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***The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling:
The Turn to the Positive***, by Sean J. McGrath.
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Appearing in *New Perspectives in Ontology* McGrath's thoughtful and insightful study not only offers a consistent reading of the late Schelling but also demonstrates the relevance of Schelling's later works to contemporary post-secular philosophy of religion, especially concerning its potential political-theological impact. As the first of two books, of which the second is still to appear, this study is so far the only example that offers an interpretation which brings together the late Schelling and (post-)secularism. Being a sequel to *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious*¹ the present book continues as well as advances the original point of McGrath's earlier project, to demonstrate how "secular, philosophical psychology, political theory, even economic theory, unconsciously depend upon forgotten theological controversies."² McGrath thus inquires into the late Schelling's "speculative repetition of Christian theology."³ He identifies "three pillars of the philosophy of the late Schelling": (1) the

¹ Sean McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012).

² Sean McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling: The Turn to the Positive* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), ix.

³ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 2.

theorem of absolute transcendence; (2) non-dialectical personalism; and (3) Trinitarian eschatology.⁴

Theological in content yet philosophical in method, Schelling's lectures on mythology and revelation are shown by McGrath to be an articulation of the politico-philosophical core of the New Testament, that "which makes Christianity hermeneutically volatile and perennially subversive." A centrepiece of the book is Schelling's interpretation of the Christ event in terms of "a non-dialectical theory of personhood."⁵ McGrath outlines and evaluates the logical as well as the moral and existential arguments that Schelling offers in his late turn to the irreducible positivity or revealedness of revelation stressing Schelling's positive assumption that "especially the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of John ... offer us an historically reliable clue to the riddle of existence."⁶ In Schelling's political-eschatological efforts to argue for a coming age of the perfect community as the culmination of human history, Christianity is "the future religion *par excellence* [since] Christianity will only be complete when the world becomes Church."⁷

The formal structure of *The Turn to the Positive* itself manifests the claim that McGrath is focused on making to some degree. We hence find the study subdivided into three parts or chapters that prefigure the *Turn* that is to be understood and undertaken: from the *Ideal* via a *Decision* to the *Real*.

The chapter entitled *The Ideal* starts off with a comparative analysis of the early Schelling and his nature-philosophy (Schelling I), which is, according to McGrath, distinct from yet joined to the late Schelling's work (Schelling II) via the hinge of the *Freedom Essay*, thus rendering Schelling neither schizophrenic nor uncreative: "For Schelling I, nature = reason = the absolute For Schelling II, nature is the ground of God, ... the antecedent of a fully ... personalised spirit. Reason ... is no longer equal to God."⁸ To show how these two modes of philosophy are formally related and quite different content-wise McGrath draws on what he calls Schelling's neo-Platonic logic, thus expanding his remarks on this topic already touched upon in *The Dark Ground of Spirit*.⁹ This logic introduces hierarchical relations insofar as it shows how in every relation of a judgement the relation itself is not present as one of the relata. Thus in every judgement of identity or attribution there is "on the surface a triad (A=B), but in the depths, a tetrad, pointing towards some unknown and unknowable ground of determination."¹⁰ As McGrath points out, moving from the triad of the judgement to the hidden fourth ungrounds the nature/God relation in Schelling. Nature, not being in itself, hence has to be grounded or to serve as ground for a higher reality, that is, the historical unfolding of the personality of the divine or divine personalisation. By focusing on Schelling's turn

⁴ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 39.

⁵ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 5.

⁶ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 29.

⁷ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 17.

⁸ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 49f.

⁹ McGrath, *The Dark Ground*, 23ff.

¹⁰ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 57.



towards the theorization of a notion of the emergence of God from that which is not originally God as an archetype for natural becoming, McGrath develops what he calls religious naturalism as the repetition of divine becoming, i.e., theogony, in natural becoming, i.e., cosmogony. As the pinnacle of the chapter, “The Ideal,” McGrath offers a condensed yet comprehensible and lucid analysis of Schelling’s final doctrine of the potencies, which marks his final take on negative philosophy and thus philosophy proper insofar as it has not yet decided for (a historical confrontation with) the Real. McGrath shows that Schelling’s doctrine of potencies can be read as “a theory of predication as well as a psychology because for Schelling, the principles of logic and the principles of psychology are principles of being.”¹¹ Being ontological as well as psychological and thus properly logical McGrath traces the manifold consequences of Schelling’s doctrine of potencies, which culminates in the insight that the potencies as “laws of thought are necessary according to essence but contingent according to existence, which means they are laws of being.”¹² Since the potencies are also laws of thought they “can be elaborated purely negatively as a self-consistent system of reason.”¹³

