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Schelling's Political Naturalism: A Case Study on the State in the Würzburg Identity Philosophy

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Introduction

Schelling is often seen as an apolitical thinker. However, although he never developed a full-fledged political theory like Kant, Fichte, or Hegel, he did reflect on politics, too.¹ Considerations on the political were not merely a side-project for him. He generally built them into a larger philosophical endeavor, for example, in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), the *Stuttgart Seminars* (1810), and the late *Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy* (1847-52). Recently, a growing number of studies have

¹ Habermas, for example, referred to Schelling as a non-political thinker. Jürgen Habermas, "Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus—Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes," in *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), 172. Sandkühler spoke of Schelling's "anti-politics" (*Anti-Politik*) (Hans-Jörg Sandkühler, "F.W.J. Schelling—Philosophie als Seinsgeschichte und Anti-Politik," in *Die praktische Philosophie Schellings und die gegenwärtige Rechtsphilosophie*, ed. Hans-Martin Pawlowski, Stefan Smid, and Rainer Specht [Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 1989]), but later modified this view. See Hans-Jörg Sandkühler, "Die Geschichte, das Recht und der Staat als 'zweite Natur.' Zu Schellings politischer Philosophie," in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 55, no. 2 (2001): 167-95. On Schelling's political thought, see also the classical studies by Claudio Cesa, *La filosofia politica di Schelling* (Bari: Laterza, 1969) and Wilhelm G. Jacobs, "Schellings politische Philosophie," in *Schelling: Seine Bedeutung für eine Philosophie der Natur und der Geschichte*, ed. Ludwig Hasler (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1981). See also Franck Fischbach, "La pensée politique de Schelling," in *Politique et spéculation dans l'idéalisme allemande. Les Etudes philosophiques* 1 (2001): 31-48.

appeared that focus on the traditionally underestimated political aspects of Schelling's thought.² With this essay, I want to contribute to this new appreciation of the political in Schelling. I propose a critical reading of the conception of the state that he developed in the Würzburg period around 1804.³ We can reconstruct his position from the posthumously published *System of the Whole of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Nature in Particular* (1804 [SW VI: 131-576]) and the newly edited 1804 lecture notes.⁴

What Schelling says about the state in this period cannot be dismissed as merely an opinion. It is important to see that his view of the political sphere is perfectly coherent with the metaphysical position he defends. As skimpy as his thoughts about the political may initially appear, they must be taken seriously as a set of genuine philosophical claims that follow from the ontology he puts forward. Schelling's ontology is, around this time, essentially a kind of metaphysical monism. Based on his monism, he constructs a philosophy of the natural and the spiritual world. The latter culminates in the outline of an ideal state.

In the following, I argue in a first step that Schelling's monism entails a kind of *metaphysical naturalism*. By 'metaphysical naturalism' I mean the philosophical conviction that only natural objects exist.⁵ In Schelling's case, these objects are not empirical objects or objects of science but parts of a singular substance, which functions as the ontological basis of all reality. Inspired by Spinoza, Schelling presents this substance as *deus sive natura*, god or nature.⁶ I argue in a second step that Schelling's metaphysical naturalism is intrinsically also a *political* naturalism. His view of the state reveals how his monistic ontology thoroughly determines the human life-world. The theoretical moves that Schelling makes on the ontological level show real-world consequences as they come to bear in the political sphere. The political is, on Schelling's account, nothing that actual human beings would create, shape, or essentially control. Rather, it is completely predetermined on the ontological level.⁷ Schelling's state thus resembles a given natural order that cannot be changed. Because

² See Saitya Brata Das, *The Political Theology of Schelling* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Ryan Scheerlinck, *Philosophie und Religion—Schellings politische Philosophie* (Freiburg: Alber, 2017). See also the volume edited by Sebastian Schwenzfeuer and Lore Hühn, due to appear in 2022: *Wir müssen also auch über den Staat hinaus!*—*Schellings Philosophie des Politischen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, forthcoming).

³ This essay contains some material published in a German text in Johannes-Georg Schüle, "Ontologie und Staat bei Schelling und Spinoza," in *Wir müssen also auch über den Staat hinaus!*—*Schellings Philosophie des Politischen*, ed. Lore Hühn and Sebastian Schwenzfeuer (Baden-Baden: Nomos, forthcoming).

⁴ This material appears in Ryan Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates und die Unterscheidung von Freien und Nicht-Freien. Ein Auszug aus der Pauls-Nachschrift Schelling über Ideal-Philosophie (1804)," *Schelling-Studien* 4 (2016): 207-227.

⁵ On this understanding of metaphysical naturalism, see Geert Keil, "Naturalismus und menschliche Natur," in *Der Ort der Vernunft in einer natürlichen Welt: logische und anthropologische Ortsbestimmungen*, ed. Wolf J. Cramm and Geert Keil (Velbrück: Weilerswist, 2008): 196-7.

