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Schelling on Reason, Revelation, and the Moons of Jupiter

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At various points in his long career, Schelling affirms central doctrines of Christianity while claiming to do philosophy. For example, in the 1809 treatise on freedom he makes fairly explicit references to the Incarnation: "For only what is personal can heal what is personal, and God must become man so that man returns to God" (SW VII: 380).[1] In the same text, the Fall of man and the consequences of sin figure prominently, with Trinitarian language sprinkled throughout the work.[2] Of course, Schelling's treatment of Christian doctrine reaches its culmination decades later in his lectures on the philosophy of revelation, both in Munich and Berlin. There he discusses the full range of Christian beliefs—from the pre-existence of Christ as the divine *logos*, to his becoming flesh as the man Jesus of Nazareth, to his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Moreover, Schelling's manner of treating these doctrines implies that they are literally true, not just symbolic representations of philosophical insight.

Now, such a philosophical treatment of Christian doctrine is controversial—both then and now. Already in the 1830s Heinrich Heine accused Schelling of reverting to the religious orthodoxy he had rejected in his youth: "The same man who once expressed most boldly the religion of

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, translations from German texts are my own.

[2] For example, see SW VII: 361. On Schelling's use of Trinitarian language in the 1809 treatise, see Christian Brouwer, *Schellings Freiheitsschrift: Studien zu ihrer Interpretation und ihrer Bedeutung für die theologische Diskussion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 171-75.

pantheism…[has] slipped back into yesterday's stables of belief."[3] And after attending the lectures in Berlin, Friedrich Engels wrote a satirical pamphlet, dismissing Schelling as "the philosopher in Christ."[4] For his part, Schelling clearly recognizes the controversial aspect of what he is doing. In the Berlin lectures, he acknowledges that some of his audience may be turned off by his line of inquiry (SW XIII: 143), and at times he comes off as rather defensive about its philosophical legitimacy (SW XIV: 80).

But why exactly is it controversial for philosophy to deal with Christian doctrine? It is true, of course, that philosophy has a long tradition of engaging with topics that overlap with religious faith—for example, the existence of God and the problem of evil. But those overlapping topics are only admitted within philosophy to the extent that they can be known through reason alone. In the case of doctrines like the Incarnation, however, reason alone cannot establish their truth—something that Schelling himself admits. How, then, can Schelling incorporate doctrines like the Incarnation into his philosophy? Don't these doctrines presuppose faith in a particular form of revelation, thus going beyond what is philosophically knowable?

In this article, I propose to critically examine Schelling's answer to these questions and, more generally, the relationship between reason and revelation in his late philosophy. Schelling's understanding of that relationship is enormously innovative but also complex. To help navigate the complexity, I would like to focus on a remarkable analogy that Schelling introduces in his 1842-43 lectures: knowing the truths of revelation is like seeing the moons of the planet Jupiter. That analogy will provide a framework for filling in the details of Schelling's account; along the way I will place it in historical context and in relation to alternative approaches.

My main interpretative claim is this: Schelling stakes out a position on revelation that is unique in the history of philosophy insofar as he makes revelation both essential and unessential for true philosophy. We will see what that means more concretely when working through the analogy with Jupiter's moons. But already in this paradoxical formulation, we can observe a fundamental tension in Schelling's approach to revelation—a tension that has largely been neglected in Schelling scholarship.[5] So, beyond arguing for my

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[3] Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, ed. Terry Pinkard, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111.

[4] Friedrich Engels, *Schelling, der Philosoph in Christo, oder die Verklärung der Weltweisheit zur Gottesweisheit* (Berlin: A. Eyssenhardt, 1842). Heine and Engels are both cited in Christian Danz, *Die philosophische Christologie F.W.J. Schellings* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996), 11.

[5] Christian Danz has perhaps the best analysis of Schelling's method in the philosophy of revelation, but (in my view) he neglects this tension and does not discuss the moons analogy. *Die philosophische Christologie F.W.J. Schellings*, 20-37. See also Sean J. McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling: The Turn to the Positive* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

interpretive claim, I would like to pose critical questions about Schelling's position that arise out of that fundamental tension. In particular, I would like to ask whether, despite Schelling's claims, his approach presupposes a faith commitment—and thus whether his philosophy of revelation would be more accurately labeled "philosophical theology" rather than philosophy.