McGrath diagnoses that it is exactly this take on idealism as a purely negative system of reason that marks the difference between Hegel and Schelling. With the final doctrine of the potencies as a starting point, noting that “the late Schelling’s own approach to logic, the negative philosophy of potencies, bears more than a passing resemblance to Hegel’s,”¹⁴ McGrath brings the two speculative thinkers into dialogue by contrasting their take on the relationship of logic to the world. Concerning one decisive and illuminating difference between the two philosophical giants McGrath writes that “Hegel blurs the distinction between the possible and the actual (essence and existence)”¹⁵ mirroring the “failure to heed the distinction between ... concept and its existential non-conceptual conditions ... which so confuses history and reason as to domesticate the positivity of the former and occult the negativity of the latter.”¹⁶ McGrath additionally opposes Schelling’s notion of personhood to Hegel’s, arguing that Hegel “renders interpersonal relations necessary to individuation,”¹⁷ while for Schelling these relations are “free relations, that is, they are each of them contingent on the good will of the persons involved.”¹⁸ According to Schelling, “it is not relations which personalise the individual ... it is the freedom to enter into relation which personalises.”¹⁹ Finally, McGrath draws a line between the two thinkers concerning their take on religion, especially Trinitarian eschatology, which McGrath promises to discuss in detail in the sequel.

¹¹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 78.

¹² McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 86.

¹³ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 86.

¹⁴ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 87.

¹⁵ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 92.

¹⁶ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 94.

¹⁷ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 96.

¹⁸ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 96.

¹⁹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 98.

In closing the chapter on “The Ideal,” McGrath observes that “we are bound to admit a *practice* of the negative in Schelling, which is found wherever reason exists and struggles to order its living.”²⁰ This practice, understood as an interiorisation of infinity and practice of transcendence, is a “spirituality of the present and for the present ... an eternal spirituality, always and everywhere valid.”²¹ Hence this practice can be found at the pinnacle of almost all spiritual and philosophical systems of the East and West formulated and vindicated therein time and again by masters of non-duality.

The following chapter, “The Decision,” marks the hinge to the “turn to the positive ... the existential, but still hypothetical, acceptance of redemption”²² and, consequently, McGrath’s explicit take on Schelling’s properly Christian speculations. The realm of the personal, be it human or divine, always already freely transcends reason insofar as “nothing is more free than personality. Knowledge of the personal ... is strictly speaking revelation.”²³ In turn, revelation is neither necessary nor natural but a free act of will which is freely recognised or freely not recognised. What is revealed in and through revelation then, McGrath concludes, is nothing other than freedom itself and thus with “the revelation of freedom, history is revealed, positive existence is revealed, and the contingency of being, the non-identity of essence and existence, is revealed.”²⁴ According to McGrath Schelling takes the revealedness of revelation as a path to a possible solution to the search for the living God: “Schelling’s Philosophy of Revelation proposes to test the plausibility of a *positive* affirmation of the revelation.”²⁵ This affirmation is radically non-conceptual, since it calls for a decision to step out of the self-containing negativity of pure thought. This “transition from the negative to the positive is an act of will that prefers the unknown and unknowable over the merely conceptual ... a letting go of control, a letting be (*Gelassenheit*).”²⁶ As the presupposition of thought this act is the inversion of the ideal or the inverted idea in which the (positive) philosopher (to be) reenacts the primordial act of the absolute prius, i.e., God, in his decision for being. Thus what comes into sight is, as McGrath puts it, “the absolute fact, that there is something rather than nothing.”²⁷ The strategy allows for a demonstration of Schelling’s doctrine of potencies *per posterius*, meaning that the potencies are shown to be “the consequent ‘logic’ of history, a demonstration that remains fallibilist and explanatory,”²⁸ which is thus neither *a priori* and deductive nor *a posteriori* and inductive but abductive in balancing the *a priori* and *a posteriori* inclusively *per posterius*. Following along this line of thought, McGrath shows how the personal creator is proven indirectly by Schelling’s

²⁰ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 114.

²¹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 115.

²² McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 131.

²³ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 133.

²⁴ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 134.

²⁵ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 135.

²⁶ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 142.

²⁷ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 144.