⁶ See Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Clare Carlisle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 4ax4d. Schelling does not use the phrase explicitly. However, he speaks of the absolute which grounds his system as God and the nature of the universe.

⁷ Contrary to my reading, Sandkühler has argued that Schelling comes up with pragmatic and functional definitions of the state. Sandkühler, "Die Geschichte," 176.

the structure of the state is completely predetermined in Schelling's ontology, this ontology is already in itself political.

As it establishes a fixed social order, Schelling's political naturalism proves to be deeply problematic. I aim to show that at the core of the problem lies the ontological status of individual entities in general and that of individual human beings in particular. Schelling rigorously denies that individuals truly exist. Consequently, they can hardly claim any authority in the political sphere. How extreme Schelling's view of individuals actually is can be seen if we compare it to Spinoza's political theory. Spinoza's monism is an important inspiration for Schelling. In contrast to Schelling, however, Spinoza does not deny that individuals truly exist. Hence, he is prepared to affirm a democratic social order in which individuals shape their political life-worlds on the basis of their own interests. In this comparison, Schelling's political naturalism does not only fall short of Spinoza's political philosophy. It also falls short of his own earlier conception of the state presented in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* as well. And it demands a reconsideration of the relation between the individual and the state that Schelling eventually undertook in the wake of the *Freedom Essay* (1809) and the *Stuttgart Seminars* (1810).

Schelling's Metaphysical Naturalism

The 1804 *System of the Whole of Philosophy* presents a version of Schelling's so-called identity philosophy. At this stage in the development of his thought, Schelling assumes that an absolute identity constitutes the inner substance of all reality. He describes this identity in the 1804 *System* as a unity of a subjective and an objective pole. The subjective pole stands for an active *affirming* side, the objective pole for a passive side of *being affirmed* (SW VI: 145). The absolute identity of these two poles constitutes the ontological core that Schelling's system posits as the ultimate ground of everything that is. With this, he defends a kind of monism which bears many resemblances to Spinoza's ontology. The absolute identity is said to exist necessarily as one (SW VI: 157; cf. in Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p14), eternal (SW VI: 158; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p19), infinite (SW VI: 160; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p13) substance that does not create an independent world—rather, the world is identical with this very substance (SW VI: 170; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p18). Schelling condenses his fundamental position in probably the shortest possible form when he states: *everything is—in as much as it truly is—God as the absolute identity or substance* (“*Alles, was ist, ist, insofern es ist, Gott?*”; SW VI: 157).⁸

The basic ontological configuration of Schelling's theory is the topic of the *System's* first part. Everything that exists expresses this ontological configuration. Whatever exists embodies the bipolarity of subjectivity and objectivity to a different degree. Schelling's theory of what exists comes in two parts. One lays out a philosophy of nature in the narrower sense. The other contains a philosophy of spirit. In support of the claim that Schelling defends a metaphysical naturalism, it is decisive to see that

⁸ All translations of *The System of the Whole of Philosophy* are mine.

he uses the word “nature” not only in the narrower, but also in a broader sense. Nature in the narrower sense refers to the sphere that we commonly associate with the word “nature.” Schelling presents his insights into nature in this sense from a theory of matter, extending into a theory of plant and animal life, culminating in a theory of the human organism. But Schelling also uses the word “nature” when he refers to the absolute identity as the ground of reality. As nature in this second sense refers to the very ontological structure of the world, Schelling says that his whole philosophy is, properly speaking, a philosophy of nature in the sense of a theory of the universe: “*Naturphilosophie: a theory of the universe [Naturphilosophie—Lehre vom All]*” (SW VI: 494). Schelling’s identification of the philosophy of nature with a theory of the universe does not of course mean that his philosophy would be identical with the philosophy of nature in the narrower sense. Philosophy, for Schelling, is obviously more than a theory of matter, of organisms, physics, and biology. He is not a naturalist in a Quinean sense. Rather, Schelling is a metaphysical naturalist in the sense that he uses the word “nature” for the eternal substance which is the ontological structure of the whole of reality. From Spinoza, he borrows the terms “*natura naturans*” and “*natura naturata*” (SW VI: 199; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p29s). *Natura naturans* stands for the absolute unity as the substance of all reality. *Natura naturata* stands for the actualization of this substance in the sphere of nature in the narrower sense and in the sphere of spirit alike. Schelling equally reduces nature in the narrower sense and the sphere of spirit to this metaphysical structure. As this metaphysical structure is an absolute substance, I propose to call it absolute nature in opposition to nature in the narrower sense. God as absolute nature defines the core of Schelling’s metaphysical naturalism. Schelling’s metaphysical naturalism is reductive in the sense that all phenomena he sets out to explain reproduce the basic structure of absolute nature. The state as well reproduces this metaphysical structure.