The Analogy with Jupiter's Moons

The analogy appears in the 1842-43 Berlin lectures *Introduction to the Philosophy of Revelation: Grounding of Positive Philosophy*. In the seventh lecture, Schelling discusses various misunderstandings of his philosophy of revelation and attempts to define more precisely the role that revelation plays. He adamantly rejects the notion that his philosophy would rely on revelation as an authority. To illustrate philosophy's independence from all authority, including the authority of revelation, he draws an analogy. For people with normal eyesight, the four moons of Jupiter are only visible when using a telescope. However, there are some people with extraordinary vision who can see the moons with the naked eye—but only after they have used the telescope to spot the moons first. The telescope is both essential and unessential for seeing the moons: it is essential in the sense that without a telescope, no one could see the moons in the first place; but, ultimately, it is unessential for those who can dispense with the telescope and see with their own eyes (SW XIII: 137).

Now, Schelling contends that this is precisely the situation with revelation. There are many things that philosophy would not know without revelation: it is philosophy's telescope. But he adds: philosophy "can now see these objects with its own eyes" (SW XIII: 137). In fact, if philosophy is to remain true to its nature, it *has to* see these objects with its own eyes—that is, its knowledge of revealed truths must become fully independent of the authority of revelation. Thus, revelation is both essential and unessential for philosophy. It is *essential* in the sense that philosophy is unable to know decisive facts about reality without revelation—and thus any philosophy that does not take revelation into account is incomplete. But it is ultimately *unessential*, because philosophy can and should dispense with revelation and stand on its own.

Before continuing, let me briefly add some background details, which I think reveal additional layers to Schelling's analogy. Famously, the discoverer of Jupiter's four largest moons was Galileo. With the aid of a new telescope he had just designed, Galileo was the first human being to observe three of

2021), 170-80. For an overview of Schelling's positions on religion throughout his career, see Christian Danz, "Schellings Religionsphilosophie. Einleitung," in *Religionsphilosophie nach Schelling: Mythos und Offenbarung*, ed. Christian Danz (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2024), 1-7.

Jupiter's moons on the night of January 7, 1610. It took another week for him to spot a fourth. We now know them as the Galilean moons: Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto. In fact, these are only the four largest of Jupiter's moons. (The total number currently recognized by the International Astronomical Union is 97![6]) What's remarkable is that Galileo did not realize at first that he was observing moons—that is, satellites orbiting Jupiter. He initially refers to them as "fixed stars." Only with repeated observations with his telescope over several days did he realize they were revolving around the planet.[7] In other words, it is possible to see the moons without seeing them *as* moons. We should keep that in mind as we think about the application to revelation: even if philosophy can see revealed truths on its own, does it still rely on revelation to see these truths for what they really are?[8]

I should also note that some scientists regard with suspicion claims of seeing Jupiter's moons with the naked eye. It is a challenging feat because Jupiter's glare interferes with our vision, and thus it can only be done under ideal conditions with extraordinary eyesight.[9] So, many of the claims may be fraudulent or the product of wishful thinking. Interestingly, Schelling himself vouches for the truth of one specific case: he knew a woman who, in the presence of an astronomer and a physicist, demonstrated her ability to observe the precise positions of the moons (SW XIII: 137). In any event, we should note the same possibility for suspicion in the case of revelation: someone—perhaps even Schelling—might believe they know revealed truths through purely philosophical means but not really do so.

Finally, the analogy raises an important question that Schelling does not explicitly address in this passage. If it is truly possible to see the moons of Jupiter with the naked eye, why was it necessary to discover them with a telescope first? Couldn't someone have—at least in principle—discovered the moons with the naked eye before Galileo? In fact, it is now claimed that the ancient Chinese astronomer Gan De observed one of the moons in the fourth century BC, two thousand years before Galileo.[10] However, he did not recognize that what he was seeing was a *moon* orbiting the planet—he thought it was an accompanying star. This suggests two reasons why no one discovered

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[6] "Planetary Satellite Discovery Circumstances," NASA, updated May 23, 2023, https://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/sats/discovery.html.

