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In the Name of the Future: Prophecy as Critique in Schelling and Tillich

Maximilian Hauer

Schelling and the State

My goal in this paper is to show how the question of the future in Schelling can be a starting point for a political reading of his metaphysics. Since the 1960s, German Schelling researchers like Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Jörg Sandkühler have repeatedly reiterated their critical judgment that “Schelling is not a political thinker.”¹ When we look at Schelling’s work, it quickly becomes apparent that political philosophy in the narrower sense occupies a very small space in it.

However, the judgment mentioned above is not primarily founded on the low number of pages devoted to the issue. The problem runs deeper than that. Schelling neglects the political sphere because his account of this aspect of the human being is deeply pessimistic. This pessimism makes him transcend the sphere of the political in favor of other layers of reality. Already in his 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, the problem of contingency is at the root of Schelling’s doubts concerning the progressive course of political history (see SW III: 584f., 597ff.).² These concerns arise even more urgently in Schelling’s later development. By introducing the concepts of evil, sin, and the fall into his metaphysics, Schelling’s account of human history

¹ Jürgen Habermas, “Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus—Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes,” in *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), 172. Hans Jörg Sandkühler, *Freiheit und Wirklichkeit. Zur Dialektik von Politik und Philosophie bei Schelling* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), 10, 27, 33, 149.

² See Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 196f., 206ff.



seems to become overall bleak. Human nature after the fall is conceived as deeply distorted. Humans are now ruled by egoistic self-will and therefore a new form of life emerges which is “false, a life of mendacity, a growth of restlessness and decay” (SW VII: 366).³ This sick form of life is shaped by the (auto-) destructive competition of egoistic, self-centered individuals. The unity of humankind has vanished.

Under these conditions of corrupted human nature, the state is the necessary means to re-establish an external unity amongst these antagonistic selfish atoms (see SW VII: 460ff.).⁴ The state is a physical force to prevent the complete dispersal of humankind into chaos. However, the unity guaranteed by the state always remains particular, deficient, and precarious. The state can never be the organ of completion of human personality in institutionalizing relations of recognition. It is a necessary expression of alienation, not the means of overcoming it.

While some of Schelling’s remarks on the state are harsh, he certainly has no inclinations towards anarchism. Quite the opposite: the state is the futile yet justified endeavor to establish a merely formal unity, forged with the help of force and violence (see SW XI: 553).⁵ Schelling does not believe in the possibility of shaping the state beyond its core function, and condemns ambitions to establish a political state according to ideals of reason as hubris (see SW XI: 546ff.).⁶

Various scholars from a Post-Hegelian and Marxist backgrounds, like the ones aforementioned, have subjected this theory of the political to fierce criticism. Habermas speaks of the “positivism” of late Schelling,⁷ thereby denouncing Schelling’s acceptance of any existing political authority and its exemption from critique and justification. Hans-Jürgen Sandkühler adds to this by pointing to what he calls the “derealization” of history in Schelling.⁸ According to Sandkühler, Schelling abandons the perspective of mundane progress in favor of a metaphysical construction of decay. This construction renders profane human action insubstantial and ephemeral because it has no impact on the fundamental occurrences that take place between God and humankind, such as creation, the fall, and redemption. In this view not only does Schelling have no political philosophy, as Habermas put it, he is a staunch advocate of “anti-politics” as Sandkühler has it.⁹

³ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 34.

⁴ Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars,” in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 226ff. This conception of the state is Augustinian in its roots. See Ernst Cassirer, *Der Mythos des Staates. Philosophische Grundlagen politischen Verhaltens* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1985), 143ff.

⁵ See Schelling, “Lectures 22–24 of the *Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy*,” trans. Kyla Bruff, *Kabiri* II (2020): 122.

⁶ See Schelling, “Lectures 22–24 of the *Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy*,” 117ff.

⁷ Habermas, “Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus,” 176.

⁸ Hans Jörg Sandkühler, “Geschichte und Entfremdung. Zur Differenz des Hegelschen und Schellingschen Systems oder Hegels Kritik der konterrevolutionären Entwirklichung der Geschichte und ihrer Philosophie,” in *Hegel-Jahrbuch 1968/1969*, ed. Wilhelm R. Beyer on behalf of the Hegel-Gesellschaft (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1970), 107–122.