From absolute nature as the starting point, Schelling’s ontology sets out to explain the totality of what exists. His theory can be reconstructed as operating on three levels. On the first and fundamental level, Schelling introduces God as absolute nature and, as such, the eternal substance of all reality. On the second level, he aims to explain everything that *exists in general*, e.g., genera and species, natural kinds, generic forms of spirit. What exists in general, according to Schelling, resembles, in fact, Platonic ideas. On the third level he thematizes the existence of individual entities that *manifest* what exists in general.

Schelling takes the step from the first to the second level by way of a complex theory of identity and difference. His first-level claim that everything that truly exists is God implies that God is identical with true being in its entirety. True being is thus an absolute identity. To explain what exists in general requires Schelling to make a distinction between the absolute unity of true being and the many distinct generic things that exist. Schelling’s theory faces the problem that, if true being is an absolute identity, it is hard to see how anything can exist and be different from this unity. He explicitly excludes the possibility that there are differences within God’s absolute nature, especially no essential or qualitative differences (SW VI: 179). God remains a pure unity without any differences. The only differences which Schelling accepts are

differences of quantity (SW VI: 179-81). They consist in a predominance of one of the two poles over the other, of subjectivity over objectivity, of the affirming pole over the one that is affirmed—or vice versa.

To account for the many distinct things that exist, Schelling proposes a theory of quantitative differentiation. According to this theory, matter, for example, is characterized by a predominance of objectivity over subjectivity. Light, in contrast, manifests a prevalence of subjectivity over objectivity. The leading idea in Schelling's account is that each thing that exists can be explained as a manifestation of a certain proportion of subjectivity and objectivity. In this picture, nothing is without subjectivity. Everything has for Schelling a spiritual, ideal side. But nothing exists in an entirely spiritual, ideal sphere either. Everything has an objective, material side too.

Human beings occupy a special place in the quantitatively differentiated totality of what exists in general. In humans, the quantitative difference between subjectivity and objectivity appears, on Schelling's account, balanced and in harmony. His view of the human is heavily influenced by Johann Winckelmann's aesthetic descriptions of classic Greek sculptures that display a perfectly ideal balance between their inner spiritual side and the material objectivity of their body.⁹ Schelling borrows the idea of aesthetic harmony to describe the human being as a real-world manifestation of the very identity of subjectivity and objectivity that exists in God as absolute nature (SW VI: 485-92).

From a structural point of view, it is clear that quantitative differences and their harmonization in the human cannot exist in God if God is an absolute identity of subjectivity and objectivity. If there are quantitative differences, they can only exist outside of God. Against the backdrop of this idea, Schelling states: "*That which is posited as quantitative difference is itself, with regard to the universe, merely posited as (relatively) negated—as non-essences [Nicht-Wesen]*" (SW VI: 180).¹⁰ Schelling says here that quantitative differences have to be regarded as non-essential beings (*Nicht-Wesen*). They fall outside of God and lay outside of being in its full and true sense. Their ontological dignity is, as it were, lower than God's own. However, they can be, such as the human being, near to perfect manifestations or images of God's absolute nature.

This conception of non-essential beings as quantitative differences lays the ground for Schelling's theory of individual entities on the third level. Schelling maintains that every individual is emphatically

... in the universe, and it is not. It *is*, in as much as it is permeated by the infinite notion of God and the universe, it *is not*, in as much as it is something

⁹ Schelling mentions Winckelmann in SW VI, 490. A source for Schelling's view of the human organism can be found in Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Vienna: Phaidon, 1934), 149.

¹⁰ "*Was als quantitative Differenz gesetzt ist, ist in Bezug auf das All selbst nur als (relativ) negiert—als Nicht-Wesen—gesetzt.*" SW VI, 180.

for itself... *Precisely the being and relative non-being of the particular in the universe is the root of all finitude* (SW VI: 181).¹¹

Individuals are thus defined by two aspects. One aspect is their being *in the All*. What Schelling calls *the All* here corresponds to the universe of what exists in general. Every existing individual entity belongs to this universe in as much as it represents a generic determination. Schelling can say that the generic is permeated by the eternal concept of God (*durchdrungen vom unendlichen Begriff Gottes*) in as much as it is characterized by a certain proportion of subjectivity and objectivity—and subjectivity and objectivity are God's own properties. *Being in the universe* thus means having and manifesting a generic essence. This constitutes the *whatness* of things.

The other aspect of an individual's existence is its individuality in the strong sense. Every individual does not only represent generic determinations. It is also a concrete, singular being. Aristotle referred to this dimension as the first substance of a thing that cannot be grasped in concepts. We can only point to it. It constitutes its *thatness*.¹² It is important to see that thatness, for Schelling, is not only something that cannot be conceptually determined. Moreover, he does not refer to it as something like a substance. In a more Platonic spirit, he describes it as *non-being* (*Nichtseyn*; SW VI: 181).¹³ To an even greater extent than that which exists in general, individuality, in the strong sense, thus falls outside the sphere of true being. It does not possess a proper existence.