[7] For a full account of Galileo's discovery, see Stillman Drake, *Galileo at Work: His Scientific Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 146-54.

[8] Schelling himself seems to hint at this possibility: "And likewise philosophy would certainly not have known many things without revelation, at least not *in this way* [*wenigstens nicht so erkannt haben*]" (SW XIII: 137, emphasis added).

[9] Clark Muir, "Glimpsing Jupiter's Moons with the Naked Eye," *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 104, no. 3 (June 2010): 101-2.

[10] Xi Ze-zong, "The Sighting of Jupiter's Satellite by Gan De 2000 Years before Galileo," *Chinese Astronomy and Astrophysics* 5 (1981): 242-43.

the moons before the telescope's invention: First, one needs the precise observations of the telescope over several days to recognize that what one is looking at is really a moon and not a star. Second, even spotting the appearance of one of the moons as a star-like phenomenon is extremely unlikely (since we only know of one example before Galileo). Someone with extraordinary eyesight has to direct their attention to precisely the right place at precisely the right time—like finding a needle in a haystack without knowing you are looking for a needle. Once the moons have been discovered with a telescope, however, you know where to look with the expectation you might see something. Applying this to revelation, we could say that revelation has the function of directing our attention to truths we would never have looked for without revelation.

Still, it is curious that Schelling contends several times that philosophy *couldn't* know revealed truths without revelation—especially if philosophy can ultimately know these truths on its own. He might have written that it is extremely unlikely but not impossible, just as it was extremely unlikely that someone like Gan De would spot one of Jupiter's moons. We will have to come back to the reasons why it is impossible.

New Parameters for Combining Philosophy and Revelation

Somewhat later in the same Berlin lectures, Schelling formulates what he calls a "first principle" for combining philosophy and revelation: they should not be combined "at the cost of either philosophy or revelation" (SW XIII: 142). In other words, one needs to respect the essential character of both and not compromise what makes them distinctive. We have already seen this principle applied on the philosophy side: Schelling insists that it cannot rely on external authority and remain philosophy. In other words, *Selbstdenken* or intellectual autonomy is essential to the philosophical enterprise. But the principle applies equally to revelation. When treating revelation philosophically, it is a mistake to leave out or explain away the very things that make it distinctive as revelation.

Here Schelling is critiquing the attempts of previous philosophers to deal with religion. They go wrong in one of two overlapping ways. First, they attempt to reduce religious beliefs to "truths of reason" (SW XIV: 4-5). This is one of the major Enlightenment tendencies in dealing with religion. According to this approach, everything that is true in religion can be known through reason alone—mostly moral truths and general claims about God's existence and nature. The supernatural and historical elements are figurative clothing that is ultimately unessential. The task, then, is to demythologize and dehistoricize religion—interpreting away the supernatural and historical

elements so that we are left with the rational core, which is "religion within the limits of reason alone" (to use Kant's title). Schelling rejects this reason-bound approach to religion, which he sometimes labels "Vernunftreligion" (SW XIII: 194). He even says that Kant's *Religion* treatise and Fichte's *Critique of All Revelation* are "the furthest possible from the kingdom of God" (SW XIV: 18). According to Schelling, revelation is only meaningful as a concept if it contains elements that go beyond reason (SW XIII: 142-43). In particular, the historical dimension is essential to what revelation is: "The true content of Christianity is a history in which the divine is interwoven—a divine history" (SW XIII: 195).

The second way philosophy can go wrong is by reading itself into religion. In other words, one begins with an already established philosophy and then interprets revelation to fit that philosophy. This was where the scholastic approach to theology went wrong, applying (Aristotelian) concepts that were alien to the truths of revelation (SW XIV: 31).[11] I suspect that Schelling also has Hegel in mind, since Hegel famously views religion as expressing philosophical truth (that is, Hegel's own philosophy) in the form of *Vorstellung* or representation.[12] Against this tendency to make revelation conform to philosophy, Schelling hints at what makes his own approach so distinctive. The question we have to ask is "what kind of philosophy is needed…to be able to comprehend Christianity?" (SW XIV: 34). This means that Christian revelation places a demand on philosophy; it calls for a new kind of philosophy. More on that later.

