personalities, are the groundings of history. Yet Schelling is quick to thwart any strictly empirical position and emphasizes that “all experience, feeling, and vision is, in and for itself, mute and needs a mediating organ in order to come to expression.”<sup>24</sup> As such, thought must not only involve itself with the thinking subject but must also investigate Being and Nature (the “external”), which are so completely wrapped up in the inner that when looking from such a vantage point we no longer have “a distinction between the world of thought and the world of actuality.”<sup>25</sup>

History qua history always remains in tension with the unique history of each individual: the innovations located within an individual’s work, in turn, are the ruptures of the world. Knowledge is a history of experiences that are remembered and (re)presented to the knower, and, simultaneously, history arises *as* these (re)presentations throughout time. Because of this relationship, however, Schelling is aware that history must be subjected to the limits of knowledge. As stated earlier, Nature and Being are not reducible to human rationality, and to this extent, history as founded upon our knowledge is unable to position itself in an absolute way. Schelling states that there cannot be an absolute claim to knowledge such as  $A=X$  because, in essence, “movement is what is essential to knowledge,”<sup>26</sup> and not only does this have ramifications for history but every science is also affected inasmuch as the ground of all sciences, since they depend on knowledge, is fundamentally movement. Simply put, knowledge is ever swaying and growing; it is becoming, and amendments are re-inscribed throughout the ages: what Ptolemy composes on the heavens and earth is

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xxxviii.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xl.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

presented and adjusted in a fluid and living manner by Copernicus. Likewise, how I (mis)take the world as a child is, through my living and breathing, developed as I cultivate the questions, thoughts, and reflections concerning my world. Seen objectively, history is therefore never separated from the subjective histories of each individual: the innovations located within an individual's work, in turn, *are the ruptures of the world*.

Since private and public histories are enmeshed indistinguishably when scrutinized closely, Schelling presents the historian's task as closely tied to the philosopher's. Both are using texts of past ages, and in this have to continually return to them in order to re-inscribe the traditions of these earlier texts. In this activity, it is the inner sense of the transcriber that announces history from its own understanding. The re-inscription, in this manner, is so reliant upon interpretation that Schelling asks: "What would history be if an inner sense did not come to assist it?"<sup>27</sup> As noted above, Schelling recognizes that it is not merely by our raw sensory faculties that everything becomes manifest to us in a meaningful way, but our "inner sense" helps our senses to *understand* Nature and Being. It is this understanding that connects each particular person to his or her world in differing ways, because everyone uninhibitedly sees the external immediately. However, this does not necessarily justify an understanding of what is presented. As Schelling comments: "Everything remains incomprehensible to human beings until it has become internal to them, that is, until it has been led back to that which is innermost in their being and to that which to them is, so to speak, the living witness of all truth ... Therefore, the goal is not reached in simple vision. For there is no understanding in vision in and for itself. In the external world, everyone more or less sees the same thing, yet not everyone can express it."<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, in so far as each person is free and particularized, indistinguishable understandings among all would be inconceivable, for if this were the case all ruptures would cease and history would be still and silent. This would be the state of complete unity, one could say, to the degree unto which Being and Nature themselves would be our immediacy and our understanding would have no succession: we would be complete and eternal circlings, each of us God. Our understanding, consequently, is precisely what distances us from God as finite beings with succession as our lens of experience, as unfinished circlings. With this schematism in mind, Schelling traces the concept of time, along with history, wherein the one is known only in regard to the other.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xxxvii–xxxviii.

Time and history, like the human act, mirror God. Fundamentally, we speak of the succession of time as past, present, and future. In speaking of God as the eternal unified circling of Being and Nature, we can never speak or understand this concept all at once, but we posit it in a successive manner, leading up to the understanding of unity. Even in this small description there is a past, present, and future insofar as there is a point in which we begin the description, the process of describing, and the final outcome and holistic view of the description. Likewise, there is the *act* of beginning the description, the explanation, and the conclusion drawn. To this degree, even Schelling sees temporality itself as amplifying the eternity in God. His 1809 essay first introduced this idea in a provocative fashion: “This act by which [a human being’s] life in time is determined does not itself belong to time, but to eternity, nor does it precede time, but moves *through* time (untouched by it) as an act by its nature eternal. *Through* this act [a human’s] life extends to the beginning of creation; thus *through* it [human beings are] beyond creation as well, free and [themselves] eternal beginnings.”<sup>29</sup>

History, as being always in connection with time, also displays an inherent tie with the eternal.<sup>30</sup> Just as time is the setting wherein one understands and discusses Being and Nature by way of succession, history is an assemblage of human acts, all of which are construed by time through a threefold succession. Time acts so as to organize human action, yet history is itself formed by such action. At the center there is an understanding, a “primordial deed” as Schelling calls it, which allows for anything like time or history to be realized. Schelling goes so far as to speak of this as the ‘law’ in human being.