Schelling's three-level ontology thus holds that (a) God as the one substance of all reality is true being; (b) the quantitatively differentiated universe of generic existence falls outside the realm of true being; (c) individual entities exist only insofar as they instantiate a generic whatness, they do not exist at all insofar as they are concrete singular things.

It is obvious that this theory is inspired to a considerable degree not only by Spinoza but also to a considerable degree by neo-Platonism.¹⁴ On the second and the third levels, there is less being than on the first. This renders the ontological status of individual beings precarious in two ways. First, individual things are said to exist in as much as they instantiate a generic essence. But generic essences fall already outside the sphere of true being. Thus, individuals instantiate a content which does not exist to the fullest possible degree. Secondly, what is more, the thatness of an individual entity does not consist in anything positive. As Schelling describes it as non-being, it consists in nothing but a privation of the universe of generic existence as well as ultimately the absolute unity of true being. Concrete individual existence is thus highly precarious.

¹¹ "... Im All, und es ist auch nicht. Es *ist*, inwiefern es durchdrungen ist vom unendlichen Begriff Gottes und des Alls, es *ist nicht*, inwiefern es etwas für sich ist.... *Eben jenes Seyn und relative Nichtseyn des Besonderen im All ist der Keim der gesamten Endlichkeit.*" SW VI: 181.

¹² See Aristotle's *Categories* 5, 2a13 *passim*.

¹³ Schelling explicitly uses the Platonic "*me on*" (non-being) to characterize the sensible world in SW VI: 229.

¹⁴ See on this Jens Halfwassen, *Auf der Spur des Einen* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2015).

According to this picture, the being of a concrete plant, for example, consists in *nothing but* the fact that it does not fully represent the generic essence it instantiates—and “nothing else” (SW VI: 184). Schelling draws the equivalent consequence explicitly for human beings, too: “The *individual* human being, i.e., is an individual human being not by virtue of the idea but because he is not the idea, the negation of the idea” (SW VI: 191).¹⁵ An individual human being is *this* specific individual human being only insofar as she or he is a privation of the generic determination of the idea of “being human” she or he instantiates. In this perspective, there is hardly anything positive in the thatness of a concrete individual. The negativity of thatness in Schelling resembles the kind of negativity that Plato sees in the sensible world.

Moreover, Schelling connects this ontological precariousness with a practical issue. He is convinced that individual freedom is an illusion: “The kind of freedom that an individual assigns to himself is no freedom but merely the tendency to be absolutely in himself, a tendency which is in itself null and void” (SW VI: 551).¹⁶ Individual freedom is an illusion because it is nothing but a futile, individualistic striving for selfhood. Schelling points out that the unfreedom of individuals is ultimately grounded in the precarious ontological status of finite existence:

The ground of finitude lies, according to our view, exclusively in the **not-being-in-God** of the things as particulars. Since they are essentially or in principle in God, their not-being-in-God can be described as a *fall*—a *defectio*—from God or the universe (SW VI: 552).¹⁷

The negative character of individual entities that Schelling introduces in his ontology thus bears directly on their practical existence. An individual human being is unfree because it is not one with God—and God, as a necessarily existing unity, is not only defined as true being but also as true freedom. Again, Spinoza is in the background: God exists, as Spinoza already said, as a *causa sui* that “exists solely by the necessity of its nature.”¹⁸ Spinoza distinguishes God’s absolute form of existence from the finite existence of entities that “are determined by another to exist.”¹⁹ Schelling compares the ontological difference between God as true being and true freedom on the one hand, and the thatness of individual entities that do not exist with necessity on the other, with the Biblical *fall* of humanity (*ein Abfall*—*eine defectio*). It is thus clear that Schelling’s ontology does not simply operate with neutral descriptive concepts. As it

¹⁵ “Der *einzelne* Mensch z.B. ist einzelner Mensch nicht kraft der Idee, sondern vielmehr *weil er nicht die Idee*, Negation der Idee ist.” SW VI: 191.

¹⁶ “Die Freiheit, welche sich das Individuum als Individuum zuschreibt, ist keine Freiheit, sondern bloße Tendenz absolut in sich selbst zu seyn, die an sich selbst nichtig ist.” SW VI: 551.

¹⁷ “Der Grund der Endlichkeit liegt nach unserer Ansicht einzig in einem **nicht-in-Gott**-Seyn der Dinge als besonderer, welches, da sie doch ihrem *Wesen* nach oder an sich in Gott sind, auch als ein *Abfall*—*eine defectio*—von Gott oder dem All ausgedrückt werden kann.” SW VI: 552.

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1d7.

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1d7.

lays the ground for real-world phenomena, it reveals a normative character as well. Structural decisions that Schelling makes on the level of his ontology eventually come to bear in his view of the state, too. In the political sphere, the ontological status of individual beings remains precarious. Furthermore, Schelling's rejection of individual freedom disqualifies individual freedom as a potential source of political legitimation. Instead, Schelling designs the political sphere completely on the basis of his ontology.