⁹ Sandkühler, *Freiheit und Wirklichkeit*, 33. For a sympathetic account of Schelling’s anti-politics, see André Schmiljun, *Zwischen Modernität und Konservatismus. Eine Untersuchung zum Begriff der Antipolitik bei F.W.J.*

Mythology and Judaism

We do not understand Schelling's abstinence from politics if we think of him as a resigned cynic who accepts the pathologies of egoism as a given feature of human nature. Furthermore, we shouldn't confuse his lack of interest in politics with classical Greek intellectualism, which retreats from the imperfection of finite being in favor of a contemplation of eternal, ideal essences (see SW XI: 558ff.).¹⁰

Schelling does not treat alienation as a general feature of human existence but rather as a historical experience. Therefore, alienation does not have the final say in Schelling's theory. By reflecting on the beginning of alienation in a historical deed, we can also imagine an end of it (see SW XII: 38). However, we have not reached this end yet; reconciliation is not the present state of affairs, but a hope for the future. While Schelling does not concede progress in political history, where powers wax and wane, he clearly embraces the idea of a new being that would transcend the present stage of alienation. The appearance of the new in history, however, seems to be detached from political history—we have to look for it in the relation between humankind and God. This decisive relationship is documented in the history of mythology and revelation.

In his *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, Schelling understands mythology as a form of religious belief that fits perfectly well to the human condition after the fall. The fall alters human nature, the relations within humanity, and the religious consciousness, that is to say, the human relation to God. This deed also leads to the dissolution of humankind into different peoples, with different languages and particular gods, i.e., it instigates the mythological process.

Now, instead of a united humankind, there are distinct people separated by different religious obligations. In this period, consciousness is tormented by the rule of different gods, powers of being that gain control over humans, who cannot distance themselves from them (see SW XI: 18f.).¹¹ Humans take these forces as a given, their power over the human mind emerges in an unconscious, necessary way (see SW XI: 245f.).¹² Mythology reflects a stage of total immanence, unconsciousness, and fear.

Against the backdrop of this desperate situation, Schelling highlights the special meaning of Judaism for the religious history of humankind. Its role is to preserve the remembrance of the old, unified God in an epoch when humankind is

Schelling (1775–1854) (Berlin: Dissertation at Humboldt Universität, 2014), <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/dissertationen/schmiljun-andre-2014-11-03/PDF/schmiljun.pdf>.

¹⁰ See Schelling, "Lectures 22–24 of the Presentation of the Purely Rational Philosophy," 125ff. With reference to Schelling, Paul Tillich further elaborates on the difference between Greek intellectualism and Christian existentialism in his essay "Philosophie und Schicksal," in *Philosophie und Schicksal. Schriften zur Erkenntnislehre und Existenzphilosophie*, Gesammelte Werke vol. IV, ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 23–35.

¹¹ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger, with a preface by Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 17f.

¹² See Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 170f.



torn into the succession of mythological gods. By clinging to that old God, they also commit to a state of unified humankind, with one religious commitment. Correspondingly, national particularism is closely linked with polytheism (see SW XI: 100ff.).¹³ Judaism remains the *representative* of humanity in the state of humanity's objective dissolution (see SW XI: 159f.).¹⁴ Therefore, Judaism is at odds with the new order of things in the mythological era, a "non-nation" ("*Nichtvolk*") (SW XI: 156)¹⁵ and an alien in the world of particular nations.

We might now suppose that Judaism is solely a conservative force for Schelling, as it remains loyal to the God of the origin that the other nations have abandoned. However, according to Schelling, Judaism transcends the seemingly eternal world of mythology in a twofold way. It is not only rooted in tradition but also directed forwards, towards a future that will transcend the current mythological state of human affairs.

The different names of God in Judaism express this complexity.¹⁶ God is not only "the Almighty," "The Master of Heaven and Earth," or the "god, *who always was*." In the course of history, he also reveals himself as the true God, the God coming into being. This is the meaning of the Name Jehovah, as it was revealed to Moses in the desert: "I will be who I will be" (SW XI: 171).¹⁷ We have to understand God as "he who is in the future ... who now is only becoming, who *will* be in the future" (SW XI: 172).¹⁸ Therefore, Judaism truly is "the religion of the future" (SW XI: 171).¹⁹ Within Judaism, though, "the actual and proper principle of the future is set in the realm of prophets" (SW XI: 174).²⁰ Prophetism is the determined institution that preserves a staunch orientation towards the future. The prophets cultivate the hope of a coming salvation that transcends the status quo of the present straits. All the pledges this God gives concern the future; all he gives are promises. The content of these promises is

¹³ See Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 73ff.

¹⁴ See Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 112f.

