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Review of Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2011). 282 pgs.

Bruce Matthews has produced one of the best books in English on Schelling in recent years. *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy* is unique in its attention to the seminal influence of Schelling's Speculative Pietist upbringing and his early—and largely unexplored—preoccupation with Platonic cosmology. Matthews proves that Schelling was so much more than a Fichte disciple when he burst on the scene in his early twenties with a torrent of publications in the burgeoning field of transcendental philosophy. The book demonstrates how much there still is to learn from Schelling when he is read on his own terms, rather than coerced to fit the terms of some contemporary conversation (by and large still the tendency in English Schelling scholarship). But this is no straightforward exegesis; it is rather “an aggressive surgical reconstruction that hopefully animates, rather than anaesthetizes, the spirit and intent of Schelling's argument” (p. 151).

The first chapter is concise and elegant. It should be read by everyone interested in the early Schelling. Matthews painstakingly reconstructs the student Schelling's fusion of the horizons of Plato and Kant. Schelling applies the category of community from the First Critique and the analysis of life from the Third Critique (reciprocal causality) to understand Plato's thesis that the universe must be considered a living whole.¹ Plato in turn grants Schelling the means he needs to correct Kantian subjectivism, for Schelling's solution to the transcendental puzzle of the relation of thought to being, the founding question of Kantianism—how are synthetic judgments a priori possible?—is that thought is the means produced by being for the sake of its own development, from the unconscious to self-conscious being.

The young Schelling's departure point is an immanent critique of Kant which draws out the structural symmetries uniting the ideas of organism, actual infinity and freedom. Kant's search for “an idea of all ideas” in the First Critique, the ideal of reason, generates an ambiguity in the relationship between *mathematical* and *dynamic* categories. Both categories generate infinity—but in crucially different ways. The mathematical categories articulate a merely potential infinity, totality not as a whole but as an aggregate of units to which one more might always be added; the dynamic categories account for an actual infinity, the infinite which is complete in itself, which is cause and effect of

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 30 c6-d5; *Philebus*, 5 d8-e5.

itself—that outside of which there is nothing. The mathematical infinite corresponds to the regulative ideal of “world,” the sum total of all external appearances; the dynamic infinite, by contrast, refers to “nature,” the dynamic whole which renders each appearance an essential part of one self-organized life. In the First Critique the dynamic categories are held to be primarily applied to life: the living organism which is cause and effect of itself. The dynamic categories allow us to conceive the reciprocity between parts and whole essential to the notion of life: the parts of an organism are in one sense the cause of the whole organism; the whole, in another sense, is the cause of the parts. The aesthetic idea of the sublime in the Third Critique appears to expand the application of the dynamic categories: no longer limited to certain experiences of living organisms, the dynamic categories are now at play in experiencing being itself as an absolute whole, nature as the unconditioned.

Of course, for Kant, this experience remains strictly speaking trans-categorical: it is a feeling without a corresponding thought. For Schelling, the aesthetic experience of the sublime raises the question of the relationship of aesthetics to the ideal of reason, the figure of the absolute as the unity of internal and external appearances, which, in the First Critique, drives reason forward into greater and greater acts of synthesis. This is the opening Schelling needs in order to move beyond a subjective idealist reading of transcendental philosophy into the objective idealism of *Naturphilosophie*. Schelling elevates the dynamic categories over the mathematical; where the latter are mechanical and incomplete, the former have the structure of a single life, a whole, which is the cause of itself. The necessary relations among the parts of a living whole are a function of the freedom of its self-grounding activity.

What empowers Schelling’s resolutely metaphysical reading of Kant’s three critiques is his early immersion in neo-Platonic cosmology. Where Kant distinguishes freedom and necessity, Plato distinguishes divine and necessary causes, the former are clearly the origin of the latter. Plato’s myth of creation suggests to the young Schelling the possibility of integrating the moral ideal of freedom (self-authorship) with the necessity of natural causation. Once the phenomenal/noumenal distinction is discarded as arbitrary, the possibility of absolutizing the notion of an organic whole presents itself. Freedom would then no longer be limited to human agency (indeed it would no longer be associated with consciousness nor would it be pre-eminently a property of the human being); rather, freedom becomes characteristic of the absolute as such. The young Schelling adopts Plato’s dialectic of the limited and the unlimited (which Plato explicitly relates to the cosmos considered as organic whole) as a master concept for a new transcendental metaphysics. This leads Schelling to what Matthews calls “life as the schema of freedom.”