Thus far, it is clear that Schelling intends to break decisively with previous German philosophy of religion. But there is one German thinker to whom Schelling remains deeply indebted in his approach to revelation: Lessing. In the 1780 essay "The Education of the Human Race," Lessing presents revelation as God's means of teaching humanity things we humans can eventually know on our own. Like any good teacher, God does not give his students the full truth all at once; instead, he unfolds his teaching gradually over the course of revelation history, guiding reason toward those truths that humanity is ready to learn at a particular stage of its development. At the end of the historical process, human beings can dispense with revelation and know the previously revealed truths through reason alone: "The development of

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[11] There is a clear echo here of Luther's critique of scholasticism: "No one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle." "Disputation against Scholastic Theology," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 12 (§44).

[12] As Peter Dews notes, we might well ask if this critique applies to Schelling himself and thus whether "Schelling is only taking out of the Christian revelation what he has read into it." *Schelling's Late Philosophy in Confrontation with Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 231.

revealed truths into truths of reason is absolutely necessary if they are to be of any help to the human race."[13]

Lessing's essay was evidently quite formative for Schelling, since he cites it repeatedly over a period of fifty years.[14] At the end of the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*, he even quotes the line about developing revealed truths into truths of reason (SW VII: 412). And at first glance, the dynamic between reason and revelation in Lessing seems very close to the analogy with Jupiter's moons. For Lessing, revelation also functions as a telescope, guiding us toward truths that we can subsequently know without the telescope: "When they were revealed, they were not yet truths of reason; but they were revealed in order to become such truths."[15]

Nonetheless, Schelling's position on revelation differs from Lessing's in two important respects. First, Lessing concedes that human beings *could* discover revealed truths by themselves, but revelation allows them to be acquired "more quickly and more easily."[16] In contrast, Schelling insists that we could not know revealed truths without revelation. This is what makes his position so distinctive in the history of philosophy: revelation is essential at first, but subsequently unessential when we come to see revealed truths on our own.[17]

Second, although Lessing emphasizes the historical unfolding of revelation, the content of revelation (what God gradually teaches) is ultimately ahistorical—the "necessary truths of reason." In this respect, Lessing is also advocating a form of *Vernunftreligion*, and thus neglecting the essentially historical content of revelation, from Schelling's perspective. Nevertheless, Lessing's notion that humanity can *outgrow* revelation has a clear echo in Schelling's insistence that philosophy can see revealed truths with its own eyes (discarding the telescope). And beyond that, it has an echo in Schelling's

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[13] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 236 (§76).

[14] SW I: 1, 4, 8; SW I: 477-78; SW V: 294; SW VII: 412; SW X: 404; SW XI: 83-84; SW XII: 179.

[15] Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," 236 (§76).

[16] Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," 218 (§4). Schelling may be criticizing this aspect of Lessing's position at SW XIV: 5, though Lessing is unnamed.

[17] One can also contrast Schelling's position with that of St. Thomas Aquinas. He differs from Schelling in holding that (1) not all revealed truths can be known through philosophy, and (2) certain revealed truths can be known by philosophy independent of revelation. It was necessary for God to reveal even the second category of truths because otherwise they would be "available only to a few people, after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors" (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 1, a. 1, resp.). *Treatise on the Divine Nature*, trans. Brian Shanley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 3.

sketches for a philosophical religion as a successor to revealed religion—one that requires consciousness to become "free from revelation" (SW XI: 258).[18]

Accessing Revelation: Faith vs. Historical Fact

If the distinctive character of revelation must be respected, as Schelling insists, what precisely does "revelation" refer to? The term has a long history in his philosophy. In earlier works, it had an extremely broad meaning: any means by which the divine essence is revealed is a form of revelation—including nature, history, and art. For example, at the end of the *Freiheitsschrift* Schelling proclaims: "We have a revelation older than any that is written: nature" (SW VII: 415).