¹⁵ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 111, translation modified. In his research on the semantic structure of modern anti-Semitism, Klaus Holz has shown that the figure of "the Jew" usually functions as a "figuration of the third" (*Figur des Dritten*), a misfit in the modern world of nation-states. This means that within the logic of anti-Semitism, "the Jew" is not just a representative of *another* nation, but rather an elusive figure that runs counter to the whole *category* of the modern nation-state. See Klaus Holz, "Der Jude. Dritter der Nationen," in *Die Figur des Dritten. Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Paradigma*, ed. Eva Eßlinger, Tobias Schlechtriemen, Doris Schweitzer, Alexander Zons (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 292-303. Schelling, too, sketches Judaism as a figuration of the third. However, he does not share the negative and hateful judgments of anti-Semitic agitation. This is because Schelling does not support the division of humankind into different nations. On the contrary, he envisions overcoming national divisions and a reunification of humankind e.g., in his discussion of Pentecost in the *Historical-Critical Introduction* (SW XI: 108f.).

¹⁶ For Schelling's discussion of these various names and their meaning, see *Historical-critical Introduction*, 113ff. (SW XI: 160ff.).

¹⁷ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 120. Gunnar Hindrichs has recently suggested an interesting political reading of this name of God in his book *Philosophie der Revolution* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 314f.

¹⁸ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 120.

¹⁹ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 120.

²⁰ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 121.

not a position of power for the Jewish people, Schelling emphasizes, but rather the reunification of all the scattered nations (see SW XI: 172).²¹

Paul Tillich on Prophecy and Socialism

In his theory of politics, Paul Tillich provides an original transformation of Schelling's principle of prophecy. Schelling's work had a deep impact on the German theologian and philosopher from early on, before World War I. His 1910 doctoral thesis dealt with the question of late Schelling's construction of a history of religion.²² In the 1920s, Tillich not only developed the outlines of his systematic theology, but also intervened in the public discourse of the Weimar Republic as a dedicated and politically committed intellectual. He had a formative influence on religious socialism and published numerous articles in favor of a dialogue of socialism and Christianity.

While Tillich had written extensively on eschatology, prophecy, and religious socialism throughout the 1920s and 1930s, this engagement peaked in his 1933 monograph, *The Socialist Decision*, which the National Socialist regime confiscated immediately after its publication. This repression came as no surprise considering the thesis of the book. *The Socialist Decision* criticizes fascism and liberal capitalism alike and passionately promotes religious socialism as the only truly human alternative to the contemporary crisis of capitalist society.

While other socialists explained the emergence of fascism by reference to the economic structure of capitalism and the interests of certain factions of capital, Tillich chose a completely different approach. He situates contemporary ideological struggles in a broad speculative narrative that comprises the whole of human history. The metaphysical roots of this universal history lie in the very nature of human beings.²³

According to Tillich, what structures human history is the antagonism of two distinct principles: mythology and prophecy. Both principles reflect different aspects of human nature. For human being is not just some sort of "being" that is identical with itself ("Sein"), but of a duplicate nature, conscious being ("bewusstes Sein").²⁴ This feature gives us the capacity to understand and fulfill ethical demands as well as the capacity to ask questions about ourselves and others. Furthermore, we can reflect on our situation in the world and realize that we owe our existence mainly to exterior forces. Naturally, an existential question arises: "Where do I come from?"

Mythology gives an answer to that question. Mythology is a consciousness of the powerful *origins* of being and the veneration of these forces: We belong to and owe our existence and our identity to kinship and earth, i.e., blood and soil, as well as traditions, authorities, or established social groups. Every myth is essentially a tribute to some kind of origin. Mythology conceives humans as standing in continuity with

²¹ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 120f.

²² Paul Tillich, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Konstruktion in Schellings positiver Philosophie, ihre Voraussetzungen und Prinzipien* (Breslau: H. Fleischmann, 1910).

²³ See Paul Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, preface by Klaus Heinrich (Berlin: Medusa Verlag, 1980), 16-34.

²⁴ See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 21.



these sacred origins. Humans stem from the origins, owe their power to the origins, and go back into the origin when they die—this is the eternal cycle of life and death, growth and decay. Where the cycle dominates the cultural imagery, space rules over time.²⁵ According to Tillich, mythological thought entails a specific political commitment: it is the basis for conservative and romantic politics.

Nevertheless, there is a second aspect of human nature: the experience of consciousness, question, and demand. From here arises a second existential question: “To what end?” The dimension of ought and shall transcend the cycle of mere being. It breaks the absolute power of the origin in the name of an absolute yet still unrealized demand. The demand aims at something that does not yet exist but should exist in the future—Tillich calls this the absolute demand of justice. Here, time rules over space. This question is represented by a certain religious principle too: the principle of prophecy. Again, this religious principle is the basis for certain political forces.