The fact that Schelling ascribes an ontologically weak status to individual entities and rejects individual freedom may seem to be in line with Spinoza's ontology. In truth, however, there are important differences between Spinoza and Schelling concerning both the ontological status of individual entities and the critique of individual freedom.

It is well known that Spinoza's monism—like Schelling's—rejects the idea that individual entities existed independently of the one substance of all reality. But admittedly—in contrast to Schelling—Spinoza still secures a positive ontological status for individual entities. He does not determine individual things only negatively in relation to the absolute substance. In 1p15 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza postulates that all things exist never independently of God but only *in God*. It is remarkable that in 1804 Schelling does not use the preposition “in” when he defines God as true being. His claim is not that everything is *in God*.²⁰ His claim is that everything that truly exists *is God*. Hence, only God truly exists for him, and nothing exists in God that could be differentiated. On the contrary, the fact that individual entities exist for Spinoza immanently in God implies that they never fall outside of God. Precisely because there is only God-immanent existence, there is no negative sphere in Spinoza's conception that would simply lie outside of the one substance of all reality. When Spinoza states in the corollary to 1p25 of the *Ethics* that individual things are nothing but finite modifications of God that express God's attributes, he underlines that individual entities actualize God's being.²¹ As expressive modifications *of* God they remain *in God*.

In the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza goes a step further and attributes a striving for self-preservation—a *conatus*—to all entities. The *conatus* defines the actual essence of an individual thing.²² Spinoza does not only *describe* the *conatus*. He holds the view that reason is not opposed to the striving for individual self-preservation. According to him, everything *should* in fact strive for the preservation of its existence.²³ Succeeding in self-preservation is even the source of joy.²⁴ When Spinoza rejects individual freedom, he turns against the idea that individuals are capable of independently defining purposes for themselves that could function as reasons for their actions.²⁵ He holds that individuals are in truth part of a great chain of causes

²⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p15. It should be noted that Schelling uses exactly this expression, all things exist in God, five years later in the *Freedom Essay*. See Schelling (SW VII: 347; 349; 355).—Ed.

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p25.

²² Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3p7.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p18s.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p18s.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1app.

in which everything is eternally predetermined and in this sense “determined by another to exist and act according to a certain and definite law.”²⁶ Yet, Spinoza does still defend the view that individual human beings can nevertheless achieve a kind of freedom. This kind of freedom consists in extending *knowledge* as far as possible. Spinoza’s idea is that if I know what truly benefits my striving for self-preservation, I reduce the ways in which I passively depend on heteronomous affects. The more I know, the greater my spiritual autonomy.²⁷ It is a sharp contrast to Schelling insofar as he does not affirm a *conatus*. He rather speaks of the “*mere impotency*,” the “*bloße Ohnmacht*,” of individual things (SW VI: 197). If there is a sublime form of *conatus* to be found in Schelling, it consists in an ultimately sinful striving to be oneself outside of God. As we shall see, the difference between Schelling’s and Spinoza’s views of the ontological status of individual entities fundamentally predisposes the space they are prepared to cede to the individual in the political sphere.

Schelling’s Political Metaphysical Naturalism

The *System of the Whole of Philosophy* was published posthumously on the basis of texts, edited by his son Karl, that stem from Schelling’s lectures at the University of Würzburg. If we infer Schelling’s position from the *System*, we see that he turns to the state only on the final two pages of the book. He defines the state as an objective unity in which science, religion, and art are one (SW VI: 575). The state—like the human being at the top of the natural world—is presented as a close-to-perfect manifestation of the one eternal substance of all reality. Schelling presents the state furthermore as an objective institutional framework that enables human subjects to lead a philosophical life in which they may enjoy and participate “in everything good and beautiful in a public life” (SW VI: 575).²⁸ He makes it clear that he does not want to describe an actual existing state but rather—like Plato—an *ideal state*.

On the one hand, Schelling’s ideal state occupies a prominent position at the climax of the *System of the Whole of Philosophy*. This speaks for its importance. On the other hand, however, the fact that Schelling devotes only two pages to it may indeed suggest that developing a detailed view of the political order was not of great importance to him. Yet, recently published notes by Johann Peter Pauls of Schelling’s lectures in Würzburg prove that when he actually presented on the state, he dealt with it to a much larger extent than the *System of the Whole of Philosophy* indicates.²⁹ This newly found material is an illuminating supplement to the standard version of the *System*.

It is already evident in the established text of the *System of the Whole of Philosophy* that Schelling’s state is not a democracy. Since he sees individual freedom as a sinful illusion, it is impossible for him to affirm that,

²⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1d7.

²⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p38.

²⁸ “... an allem Guten und Schönen in einem öffentlichen Leben.” SW VI: 575.

²⁹ See Scheerlinck, “Die Konstruktion des Staates,” 207-27.