There is an incessant primordial deed that precedes each and every single action and through which one is actually Oneself. Yet this primordial deed sinks down into unfathomable depths with respect to the consciousness that elevates itself above it. Thereby, this primordial deed becomes a beginning that can never be sublimated, a root of reality that cannot be reached through anything. In the same way, in the decision, that primordial deed of divine life also eradicates consciousness of itself, so that what was posited as ground in divine life also can only be

---

<sup>29</sup> Schelling, *On Human Freedom*, 259; emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account of this see Robert F. Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809–1815* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1977) 201–212.

disclosed in the succession through a higher revelation. Only in this way is there a true beginning, a beginning that never ceases to be a beginning.<sup>31</sup>

This very deed is, in fact, the root of beginnings, it is a commencement that cannot get out of itself and is definitive of our situatedness within the world. For Schelling, to rise above our situation would only be possible if we were as the eternal is: only then would we experience a 'true' beginning. In this way, our reification of the world is that which begins with action (the past), yet in each 'now' we are in the state of understanding (the present), which is always moving towards a unity in which the understanding solidifies Being and Nature into a concept (the future). In the end, this 'future' aims to be that of complete reconciliation. Schelling configures our being within time as also displaying history in a wide-reaching, although similar, schema. The past, the beginning of time in general, is that which gave way to the present by acting. Now, however, in the present, our situation is that of an understanding that never completely actualizes knowledge but can only reify Being and Nature when it attempts to comprehend them. Any sort of future time would be the fulfillment of our leaning towards reification; it would be a unity in which we could know Being and Nature in a way that would elude interpretations.

The future seen as an end of our present state would be a time of pure presence, wherein our place as understanding beings would find resolve and we would know, in a pure way, beings themselves. Some may see this as idealistic, but it appears that Schelling never says that this can actually be fulfilled. Rather, his description seems simply to underline what would take place if our reason were to become pure: history would cease, because without (re)interpretations of the world (for in pure knowing, interpretation is a nonsensical idea) ruptures would collapse into unities. Even though in our very nature we seem to point toward the unity of God, it is by no means the case that this is something that can actually be fulfilled. Schelling observes that "as often as life enters into a new epoch, it is necessary that it again make a new beginning."<sup>32</sup> This new beginning is brought about in every epoch by the action of the free person, which is defined not by a good or evil act, but by the very condition of choosing and differentiating one thing. As Heidegger remarks, Schelling's notion of "human freedom is not the decidedness for good or evil, but the decidedness for good and evil ... the

---

<sup>31</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 84.

unity of the will ...[which when aroused] is spirit, and as such spirit history.”<sup>33</sup> Our very being human implies that we must lack full unity and by nature always choose to understand in some way or another. Only as divinized would a unity occur within us.

With such a view sketched, we can understand why Schelling’s book can be said to present a view of the ages of the world, the process (becoming) of Being and Nature. The idea of epochs itself seems to describe each break and (re)interpretation of Being and Nature, where one speaks of a new beginning. To leave this cycle would be to end the becoming of the ages—the pressing forward and backward—and would end humanity insofar as it would take away the temporal understanding that is essential to the human being.

### **Ricoeur’s Philosophy of History**

By defining the process of history as founded upon the finite and temporal human understanding necessarily bound by temporality, although free in its possibilities (interpretations), Schelling invokes his turn toward the key aspects of what others will draw upon as the infrastructure of hermeneutic thinking. In Paul Ricoeur’s essay, “The History of Philosophy and Historicity,” the grounding concepts of Schelling’s *Ages of the World* are plainly in sight. Ricoeur is primarily concerned with the relationship between philosophy and history—where fissures are exposed and also obstructed within their rapport. Ricoeur begins his discussion of history and philosophy by first explicating the two main ways in which historians approach history. The system, which is often referred to as the “Hegelian” model, is a method wherein the historian appeals to the thinkers and artists surrounding a certain author so as to account for the intelligibility of the work produced.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, the singular approach is one wherein each author is approached by himself, without construing their thought in the light of a school of thinking. In this light each work of art “constitutes a total world into which it is necessary to penetrate slowly by means of a kind of familiarity which is never totally achieved.”<sup>35</sup>