By claiming that the Jewish Prophets were the first to question mythological authorities in the name of future justice, Tillich follows Schelling’s account. However, Tillich puts much more emphasis on the fact that this eschatological striving for a just future implicates severe social conflicts. The orientation towards a radically different future cannot leave the present social order unchallenged. Consequently, the prophets fought against society’s bonds to the soil. They devaluated aristocracy and kingship, nationality, and the ritual traditions guarded by a caste of priests. The Old Testament is a book of universal meaning precisely because it questions Jewish national traditions, and in the name of universality and justice contains a critical dynamic of self-transcendence.

Another crucial difference between Schelling’s account of prophecy and Tillich’s appropriation lies in the historical range of the concept of prophecy. For Schelling, prophecy is a distinct phenomenon of the past, it occurs in the ancient history of the Jewish people. What is more, the hopes, expectations, and promises of the Old Testament prophecy are fulfilled with the Christ event (see SW XI: 177f.).²⁶ For Tillich, however, prophecy is a principle that is not yet exhausted. Jewish prophecy is but the first realization of a dynamic principle in history.²⁷ This principle is sufficiently potent to critically transcend its own manifestations. Therefore, there were several consecutive realizations of it throughout the history of Christianity. Tillich interprets Protestantism as an expression of the prophetic principle because it subjected all the traditions, hierarchies, and mythological remnants of the Catholic Church to criticism.²⁸

Tillich’s extension of prophecy does not stop here. Both, Catholic and Protestant churches have largely lost their prophetic character during the last

²⁵ For this particular aspect, see Paul Tillich, “Der Widerstreit von Zeit und Raum,” in *Der Widerstreit von Zeit und Raum Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie* Gesammelte Werke vol. VI, ed. Renate Albrecht, Hildegard Behrmann (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1963), 140–148.

²⁶ See Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction*, 124f.

²⁷ See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 22f.

²⁸ See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 49.

centuries.²⁹ They became hierarchical institutions closely connected to the ruling authorities. Hardly any true expectation of the coming Kingdom of God on earth still lives in them. Salvation and fulfillment are now private issues that only concern the individual soul and will not alter the social order and being in general.³⁰ In this situation, the principle of prophecy now realizes itself beyond Christian religion.

According to Tillich, the most important contemporary manifestation of prophecy is the socialist movement.³¹ Socialists experience the present as torn, alienating and unjustified.³² Within their circles, humans still live in the expectation of the radically new, a new order of being. They live in hope for a future that will be more just and fulfilling. This is why Tillich calls socialism prophetic in its substance.

At the same time, Tillich describes the fascist powers of his time as deeply committed to mythological powers of all kinds. They deify blood, soil, and social authority and imagine humans as fully determined by these (supposedly) natural forces. In addition, they pit their own particular belonging against that of other “races,” thereby cultivating war and oppression and denying the demand of universal justice. Therefore, the contemporary confrontation between fascism and socialism has its predecessors in the fight between mythology and monotheism.

Tillich’s reading of the late Schelling offers us a starting point for a political reading of Schelling’s philosophy. Tillich picks up Schelling’s distinction between mythology and prophecy, and creatively transforms them into a powerful conceptual framework for political theory. This framework allowed him to not only to critically interpret his era but also to intervene in the political debate on the eve of the rise of fascism in Germany. As authoritarianism and ethnocentrism gain traction around the globe again, Tillich’s insights into the dangers of political mythologies are indispensable for orientation in our own times.

²⁹ See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 87.

³⁰ See Paul Tillich, “Eschatologie und Geschichte,” in *Der Widerstreit von Zeit und Raum. Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie*. Gesammelte Werke vol. VI, ed. Renate Albrecht, Hildegard Behrmann (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1963), 77. See Jacob Taubes’ similar diagnosis of the devaluation and individualization of eschatology within the history of Christianity: *Abendländische Eschatologie*, with an appendix by Jacob Taubes, (München: Matthes und Seitz, 1991), 71ff.

³¹ See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 85–94. Tillich is far from being the only German intellectual in the first half of the 20th century to demonstrate what Michael Löwy has called the “Elective Affinity” of (Jewish) eschatology and socialism. See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Verso, 2017). However, as Tillich is a renowned Schelling scholar, who integrated Schellingian thoughts in his work, his contribution to this broad discourse of “anti-capitalist romanticism” (Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 23) is of particular interest.

³² See Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, 57.