In the philosophy of revelation, the meaning of the term is much more restricted, though Schelling has different ways of formulating it. In the second part of the Berlin lectures, he states directly that revelation is Christianity, and the true content of Christianity is the person of Christ: revelation is Christocentric (SW XIV: 35). Somewhat earlier he had noted that revelation in "the highest sense" is the revelation of the divine will (SW XIV: 10), in particular, the divine decision to save fallen humanity (SW XIV: 24). Finally, he says that the content of revelation is a "higher history" that extends from the beginning of things to their end (SW XIV: 30). I believe these meanings of revelation all hang together. The main elements of the Christian story (creation, fall, redemption) all involve Christ, through whom all things were made, and who became flesh to redeem humanity. Importantly, they also involve free decisions of the divine will—the will to create and the will to redeem.

If the content of revelation is the person of Christ, how do we gain initial access to that content? In other words, what exactly is the telescope that allows us to see the revealed truths of Christianity? This is perhaps the least developed aspect of Schelling's account. He rejects the obvious answer: faith. This rejection might seem surprising, since revelation and faith are typically so closely associated that we use the words interchangeably—to ask about the relationship between reason and revelation is to ask about the relationship between reason and faith. Indeed, one could imagine a variation on Schelling's position where faith would play a role. One could say, for example, that faith gives us initial access to the truths of revelation (this would be the telescope). However, once faith points out these truths, we can use philosophy to establish them independently of faith and thus see them with our own eyes. To use the Augustinian formula, *credo ut intelligam*: "I believe so that I might understand."

[18] I will return briefly to philosophical religion in the last section of the article.

This is essentially Étienne Gilson's conception of a Christian philosophy: using faith as a guide to what is true, but then seeking to know through purely philosophical means some of what one already believes through faith.[19]

Schelling, however, denies that faith has any significant role to play in his philosophy of revelation—at least not faith in the traditional sense: "The one who wants to believe and can do so, does not philosophize; the one who philosophizes announces thereby that mere faith does not suffice for him" (SW XIII: 135). Nonetheless, Schelling does allow for other, non-religious senses of faith to play a role. For example, he calls the state at the very end of the knowledge process "faith," since it involves a certainty that eliminates all doubt (SW XIV: 13-15).[20]

Why does Schelling reject any role for religious faith, even as an initial access point to revelation? In short, religious faith would treat revelation as an *authority*. But philosophy by its nature is incompatible with relying on external authority, since it requires "our own thinking" (SW XIII: 137) or intellectual autonomy as a truly free science. Schelling thus wants to distance himself from a "Christian philosophy" that would treat faith in revelation as a source or starting point (SW XIII: 133).[21] I suspect he is also keenly aware of critics who would pounce on any admission of religious faith as evidence that Schelling is no longer a true philosopher.

To be sure, the situation is a bit more complicated than the renunciation of external authority would suggest. In fact, Schelling concedes that a certain form of authority is involved: "Revelation will exercise no other authority over [philosophy] than that which every other object exercises over the science that deals with it" (SW XIII: 133). Natural science, for example, has to treat its object—the empirical facts about nature—as an authority with which it must align. Such is also the case for philosophy's treatment of revelation, which likewise presents "authoritative" facts, as we will see shortly. Interestingly, later in the same lectures Schelling notes that "any submission to authority" can be called *faith*. In fact, we only know through faith that an external world exists, since we must trust the authority of our senses (SW XIII: 171-72).[22] Schelling thus allows for faith in certain forms of external authority when doing philosophy—just not religious faith.

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[19] See Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy (Gifford Lectures 1931-1932)*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 1-41, esp. 36-37.

[20] For a discussion of the alternative senses of faith, see McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling*, 170-80.

[21] Interestingly, Schelling had applied the name "Christian philosophy" to his own work in his 1827-28 Munich lectures. *System der Weltalter*, ed. Siegbert Peetz (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1998), 9.

[22] Schelling notes the origin of this idea in Johann Georg Hamann. See James C. O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967), 166-67.