Ricoeur finds each of these approaches by itself to be lacking. He asks: Why is it that we seek totality, which seems to be the ultimate detour of self-consciousness? Ricoeur points out that in systems, especially Hegel’s, Spirit

---

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

is the goal of self-consciousness, yet what is interesting in this move is that “my consciousness becomes thought at the same time as history.”<sup>36</sup> In short, a history gets (mis)taken as the history of philosophy, then further, a system develops and ultimately rationality conquers with the advancement of the system. Here, history is exactly what is left out. In singularity, a certain philosophy seems always already caught up with others, but if we are to merely identify it in regards to its surroundings, we do violence to the particularity of the work. For example, a certain philosopher one aims to understand historically “is not simply a partial discourse but a complete personality.”<sup>37</sup>

With regard to philosophy, Ricoeur emphasizes the limitations that we come upon when we speak of how philosophies echo history. Philosophies seem to reflect epochs, but in the end, even in distinguishing an “epoch” one is already involved in the certain effects that past philosophies have brought about in our thinking. Often philosophies are also discussed in a very deterministic fashion wherein they are placed as the outcome of a certain preceding strain of thought, and any other response would have been out of the question. However, the mechanical and rationalized understanding of history that this way of thinking presents always underestimates and misunderstands the role of the single individual in history to the degree that history appears to dictate human action.

Even in rejecting a cause and effect relationship between philosophy and epoch, Ricoeur still understands that a thinker’s environment is always affecting the work that is authored, but the only time wherein we can become mindful of an author’s “situation” is when we, ourselves, enter ‘into’ the mindset by the only means left for us: going through the work produced by a thinker.<sup>38</sup> Although a work is ‘in’ a time period, history is not such a mechanism that it would have produced the same ideas if the text were in fact written by another philosopher. Still, there is something more primordial, although still evasive, in the fact that a certain work brings a certain idea to the fore in a certain situation which comprises the environment of its birth. There are more than cause/effect and reality/reflection relationships at work here. Ricoeur agrees with Sartre that in this happening, artists make the situation their own unique situation by bringing forth a work which is in response to the environment surrounding the work.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Some propose that an artwork, as such, aims primarily to dissimulate the situation that is currently at hand in one's world. Ricoeur adheres to this only inasmuch as the philosopher's work "dissimulates because it surpasses and transcends ... every work is a new reality with its own history -- the history of discourse. It calls for a peculiar type of understanding, for it is connected to its situation only by transcending."<sup>40</sup> Correspondingly, Ricoeur demonstrates that there are two main constituents in illuminating the process of history: "History waivers between a structural type and an 'event' type of understanding."<sup>41</sup> A "structure" is spoken of only to account for a certain way in which history occurs, a setting, and the "event" of history is that moment where one simultaneously dissimulates and transcends one's own context. The setting (the how) and the actual happening (the what) of history both mingle between the singular and the system that historians advance, and because of this, the polemical arguments of the historian actually go so far as to suppress history. Suppression of this sort reifies our historical understanding, making it something present-at-hand. Ricoeur observes that "from this standpoint, in so far as philosophic discourse is not mere reflecting of meaning but the very constituting of meaning, it manifests the twofold characteristic of all history, which is to be both structural and event-filled, the unity of history, and the multiplicity of events, works, and men."<sup>42</sup>

If we are to treat history with either the system or the singular alone, it will only contain our suppression of something that is irreducible because it actually occurs in the opening ruptures of humanity. Ricoeur unequivocally asserts that "history is the realm of the inexact,"<sup>43</sup> and for this reason "if there were no ruptures or innovations, there would be no history at all."<sup>44</sup> History is inexact because in containing both singular works and the discourse of the time, it is always something between these great poles and does not allow an absolute version of either. In the end, Ricoeur exposes the failure of both singular and systematic methodologies to explain the phenomenon of history adequately. Systemization ends history "because history becomes nullified logic; singularity is the end of history since all history is repudiated in it."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 75.