... in acting, the human being could be satisfied with the arbitrariness and freedom of all. To expect a rational development from that would be as foolish as to expect it from a play without a poet and in which everyone played their part independently at their own discretion (SW VI: 555).³⁰

Schelling's worry is that grounding government on the freedom of all would surrender society to arbitrariness. The state thus needs, on his account, a kind of government that is not grounded on the freedom of all. While the *System of the Whole of Philosophy* does not tell us anything about this kind of government, the newly published material shows that Schelling envisioned a state with two classes of people: a class of *the free* and a class of *the unfree*.³¹

Schelling's view of a class society is once more conspicuously influenced by Plato. He tells us that the class of the unfree is occupied with personal affairs. The unfree possess private property, have a job, and lead a family life.³² They have nothing to do with the administration of the state. The government is taken over exclusively by the class of the free. Among them are philosophers, soldiers, lawmakers, and artists.³³ The freedom of the free becomes manifest in the fact that they do not possess private property. Neither do they work. The unfree supply them with all of their material needs. In turn, the free defend the state and the households of the unfree against enemies and establish a legal order.³⁴ Schelling characterizes the class of the free as a collective of brave and virtuous men who devote all their energy to the well-being and administration of society. The laws they make emanate from reason—that is from the one substance, god's absolute nature—and they are laws for the unfree alone.³⁵

It is important to see how this political vision fits into the ontological framework of Schelling's Würzburg identity philosophy. I propose to distinguish two axes in Schelling's description. The first one is a *horizontal* axis on which the two classes manifest the two poles of everything that exists. The free represent the subjective pole and the unfree represent the objective pole of God's absolute nature. Both together

³⁰ "... der Mensch im Handeln sich mit der Willkür und Freiheit aller begnügen [könnte], von welcher ... eine vernünftige Entwicklung zu erwarten ebenso thöricht wäre, als sie von einem Schauspiel erwarten, das keinen Dichter hat, und in dem jeder für sich und nach Gefallen seine Rolle spielt." SW VI: 555.

³¹ Schelling articulates such a view also in the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion* (SW VI: 65) and already in the 1802 *Lectures on the Method of Academic Studies* (SW V: 260-1; 314-5). Moreover, he continues to speak of a "distinction between rulers and ruled that is ... derived from the world of ideas [*von der Ideenwelt sich beschreibenden Unterschied zwischen Herrschenden und Beherrschten*]" (SW XI: 540) in Lecture 23 of the *Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy*, published in English as part of "Schelling's Late Political Philosophy: Lectures 22-24 of the Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy," trans. Kyla Bruff, *Kabiri* 2: 93-135, here 109.

³² Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 224.

³³ Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 226.

³⁴ Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 219-20.

³⁵ Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 223.

mirror the ontological structure of the one substance that is at the basis of all reality. The division into two classes is thus in complete accordance with the basic layout of Schelling's metaphysical naturalism. A consequence of the metaphysical grounding of the state is that the dual structure of society neither needs to be affirmed nor authorized by the people who live in that state. As it depends on what Schelling sees as true being, the state is neither a genuine result of human choice nor a product of human activity. Schelling's ontology rather demands from a divine standpoint, as it were, an oppositional social order of free and unfree people. Insofar as the free and the unfree represent subjectivity and objectivity, Schelling also describes them as the soul and body of the state.³⁶

The second axis implies a *vertical* hierarchy. In this perspective, Schelling describes the free as standing in a closer relationship with the eternal substance than the unfree. In contrast to the free, the unfree are linked to the sphere of individual entities.³⁷ While the first axis suggests that both classes are on the same level and equally necessary to manifest the dual structure of the eternal substance, the second axis introduces a precedence of the free over the unfree. This precedence is grounded in the fact that the opposition between the two classes is defined by a difference in degree as to their being. The free stand closer to God and have thus "more" being than the unfree who exist farther away from God.

In Schelling's description of the two classes, it may seem at first as if the freedom of the free consisted solely in their detachment from the responsibility to cater to their own material needs. Correspondingly, the unfreedom of the unfree seems to consist in their involvement in common practices that secure their subsistence. However, Schelling's definition of freedom in his lectures states: "*Freedom is a defection from everything that is concrete, unfreedom is a defection from the universal and the ideal.*"³⁸ This definition does not only pertain to the ways of life that Schelling associates with the two classes. It contains a stronger claim: the unfreedom of the individual is due to a defection from the true freedom of God's absolute nature. Freedom as a renunciation of everything concrete is conceived of as a reversal of this defection and thus a return to God. In this perspective, the unfreedom of the unfree stems first and foremost from the fact that they are linked to the sphere of individual entities who have, according to Schelling, a precarious ontological status and do not have access to true freedom. The free, in contrast, can ultimately only be those who maintain a particularly close relationship to the divine substance.