The thought of the 19 year old Schelling is not easy to reconstruct, and Matthews prose sometimes bogs down in technicalities and obscurities. But the overall structure of the young Schelling’s fusion of Plato and Kant is clear enough: Schelling finds in Plato the proper method for limiting reason. Rather than positing arbitrary limits on the basis of an empirico-idealist

phenomenal/noumenal distinction, Schelling discovers limits in that which reason demands but cannot conceive: the form of unity at the base of the dyad of thought and being. For the early Schelling, the form is not only outside us, in the cosmos, or hidden in the inaccessible depths of the Godhead, it is also nearer to us than we are to ourselves, it is “the immediacy that exists within us,” which precedes and exceeds all concepts.² This emphasis on immediacy, on pre-conceptual intelligibility, resonated with Speculative Pietism and simultaneously, with early romanticism, making the task of constructing a neo-Platonic transcendental philosophy (first as *Naturphilosophie*, then as *Identitätsphilosophie*) an urgent if not inevitable one for the young Schelling.

One of the strongest features of Matthew’s book is the archaeology of the theosophical root of Schellingian philosophy—a crucial history that is all too frequently overlooked in English literature.³ Friedrich Christoph Oetinger spearheaded a movement in radical Protestantism which attempted to counter the impersonalist deism of modernity by re-thinking natural scientific discoveries in the light of esoteric-kabbalistic Christian theology.⁴ Oetinger sought to inaugurate a genuinely theological form of modernity which could support the scientific turn towards nature, but without the hubris of mastery typical of eighteenth-century natural philosophy. Empirical science should be founded upon the conviction that nature was theophany. The biblical revelation of God as life, that is, as a free being whose essence is self-revelation (*ens manifestativum sui*), has an essential materialist consequence. The life of material nature, which the vitalists correctly insisted is irreducible to efficient cause, cannot be conceived as mechanism, but must be understood as a self-organized whole oriented to the *telos* of self-manifestation. As such nature is the first *imago Dei*, a thought Oetinger finds best articulated in the theosophy of Jacob Boehme, for whom God is primarily a self-revealing life.

According to Matthews, Schelling was steeped in Oetinger’s theology, both through one of his maternal uncles who was an enthusiastic disciple of Oetinger, but more directly through the Deacon Köstlin, another maternal uncle

² F.W.J. Schelling, “Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus,” *Schellings Sämmtliche Werke*, hrsg. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart/Augsburg, 1856-1861), I/I, 376.

³ As with much in the field of Schelling studies, this lacuna is limited to the English reception of Schelling. The Speculative Pietist thread is relatively well researched in the German literature on Schelling. See Ernst Benz, *Schellings theologische Geistesahnen* (Wiesbaden: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1955); Horst Fuhrmans, “Einleitung und anmerkungen,” zu F.W.J. Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1964); Robert Schneider, *Schelling und Hegels schwäbischen Geistesahnen* (Würzburg, 1938); Wilhelm August Schulze, “Oetinger’s Beitrag zur Schellingschen Freiheitslehre,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 54 (1957): 213-225. In translation see Ernst Benz, *The Mystical Sources of German romantic Philosophy* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1983). In English see S.J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012), chapter two. On related issues in Hegel see Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴ Among the more accessible of Oetinger’s texts, see Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, *Biblisches und Emblematisches Wörterbuch*, ed. Gerhard Schäfer, in two parts, *Texte zur Geschichte des Pietismus*, ed. Gerhard Schäfer, Abteil VII, Band 3 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1999).

with whom Schelling lived while attending Latin School in Nürtingen. Köstlin was closely associated with Philipp-Matthäus Hahn, who, along with Oetinger, is generally considered a founder of Speculative Pietism. Mid-twentieth century German scholarship argued that Schelling's early initiation in theosophy is the missing link connecting *Naturphilosophie* with the more explicitly Boehmian metaphysics of freedom of 1809-1815.⁵ On this view, Schelling's turn to Boehme in 1809 was *a turn back* to the first metaphysical theology he had learned. It is habitually overlooked that the claim most characteristic of German Idealism—historical immanence, the notion that God needs the world in order to become conscious of himself—originates in Renaissance Hermeticism, Christian Kabala, and more proximally, the theological retrieval of Hermeticism in Speculative Pietism. Matthews notes that at the heart of Hahn's theology is the unorthodox conception that the creation of the world is not the overflow of superabundant goodness from the self-sufficient Godhead (the Neoplatonic notion which shapes mainstream Jewish, Christian and Muslim medieval theology), but the result of a lack in the creator, the original absence of self-consciousness in the divine monad, which drives the One into multiplicity, the act of God revealing himself to himself through his work in creation (p. 53). It has been argued that Speculative Pietism is also the source for historical immanentism in Hegel, who in fact carries the thesis further than Schelling, ultimately into a denial of the transcendence of God.⁶ The late Schelling breaks with the thesis as compromising the freedom of God and its consequence, the contingency of creation, a fact which Matthews fails to mention.