So, how do we know revelation if not through religious faith? Schelling's answer is simple—we might even say frustratingly simple: "Christianity is a fact that cannot be dismissed" (SW XIV: 234). By that he means that Christianity is a historical reality that everyone—even the most secular historian—must acknowledge. Indeed, he asks us to imagine someone who was raised as a strict rationalist and had never heard of Christianity. If such a rationalist were suddenly confronted with the historical appearance of Christianity in the world, that person would feel compelled to account for the phenomenon (SW XIV: 229). Along similar lines, Schelling notes that revelation is an actual fact that we encounter through experience, just like the phenomena of nature and other events in history (SW XIII: 133). And as a historical fact, Christianity has had enormous and undeniable effects, even shaping the present state of human consciousness (SW XIV: 19). Above all, Christianity effected what Schelling calls "the greatest of all revolutions"—the liberation of humanity from the darkness of the pagan world (SW XIV: 19-20).[23] In sum, Schelling insists that he is interested in Christianity as a fact (*Tatsache*), not a doctrine or teaching (*Lehre*) (SW XIV: 34).

Here one can certainly question Schelling's claim that he is merely attending to the objective phenomena from a faith-neutral perspective. It is undeniably true that the man Jesus of Nazareth actually lived, and that the movement he began eventually transformed the ancient world. But the details of Christ's life—especially his resurrection—are not undisputed historical events. Indeed, the historical reliability of the New Testament was the subject of the so-called Fragments Controversy involving Reimarus and Lessing a generation before Schelling.[24] To be sure, Schelling acknowledges the importance of historical critique of the scriptural sources (SW XIV: 33), and he claims to be drawing on the most reliable historical documents (*Urkunden*), just as he did when examining the myths about Dionysus (SW XIV: 201). He also claims that the *content* of the New Testament books authenticates them: we know they are authentic sources because their content has a necessary fit within the higher history traced by Schelling's positive philosophy (SW XIV: 318). Still, even if this authentication is possible, it certainly seems that

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[23] Schelling's claims about Christianity's role in liberating the world from paganism and shaping the current state of consciousness have striking parallels in the historian Tom Holland's much-discussed book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). Holland's focus is on Christian moral values that were alien to pagan culture—especially, the intrinsic value given to the poor and the weak. Cf. this line from Schelling: "The proud power of paganism bowed down before the despised cross" (SW XIV: 19).

[24] See Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 56-57.

Schelling is relying on his faith background in choosing which sources to examine.[25]

Moreover, it is not clear that Schelling's distinction between fact and doctrine holds up when we turn to the revealed truths he is most interested in. Above all, the Incarnation—the Word becoming flesh—involves an interpretation of who Christ is that is a matter of doctrine, not pure historical fact.[26] In any case, it seems to me that it would be in keeping with Schelling's overall approach if he were to admit his faith background plays an initial role in interpreting the historical facts, but that this is merely the telescope that can be discarded, if indeed philosophy can see these truths on its own.

The Need for Revelation and the Transformation of Philosophy

If philosophy can see revealed truths on its own, why is revelation necessary in the first place? The short answer is that revelation is above reason; it thus allows us to know things that are beyond our *ordinary* philosophical concepts. However, revelation also challenges philosophy to expand its concepts—to go beyond its current limits. And, presumably, this enhanced philosophy can see revealed truths with its own eyes, no longer needing revelation. So, we have a before-and-after story with respect to philosophy, just as we did with Galileo and the telescope. Before revelation (the telescope), philosophy is incapable of seeing these things on its own. But after revelation, they can be seen by a new, transformed philosophy—Schelling's positive philosophy.

Let me fill in some of the details. When Schelling says that revelation goes beyond reason, he is making two claims—one that is fairly modest, one that is more ambitious. On the modest side, he is claiming that revelation is a matter of experience, and all experience goes beyond reason (SW XIII: 143). Through experience we come to know about the actual existence of things, while reason is incapable of establishing actual existence—it remains within the realm of concepts. Schelling even points out that through pure reason we would not even know that actual plants exist in the world; we might have knowledge of the essence of plants, but not their existence (SW XIII: 171). So, revelation gives us experiential knowledge of facts about reality, and thus goes

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[25] For a more sympathetic discussion of Schelling's treatment of scripture, see Danz, *Die philosophische Christologie F.W.J. Schellings*, 34-37.