It is clear that Schelling developed his view of the ideal state entirely on the basis of and according to the ontology he defends. The precarious ontological status of individuals and the denial of individual freedom fundamentally define the roles that humans may play in society. The space for political activity in this state is as small as it is ontologically determined from the bottom up. Schelling's ontology proves to be

³⁶ Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 217-8.

³⁷ Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 216.

³⁸ "Freyheit ist Lossagung von allem Concreten, die Nicht-Freyheit Lossagen vom Allgemeinen und Idealen" (Schelling according to Pauls in Scheerlinck, "Die Konstruktion des Staates," 223).

political as it predetermines society even before he turns explicitly to the state and its inner constitution.

It is both worrisome and coherent with Schelling's ontology that the free legislate only for the unfree. The free do not need laws precisely because they immediately actualize freedom without any rules in that they exist in a closeness to the divine substance, eventually even in a unification with God. Within the framework of his theory, Schelling can argue that only those who do not achieve such a unification need guidance by laws. The unfree who are not in direct contact with God depend on the guidance of the free. The laws help them to learn externally what they do not know through immediate insight, immediate unity, or at least closeness to God. As coherent as it may be, this structure of society resembles an elitist theocracy.

It is instructive to see that Spinoza comes to an entirely different view of the political on the grounds of his ontology. Spinoza grants a positive ontological status to individual beings. While Schelling derives his political idea directly from God's absolute nature, Spinoza develops his political philosophy on the basis of the individual's *conatus*. Driven by the *conatus*, an individual wants whatever she or he finds appropriate to support her or his striving for self-preservation. Freedom can be achieved by an individual through knowledge of what truly benefits her or his *conatus*. Among the insights into what truly serves an individual's *conatus* counts, as Spinoza outlines in 4p18 and 4p35 of the *Ethics*, that there is nothing more useful to a human being than another human being who leads a life guided by reason.³⁹ He says against Hobbes, "*A human being is a God to another human being (homine hominem Deus esse).*"⁴⁰

The difference between Schelling and Spinoza can hardly be exemplified in a clearer way. If we encounter God in another human being, we are never really outside of God's absolute nature. There is thus no necessity to return to God. Rather, we encounter God everywhere we meet other people. Spinoza argues in this very context for the necessity of a state because it is hard for humans to lead an independent life guided by reason and not by affect. Political institutions help to strengthen reason against affective temptations that lead our self-interest astray.

In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza develops his political philosophy further. He argues that all political power is derived from the *potentia multitudinis*, the power of the multitude.⁴¹ The multitude is essentially a group of individuals who come together to collectively pursue their *conatus*. As they cooperate, the potential to succeed in the strife for self-preservation grows for each individual. With the power of the multitude, Spinoza introduces a basic democratic principle at the heart of political legitimacy at large.⁴² All specific forms of government that Spinoza discusses (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) depend on this principle. It is of fundamental importance

³⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p18s.

⁴⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p35s. Translation here is mine; George Eliot translates this as: "The God of man is man."

⁴¹ Baruch de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ed. and trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 2.17.

⁴² On this point, see Gunnar Hindrichs, ed., *Die Macht der Menge: Über die Aktualität einer Denkfigur Spinozas* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006); Martin Saar, *Die Immanenz der Macht: Politische Theorie nach Spinoza* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

because it legitimizes political power from the people to the state. For Spinoza, the standard by which political legitimacy must be judged is the aggregated *conatus* of a multiplicity of individuals. It is not God or the eternal substance as such.

The difference between Schelling's and Spinoza's positions can be traced back to the ontological status they grant to the individual. The fact that the ontological status of the individual is precarious in Schelling prohibits him for principal reasons from affirming a democratic position. If the individual is supposed to play a political role, it cannot be disqualified already on the level of ontology. Because Schelling denies that the individual truly exists, he cannot assign a substantial role to it in any sphere of the actual world. Spinoza's achievement is that he is a monist and a metaphysical naturalist who is even committed to necessitarianism. But he nevertheless grants a surprisingly large space for the individual and a democratic form of finite social life. Spinoza shows that monism does not necessarily exclude the sphere of individuality, neither ontologically nor politically. Schelling's view of the state in the 1804 identity philosophy falls short of this important feature of Spinoza's position. Schelling's conception of the state in 1804 is totalitarian and as such deeply problematic.

The conviction that individuals do not truly exist distinguishes Schelling's position not only from the one Spinoza defends. In 1804, Schelling even falls short of his own view of the state that he defended only four years earlier in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*. The principal function of the state then consisted precisely in securing individual freedom. Schelling refers to individual freedom indeed as "the holiest":

The holiest ought not to be entrusted to chance. It must be made impossible, through the constraint of an unbreakable law, that in the interaction of all the freedom of the individual should be abolished (SW III: 582).⁴³

Securing the freedom of the individual can only be achieved, according to the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, if the state is a "second nature":

A second and higher nature must, as it were, be set up over the first, governed by a natural law quite different, however, from that which prevails in visible nature, namely a natural law on behalf of freedom. As inexorably, and with the same iron necessity where by effect follows cause in sensible nature, an attack upon freedom of another must be succeeded, in this second nature, by an instantaneous counter to the self-interested drive (SW III: 582).⁴⁴

The state here resembles *nature* because its laws are as strict as natural laws. However, the state is a *second* nature because it is not a given. It is set-up and created by humans

⁴³ F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heach (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 195.