Matthews goes so far as to insist on a systematic relationship between the poem the 15 year old Schelling wrote at Hahn's passing and the form of Schelling's early philosophy. Schelling had met Hahn when he was 9 years old, and experienced what he later remembered as a "hidden incomprehensible reverence" (Schelling cited p. 62). In Kant, the young Schelling, who had already precociously committed himself to a theosophical reading of Neoplatonism, discovered the philosophical imperative for the construction of a concept of absolute unity (the unity of an organic whole) as the origin of the intelligibly ordered; only Kant, in a profoundly anti-Platonic move, reduces the concept to a subjective principle, a "regulative ideal": "The unity of reason always presupposes an idea, namely, that of the form of the whole of knowledge—a whole which is prior to the determinate knowledge of the parts and which contains the conditions that determine *a priori* for every part its position and relation to the other parts."⁷

Without disagreeing that the ideals of reason are principles of the subjective synthesis of experience, Schelling argues that the subjective synthesis is itself a part of the whole, a medium of cosmological synthesis—nature become

⁵ See Schneider, *Schelling und Hegels schwäbischen Geistesahnen*.

⁶ See Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*; Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), A 645/B 673.

self-conscious. The categories of the understanding and the ideals of reason, according to the young Schelling, should be understood in a Platonic manner, as evidence that “mind” is the cause and principle of creation, that is, the categories and ideals are “not only forms of our understanding, but are rather universal *Weltbegriffe*, from which the existence of the entire world is capable of being explained” (Schelling, *Timaeus* commentary, quoted p. 63). As Matthews puts it in a trenchant sentence, “the larger organism of nature is the source of this ordering power within us” (p. 128).

The young Schelling, however, remains emphatically modern in his approach to cosmology: transcendental philosophy illuminates Platonism and corrects certain traditional misinterpretations. Schelling’s transcendental reading of Plato demolishes the “two world theory”: the forms are not other-worldly things; they should not be understood in terms of the ontic order of being to which they give rise. Platonic ideas are strictly speaking *forms of substances*, not substances themselves but principles that underlie the genera of individual things. To speak of them in a Kantian fashion as forms of synthesis, patterns of intelligibility, Schelling argues, is much more faithful to Plato than to posit them as a second order of subsisting things.

The initial fusion of Plato and Kant occurred in Schelling’s *Jugendschriften*, particularly the unpublished commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* which Schelling wrote in 1794. In the light of these writings, Matthews contends, Schelling’s early publications must be read in a new way. Schelling’s first book, *On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy*, has been traditionally read as a youthful contribution to a heated debate in post-Kantian transcendental philosophy (spearheaded by Fichte), the question concerning a common ground that could unite the form (categories) and content (sensible intuitions) of knowledge. Certainly, this was the exoteric side of the young Schelling’s contribution. But the esoteric motivation was to modernize the Platonic dialectic of the limited and the unlimited, which Schelling had examined at some length three years earlier in his *Timaeus* commentary. “The complexity of Schelling’s way of thinking is best grasped through the use of an organic form of reasoning, structured by a *disjunctive logic of identity* that articulates the self-organizing dynamic of freedom and necessity [Plato’s dyad of divine and necessary causes (*Timaeus*, 68 e5-69 a1)] as it extends throughout the entire spectrum of reality” (p. 141). Life, understood as self-action, is the common relation that unites the form of the limited and the content of the unlimited, which in turn is the basis for Plato’s argument for the immanent pre-established harmony of both the cosmos and our system of knowledge (p. 155). As cause and effect of itself, life is the concrete image of freedom. When the universe itself is considered as an organism (a consideration grounded in the experience of infinity as a dynamic whole in the aesthetic intuition of the sublime), both the necessary causes suturing the empirical order and the spontaneity of self-consciousness and moral agency are explained: life causes the mechanical, self-reflective and moral orders as the organs of its own self-production. Or, in the more familiar Schellingian trope, spirit is nature become conscious of itself.