[26] Walter Kasper makes a similar point: "Revelation is certainly history, but a history that leads back into what is above history, the history of salvation. This aspect cannot simply be 'seen' in the historical fact….Thus, along with the historical act, there must be the Word that interprets and calls to decision." *The Absolute in History: The Philosophy and Theology of History in Schelling's Late Philosophy*, trans. Katherine E. Wolff (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018), 209.

beyond what reason can establish conceptually. This is, of course, why the philosophy of revelation is part of Schelling's positive philosophy.

But Schelling is making a more ambitious claim as well. He quotes the famous line from *Hamlet*: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (SW XIV: 19).[27] Revelation contains elements that go beyond reason in the sense that they are inconceivable in terms of human concepts and the philosophies derived from them. First and foremost, Schelling has in mind the acts of God: "God is greater than we think" (SW XIV: 14). He notes that, if divine actions were not revealed by actually becoming reality, they could never have come into the thought of any human being (SW XIV: 24). Indeed, from the standpoint of human judgment, the acts of God appear to be foolishness. But divine foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, in the words of St. Paul, whom Schelling quotes (SW XIV: 24).[28]

Of course, creation itself is a divine act that we only know from the experience that the world actually exists. Beyond that, Schelling notes God's apparently foolish decision to create a being—man—to whom he also gave the power to jeopardize his entire work through sin. And finally, there is the divine decision that Schelling singles out, since without revelation it is unknowable "in the most eminent sense." This is the decision to redeem fallen humanity through the Incarnation. Schelling adds that the revelation of God's will to redeem is "revelation in the highest sense" (SW XIV: 10; cf. SW XIV: 169).

Thus, we can identify two ways in which God's acts are unknowable apart from revelation. First, they are acts of freedom—creation and redemption are the result of the divine will. And if God's decisions are truly free, it is impossible to know a priori how those decisions will come out. We know them only a posteriori, through the execution of the divine will in the real world (SW XIV: 6-8). Second, as we have seen, the reasoning behind God's decisions defies our human way of thinking. We would never reason our way to those decisions ourselves.

But, even if God's decisions are above reason, Schelling insists that this does not mean the decisions are "incomprehensible" (*unbegreiflich*) (SW XIV: 24). To comprehend them, we have to expand our thought so that it reaches the level of divine thought (SW XIV: 12). As noted already, this places a demand on philosophy: a philosophical treatment of revelation requires "an expansion of philosophy beyond its current limits" (SW XIII: 145). And Schelling contends that only his positive philosophy is able to meet this demand. In fact, revelation's demand for a new kind of philosophy is—in his

[27] Act 1, Scene 5
[28] 1 Corinthians 1:25

view—confirmed by his previous critique of the inadequacies of negative philosophy (SW XIII: 145). In any case, once this expansion of philosophy is accomplished, it is the task of Schelling's philosophy of revelation to make revelation "comprehensible" (*begreiflich*) (SW XIII: 174; XIV: 28).

What does "making comprehensible" involve exactly? At least three things. First, it involves thinking of the grounds or motives (*Beweggründe*) for divine decisions that at first seem inscrutable (SW XIV: 12). For example, Schelling discusses the reasons motivating the divine decision to become flesh (the Incarnation): this was the only way to save a fallen humanity, making possible the free sacrifice of the Son that overcomes the will of the Father to punish mankind (SW XIV: 166-69). Second, "making comprehensible" involves showing how the "higher history" of revelation can be traced back to the principles of positive philosophy that Schelling had already established (SW XIV: 30). Each piece of the puzzle that revelation gives us fits with what came before and forms part of a coherent narrative. In this connection, Schelling refers to the "great universal context [*Zusammenhang*] in which this content [of revelation] is alone comprehensible" (SW XIII: 141). As the structure of Schelling's lectures makes clear, that context includes mythological religion, which precedes and sets the stage for revelation (SW XIV: 20; cf. XIII: 530). Finally, "making comprehensible" involves a unification (*Vereinigung*) of the various statements in scripture. The "true" system will be able to show how these statements cohere while staying faithful to their character—not reading into them something that isn't there (SW XIV: 33).[29]

As the last point makes clear, revelation not only has the function of transforming philosophy by challenging it to expand its concepts. It also has the function of *confirming* the true philosophy. Only the philosophy that can comprehend and explain revelation is fully adequate to reality. And Schelling, of course, claims this for his positive philosophy.