### Schelling and Ricoeur in Conversation

In further advancing a reading of Schelling's turn towards a hermeneutic thinking, I will focus on the three main aspects of both his and Ricoeur's writings which have been explicated in the body of this essay. First, Schelling proposes that not only do humans have freedom and personality, but through this, they are open to the world as beings that interpret Being and Nature. Each person has his or her own personality to some degree and, in this, each individual "seeks to withdraw itself from the universal center and eccentrically seek its own center of gravity or foundational point."<sup>46</sup> As historical and temporal beings, they have an understanding that does not comprehend the Godhead absolutely—if the reverse were ever the case they would cease to be finite. Schelling says that this finitude, in fact, is our situation:

[Finitude] is the poison of life, that needs to be overcome, yet without which life would pass away ... life first desires delimitation and to go from breadth to narrowness in order to become perceptible to itself. Thereafter, when it is in narrowness and has felt it, life desires to go back again into breadth and would like to return back into silent nothingness in which it was before. And yet it cannot, because it would have to renounce again its self-incurred life. And just as soon as it would have returned, from out of this state it would have yearned again, and through this yearning it would incur anew something that has being.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, this Godhead that is interpreted is not only external to human beings, but is the very way in which they move through the world and understand. Because of this, humans are just as much a part of that which they investigate. It is not that humans stand outside and look into Being and Nature, rather, by their very nature they always already participate in divinity. This has been worked out in the previous sections. We sought out fundamental aspects of the human being (i.e. history, time, knowledge, etc.), in which every characteristic disclosed and mirrored the three constituents of the divine. The progression of subject, object,

---

<sup>46</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

subject-object is, for that matter, one that Schelling makes use of in many of his writings.<sup>48</sup>

Lastly, Schelling presents a concept of history that is made up of eternal beginnings—what we have already spoken of as the “primordial deed”—that are in each case breaking away and, in this sense, transcending the preceding era:

As often as life enters into a new epoch, it is necessary that it again make a new beginning. As such, it is unavoidable that this beginning or the first level of the new epoch, when compared with what was ultimate or supreme in the preceding epoch, would appear as a retrograde step ... Hence, such seeming regressions are necessary in the life of history ... In the same way, in the decision, that primordial deed of divine life also eradicates consciousness of itself, so that what was posited as ground in divine life can only be disclosed again in the succession through a higher revelation. Only in this way is there a true beginning, a beginning that never ceases to be a beginning.<sup>49</sup>

History is thus defined by Schelling as the eternal beginning points which are made by the primordial deed, the decisions of individuals who are acting by this deed to eradicate the view of the divine ground (Being and Nature) which is posited in the everyday disposition of their environment. To the era in which it proceeds, this break appears, as sophomoric, a step backwards, but in fact its untimely character is what distinguishes it as a new step, that which opposes and moves ‘beyond’ the current epoch, establishing a succession indispensable to history itself.

It is precisely these three points which are the core of Ricoeur’s argument. History is an “inexact” process which is somehow found in between the system and the singular. In Schellingean terms, it is subject-object: history is found in the human being insofar as it is succession and, thus, it is constructed in time, which is characteristic of, and only found within, the finite individual. Yet, in its very being singular it must always already be caught up in the whole, in that the very way in which it moves is a movement through the whole. Again, Ricoeur will say that the individual thinker is never able to be separated from a situated

---

<sup>48</sup> This is seen as early as Schelling’s *System of a Transcendental Idealism*. For more see Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (New York: The Modern Library, 1964), 347–357.

<sup>49</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 84–85.

environment. Any work whatsoever is one that responds to, and also away from, a situation in the very act of correspondence. In this way, it is always a certain person who responds in a certain way. History hinges on the personality of an individual and the (re)interpretation that this individual provides in the work produced. Thus, history can never be reified to the extent that a certain response to a certain situation is inevitable. From this, we can say that history is the rupturing that occurs in the interpretations of the artist's world that are undetermined and heretofore unseen. For Ricoeur, rupturing is history in that it both dissimulates and transcends the current sway. Without this aspect it would be impossible to differentiate one period from another.

In developing the binaries of free/finite and interpretation/situatedness in relation to history, Schelling and Ricoeur not only reiterate the predominant issues of hermeneutics as a way of approaching philosophy, but point toward the complexity that is involved in taking up the task of historical thinking. In a manner of speaking this essay itself is performative: I aim not only to illuminate the thought of Schelling and Ricoeur, but to trace and (re)inscribe moments in the history of philosophy, and in this inscription only others can judge the veracity of my understanding. What holds true, nevertheless, is that if one finds my account faulty, this person will, once more, reinscribe his or her own history in accounting for my shortcomings, thus entering the circle.

History itself cannot simply be isolated in one individual or the totality of individuals; rather, the two share a community of sorts that gives birth to history. As finite beings, however, we are unable to ever position ourselves in an absolute manner so as to grasp the whole of history. In general, this is the case of our coming into contact with Being and Nature. A glance held, suppresses and reifies; we continue, notwithstanding, to revolve around our unfinished circles.