Matthews has gone into texts that have never received commentary in English—this alone makes *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy* a noteworthy event in the slow but steady field of contemporary Schelling studies. Matthews exhibits an enviable mastery of the technical moves the young Schelling makes in his transformation of transcendental philosophy into a metaphysics of the absolute. My criticism concerns the claim to have discovered *the single principle* which would make of all of Schelling's work a system (even if an open-ended organic system). To be fair, Matthews does not claim that this principle is explicitly clear in Schelling's famously fractured career: "The argument of this work has sought to make explicit Schelling's 'fundamental thought' that provides the key to unlocking what, in my view, 'he had to have intended if his philosophy . . . [is] . . . to prove internally cohesive' [Schelling speaking of Kant in *Sämmtliche Werke*, I/I, 375]" (p. 222). Matthews assumes that contrary to the received opinion there is one philosophy in Schelling, and although it may not appear cohesive in its wildly varying expressions, it can be reconstructed as such. That Matthews takes recent work on Schelling to task for failing to deal with the whole of Schelling (p. 226, note 16) justifies us in asking whether his reconstruction indeed makes a whole of Schelling's vast oeuvre. One notes, for example, that the middle Schelling, the Schelling of the celebrated *Freedom* essay, *The Ages of the World* drafts, and the *Stuttgart Seminars*—the subject of influential studies by Frank, Høegrebe, Žižek, and Gabriel—is scarcely mentioned. Is this because Matthews disagrees with the contemporary emphasis on the significance of Schelling's middle period? Or is it, rather, that Matthews simply cannot reconcile the middle Schelling's notion of freedom as dark ground of chaotic volition with the more rationalist trajectory of freedom as self-organized infinity?

Even more surprising is Matthews's cursory treatment of Schelling's last philosophy, the philosophy of mythology and revelation. In one of his few references to the last Schelling, Matthews loosely identifies the meaning of negative and positive in the late work with the same terms as they appear in his early work. "In his first book, the *Weltseele* of 1798, he [Schelling] writes that 'our philosophy cannot proceed from the mechanistic (what is negative), but rather must start with the organic (what is positive)' (I/2, 349). Pointing towards the very factors that will inform the distinction between Negative and Positive Philosophy in his final system, Schelling presents the organic as what is positive in nature's self-organizing system of creation as opposed to the static and formulaic results of this process (Matthews, 222)." Schelling's early usage of the negative/positive binary itself does not demonstrate a continuity between the first and last periods of Schelling's work; Schelling uses the disjunction of negative and positive at every stage of his career. In the *Naturphilosophie*, the positive is the infinitely productive force of nature (modelled explicitly after Spinoza's *natura naturans*), the negative is the countervailing force which inhibits the flow of production for the sake of individuation (*natura naturata*). In the *Identitätsphilosophie*, the negative is the ideal, the positive, the real. In the philosophy of freedom (1809-1815), the negative is ground, the positive is

existence. As the *primum analagatum* of these non-univocal conceptions of the positive Matthews chooses organic causality by distinction from mechanistic causality. In fact, the late Schelling returns to the meaning of negative/positive typical of his *Identitätsphilosophie*—the positive as the real, the singularly existing, the empirical other and the negative as the idea. This suggests an intimate connection between the two apparently opposed orientations of *Identitätsphilosophie*, for which time does not exist, and positive philosophy, which is through and through a philosophy of time, of historicity, of event (a connection which has received comment in the German literature).⁸ It would seem that for the late Schelling the negative is not the mechanical but the *a priori*, which Kant demonstrates is closely associated with conceptions of infinity as that outside of which there is nothing, organic holism, and teleology (dynamic categories). These concepts are negative because, like all *a priori* concepts, they have no direct connection with existence; they are essential components of the necessary order of essences, that is, they are reason's inalienable content, the philosophy of hierarchy and teleology which reason spontaneously generates anew in every epoch (it is in fact Neoplatonism considered as the form of metaphysics itself). The point of calling it negative is to accent the gap which separates it from the philosophy which begins not with thought but with the fact of being as such, what the late Schelling describes as *das bloß Seyende*, that which simply is, "from which properly speaking, every idea, that is, every potency, is excluded," i.e., that which cannot be anticipated or deduced *a priori*.⁹

Is the fragmentary nature of Schelling's work not an essential feature of his contribution and a sign of his freedom from convention, writing as he did in an age when philosophers were expected to create a system, and which even the mediocre among them did? I am not saying there is no consistency in Schelling, far from it. I have argued that Schelling follows a single thought in all of the varying contexts of his philosophizing, from transcendental philosophy, through *Naturphilosophie*, from *Identitätsphilosophie* through the philosophy of freedom, and finally to the culmination of these investigations, the philosophy of mythology and revelation.¹⁰ It is one thing to say that these diverse explorations return to the same theme; it is another to say that they are parts of an organic whole. The latter claim makes Schelling into an alter-Hegel and this role he repudiated (even when it was offered to him by the Prussian King in 1841).