²⁸ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 153.



approach insofar as the “divinity of the act of being is ... proven as the assumption that makes possible certain real facts ... order in nature, the existence and history of spirit, and the fact of love.”²⁹ The decisive turn to the positive can then be explained as an absolutely free act, since it is neither compelled by grace nor by an irrefutable proof and therefore does not culminate “in the security of possession but in silent astonishment (*Erstaunen*) before the fact of God’s existence.”³⁰ With Schelling, McGrath argues that an innovative understanding of faith is “the discovery that history is meaningful.”³¹

McGrath’s foregoing insights culminate in the chapter, “The Real.” Here McGrath focuses his investigations around a deepening of the understanding of Schelling’s late philosophy which is “nothing short of a progressive demonstration of the existence of that which alone is worthy of being called God.”³² Since McGrath understands Schelling’s elaborations in his philosophy of revelation to be a philosophical appropriation and interpretation “of the singular divine revelation which is the event of Trinitarian redemption,”³³ he shows the immanent absolute freedom of the Christ event and its following historical effects as formulated in Schelling to be closely connected to secularisation. It is thus the Christian religion and its content, which is the singular person of Christ, that sets into motion a historical development “that can only end in the complete secularisation of the world and the total emancipation of the individual from mythic and historical religions.”³⁴ In analyzing the significance of mythology in Schelling’s positive philosophy, McGrath shows how, by freeing human religious consciousness from its mythological necessity to conceive the divine under a certain determinate form, Christianity introduces a religiosity that (freely) decides for the divine and thus a freedom “to worship or not to worship, which we can call secular consciousness.”³⁵ In not condemning but vindicating paganism, mythology is shown to ground revelation insofar as “it supports revelation, makes it possible, and continues to nourish it ... but as potency not actuality.”³⁶ Mythology is a “collective experience of divinity, remembered and recounted in symbol and narrative, which determines the consciousness of a people.” This is contrasted with the freedom of revelation that “does not *determine* consciousness; it confronts us in person ... and demands of us a decision.”³⁷ Closely entwined with the notion of the person and the notion of freedom in Schelling’s late philosophy, the secularisation of the revelation also enacts the sacralisation of the secular and is understood by McGrath to be the aim and content of what Schelling calls “philosophical religion.” With this religious secularism, as McGrath terms it,

²⁹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 161.

³⁰ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 171.

³¹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 173.

³² McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 196.

³³ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 200.

³⁴ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 200.

³⁵ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 210.

³⁶ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 212.

³⁷ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 213.

Schelling “anticipates the restoration of the unity of the human race ... a unity that allows to each and all the dignity and freedom of their own ethnic and religious origins.” “The unity to come will be *by means of* ethnic, national and historical diversity.”³⁸ In an emphatic political interpretation of Schelling’s philosophy of ongoing revelation, McGrath completes his study with an extensive interpretation of the Church of St. John to come. Following the Church of Peter (conservative/real 1st potency) and Paul (expansive/ideal 2nd potency), the Church of John (dynamic 3rd potency) “is a vision of a future planetary civilisation that is pluralistically grounded in a fully secular appropriation of the revelation.”³⁹ McGrath stresses that this does not mean an annihilation of the preceding movements of history nor the forgetting of the past of humanity for the sake of its future. Indeed, McGrath sees in Schelling the opposite of annihilation but active (co-)creation of the future at work for the final aim, “not more nationalism, but ecological universalism; not more sectarianism and protectionism, but greater trust, and reverence for our common home.”⁴⁰

As political eschatology McGrath understands this notion of the future of humanity not as a move within the sphere of the political as such, but the decisive and salvific transcendence of the political proper. McGrath thus reads the late Schelling’s final political-eschatological remarks through the lens of a practical theology insofar as he understands the pinnacle of the religious life to be expressed in the active sublimation of the political, since only in “the absence of our heart’s desire, we turn to the political.”⁴¹ In the sphere of the political, we require of society “support for our philosophical and religious pursuits.” Schelling argues for “a form of governance that reflects this deepest need of human beings, for personal encounter with the divine.”⁴² In this way McGrath points out Schelling’s conviction which holds together his *Philosophy of Mythology* and *Philosophy of Revelation*, which is “that all past human history converges on a single point, the redemption of the world in the Christ event, which points ahead to the final end of the human odyssey, the sanctification of the earth.”⁴³

Concluding this review we might state that, as McGrath admits in his introductory chapter, he is asking a lot of his readers. Yet it is precisely his refusal of simplification that makes this profound study speculative and a work that goes beyond a mere introduction to the late Schelling. McGrath’s book is nothing less than a centrepiece of future Schelling scholarship and all thematically related authors and academic disciplines. As a final remark one might ask whether McGrath will also touch on the topic of individual salvation or *Seligkeit* that Schelling broaches towards the end of his *Stuttgart Seminars* and *Erlangen Lectures* as well as in the end passages of the *Philosophy of Revelation*. So far, McGrath has reconstructed and interpreted salvation and redemption in political terms, i.e., in terms of its general significance for the

³⁸ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 202f.

³⁹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 224.

⁴⁰ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 225.

⁴¹ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 232.

⁴² McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 232.

⁴³ McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive*, 238.

human future. The existential question with a focus on the individual insofar as he or she is not yet a (positive) philosopher remains to be discussed.