⁴⁴ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, 195.

on behalf of their freedom. The difference of this conception to the one Schelling defends in Würzburg is remarkable: not only does he affirm individual freedom in 1800, he sees the state as a product of human activity.⁴⁵ This appreciation of human practice and individual freedom drops out in 1804.

Yet the Würzburg conception of the state was not Schelling's last word on the subject. As he began to rethink his view of individual freedom in the *Freedom Essay* (1809), he modified his conception of the state too. He presented an alternative conception of the political sphere in the *Stuttgart Seminars* (1810), where he tried to combine his new appreciation of individual freedom with the form of a philosophical system that informed his identity philosophy. The state appears still as a second nature but now as a "curse" that must be overcome:

The natural unity, this second nature superimposed on the first, to which man must necessarily take recourse, is the *state*; and, to put it bluntly, the state is thus a consequence of the curse that has been placed on humanity. Because man no longer has God for his unity, he must submit to a material unity (SW VII: 461).⁴⁶

The state thus fills a void. It is set up to overcome a fundamental disunity among humans. It is striking that Schelling thinks at this point that not only some human beings (the unfree) are separated from God but *humanity* at large. While the state tries to reunite humanity, Schelling is convinced that in truth "only *God* can be the unity of free beings" (SW VII: 461).⁴⁷ He argues that the state as a merely material power faces the problem that a "free spirit . . . will never consider [such] a natural unity sufficient, and a higher talisman is required; consequently, any unity that originates in the state remains inevitably precarious and provisional" (SW VII: 461).⁴⁸ What drives humans beyond the state is thus precisely their individual freedom. Neither their ontological status nor their freedom seem to be precarious. Instead, what is precarious is the state. Hence, it must be overcome.

The idea of an overcoming of the state in the name of freedom appears of course already in the so-called *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*. "We must therefore go beyond the state! For every state must treat free human beings as if they

⁴⁵ Schelling assigns a constitutive role to god also in 1800. He argues that a particular state can only persist if there is "an organization extending beyond the individual state, a federation of all states, who mutually guarantee their respective regimes" (SW III, 586-7; transl. Heach, 198). Inspired by Kant, Schelling argues for a "state of states" and "an international tribunal, composed of members of all civilized nations, and having at its command against each rebellious state-individual the power of all the rest" (SW III, 586-7; transl. Heach, 198). However, Schelling argues, unlike Kant, that the emergence of such an international order depends ultimately on an absolute identity of necessity and contingency at the heart of all human activity.

⁴⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *Stuttgart Seminars*, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. & ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 227.

⁴⁷ Schelling, *Stuttgart Seminars*, 226.

⁴⁸ Schelling, *Stuttgart Seminars*, 226.

were cogs in a machine; but that it should not do; therefore it should *cease* to exist.”⁴⁹ Even though the authorship of this text remains unclear, it bears a striking resemblance to Schelling’s view of the state after the *Freedom Essay*. The idea of an overcoming of the state still informs his latest text, the *Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy*: “The task is therefore: to provide the individual with the greatest possible freedom (autarchy), freedom, namely, that rises above and, as it were, beyond the state” (SW XI: 543).⁵⁰ Schelling’s expectation is that a true ethical community may be prepared but never fully actualized in an institutional framework. It rather requires an inner bond of the heart.⁵¹ The fact that Schelling describes the ethical community he has in mind often in religious metaphors may make it difficult for secular readers to appreciate its philosophical import. Yet, Schelling’s position can be seen as a philosophical plea for the idea that individual human freedom can ultimately only be fully actualized in informal relations among good-willed individuals. Such a community would be inspired not by laws but by love and—as I would like to read it—original and broad forms of solidarity.

In light of the conceptions of the state that Schelling put forward before and after 1804, his political naturalism during the Würzburg period certainly appears exceptional. It is a reminder of the dangers that arise from the attempt to deduce a political order from a putative metaphysical truth. We cannot give up on the idea that a state must freely be established and organized by humans for humans. A metaphysics which rejects the possibility of free human action is therefore never adequate. Yet if we defend the idea against the Schelling of 1804 that the state must be the product of human freedom, the question of the later Schelling remains to be discussed: is the state also a sphere in which human freedom can be fully actualized?

⁴⁹ Anonymous, “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism,” in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 4.

⁵⁰ Schelling, *Schelling’s Late Philosophy: Lectures 22-24*, 121.

⁵¹ See Kyla Bruff, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Schelling’s Late Philosophy: Lectures 22-24*, 94.