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Matthews's hermeneutic of immanent reconstruction works superbly for the early Schelling. It is no small feat to display a unity in the diversity of texts produced in Schelling's most productive years, 1792-1804. During this time, Matthews notes, Schelling produced thirty-four essays and books which fill five volumes of his collected works—before the age of thirty. And no doubt, it is this extraordinary output

⁸ Horst Fuhrmans, *Schellings letzte Philosophie. Die negative und positive Philosophie im Einsatz des Spätidealismus* (Berlin: Hans Triltsch, 1940).

⁹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures* (Albany, N.Y.: State University Press, 2007), 203.

¹⁰ McGrath, *Dark Ground*, 179.

which has earned Schelling the harshest criticism and reputation of dilettantism. Matthews has, I think, proven that these works are unified and constitute a single system. He has demonstrated that the notion of infinity as an organic whole is the presupposition, not only of the *Naturphilosophie* (which no one would deny), but also of the early transcendental philosophy and the *Identitätsphilosophie*. But Schelling's career continued for four decades after this period of manic publishing. If he did not publish, he certainly lectured, and these lectures, in my view (the positive philosophy) put the whole of his early work in a different light.

Of course, Matthews, the translator of *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, knows this quite well. Why, then, does he underplay the rupture in Schelling's thinking which occurs with the later work on revelation and mythology? For the late Schelling's claim is precisely that the contingency of history, and its presupposition, the abyssal nature of freedom, cannot be fully thought within an organic system. Indeed, the most thorough going organic thinker, Hegel, is driven, Schelling, says, by the logic of negative philosophy, to deny contingency and freedom. The philosophy of revelation begins where organicism cannot go, not in teleology, but in eschatology: God interrupts the life which he designed, and in doing so, demonstrates that in fact, Kant was to some degree correct: a creator God is not included in the whole which he creates.¹¹ The God who can only be known insofar as he reveals himself reveals himself to be wholly transcendent, not just the transcendence of the whole to the parts of which it is a whole (for the whole can still be derived from a proper understanding of its parts), but the transcendence of an infinite person to the order of being which he produces out of himself, sets free, and enters into relationship with. This thought, the thought of revelation, has always been the most difficult thought for philosophy. It seems that every time philosophy endeavours to think it, it does so at the expense of the radicality of the thought itself. The thinker who underscored this contradiction was Kierkegaard, and his inspiration was the late Schelling.

The rupture of the negative and the positive is something other than a new expression of the asymptotic nature of organic philosophy. No doubt, negative philosophy "does not follow the logic of subsumption, but rather that of productive coordination (*Wechselwirkung*), thereby precluding the possibility of closure" (Matthews, 229 note 29). If it did not, it could never be coordinated with positive philosophy and the whole of Schelling's late philosophy depends on the possibility of this coordination. The future developments in an organic system conform of necessity to the logic of past developments, even if that logic is only fully understood *a posteriori*. But the philosophy of revelation endeavours to think not that which organically develops, but that which is absolutely new.

To be sure, this point can be exaggerated. Schelling is not Kierkegaard or Karl Barth. The delicate balance Schelling endeavors to strike is the preservation of the necessity of negative philosophy with the unexacted content of positive philosophy. We could never deduce that God could become man in Christ, just as we could never deduce the fact of being. But once God reveals himself, reason's

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 112.

task is to think the revelation, and this thinking is not theology but philosophy. The great challenge of Schelling's positive philosophy is to make secular reason (by distinction from the Church or the churches) the proper receiver of the biblical revelation, and to do so in such a way as to resist, on the one hand, accommodating revelation to an *a priori* criterion of rationality (the perennial mistake of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and in more recent times, liberal Christianity), and, on the other hand, to avoid the fideism espoused by Jacobi, or later, Kierkegaard, and in our own time, George Lindbeck. "Revelation," the late Schelling writes, "is expressly conceived as something which presupposes an *Actus* outside of consciousness, and a relation which the most free cause, God, grants or has granted to the human consciousness not out of necessity but in complete freedom."¹² No system, not even an organic system whose presupposition is freedom, can tolerate receiving its end from without. The difficult thought that the late Schelling asks of us is to conceive of an interruption of the teleologico-organic whole of the ideal-real (the system of reason) which does not annul or invalidate its rationality. The ingressing of the eschatological into the teleological, which re-orientes philosophy as a whole, grants it a new *telos*, one that is not born from its beginning, but remains always somehow external to it, a *telos* that paradoxically must be freely decided upon if it is to bind philosophy into a developmental trajectory that will give its native intuitions and logical concepts a sufficient ground.

¹² F.W.J. Schelling, *Drittes Buch der Philosophie der Offenbarung. Zweiter Theil, Schellings Sämmtliche Werke*, XIV, 3.