The Result: Autonomous Philosophy or Philosophical Theology?

Now we can circle back to the analogy with Jupiter's moons. The main point of the analogy is to insist on the possibility of philosophy seeing revealed truths for itself, fully independent of the revelation that had given it initial access to those truths—just as those with extraordinary sight can see the moons of Jupiter without a telescope. So, does Schelling's philosophy of revelation

[29] Though Schelling does not acknowledge it, the task of providing a coherent interpretation of scriptural statements presupposes the fundamental reliability—and thus authority—of scripture. And that presupposition is difficult to reconcile with Schelling's claim that the philosophy of revelation is based on undisputed historical facts, not on faith.

accomplish this? The answer to that question largely depends on the meaning of two verbs that occur again and again: *begreifen* and *erklären*—"comprehend" and "explain." The task of the philosophy of revelation is to comprehend revelation and to explain it.[30] The question is: is that comprehension and explanation so complete that they give us demonstrative knowledge—and thus certainty independent of revelation? Or is the comprehension only partial, involving some understanding of divine actions, yes, but with some residual dependence on revelation?

To make the question concrete, we can return to the central object of revelation for Schelling: the divine decision to redeem humanity by becoming flesh—that is, the mystery of the Incarnation. It is true that Schelling offers reasons for this decision and connects it to the principles of his positive philosophy, as mentioned above. To summarize briefly: As a result of the Fall, an alienating principle separated us from God, and that principle could not be fully overcome in paganism and Judaism (SW XIV: 167). To overcome the principle, it was necessary to overcome the will of the Father to punish mankind. But "will can only be overcome by will" (SW XIV: 168). Thus, the only means of saving mankind was the freely willed act of submission by the Son (the mediating potency) to the Father. And so Christ had to sacrifice himself in place of man, "the innocent in place of the guilty" (SW XIV: 169). From this brief summary, it is clear that Schelling is concerned with providing an explanation of the divine decision by giving reasons; he is not content to leave it as an impenetrable mystery (see SW XIV: 153-55). But do those reasons constitute a demonstration, giving us proof that the Incarnation had to happen?

There is an alternative interpretation for what Schelling is doing—one that relies on a historical precedent. As it happens, one of the classic works of medieval theology treats precisely the same theme: St. Anselm's treatise *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why God Became Man"). In that work, Anselm offers reasons why that have some resemblance to Schelling's (basically, only an incarnate God could repay the infinite debt man had incurred through sin).[31] But that treatise is not typically considered a work of philosophy. Instead, Anselm intends it to be theology, which is defined as *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding," in a tradition going back to St. Augustine. The idea is

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[30] "The philosophy of revelation aims at nothing other than explaining [*erklären*] this higher history [of revelation]" (SW XIV: 30). "The first part of the philosophy of revelation proceeds to the point where, with the comprehensibility of the *content* of revelation, the possibility of a philosophy of revelation is also given. The second part is concerned with making this content comprehensible [*begreiflich*]" (SW XIII: 174). I believe that Schelling uses *begreifen* (to comprehend) and *begreiflich machen* (to make comprehensible) more or less interchangeably.

[31] Anselm, "Cur Deus Homo," in *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 237-326, esp. 319-22 (book 2, chapter 18).

that one begins from the standpoint of faith in revealed truth; then one seeks to understand what one believes by using reason and philosophical argument. But the key word is "seeks"—one *seeks* to understand. Total understanding of an infinite being is not possible in this life.[32]

Could "seeking understanding" accurately describe what Schelling is doing as well? He openly admits he is not in the business of proving the truths of Christianity: "It is not about a proof [*Erweis*] but rather the explanation of Christianity, which we *presuppose* as [historical] fact" (SW XIV: 34). *Explaining without proving* would certainly qualify as "seeking understanding" in the Augustinian sense. Moreover, there is a specific reason to think that Schelling's comprehension of Christianity falls short of demonstrative knowledge: divine freedom. As Schelling makes clear, the content of revelation is primarily divine acts, and those acts are free. That means that we cannot demonstrate philosophically that God had to act the way he did because that would mean his decision was not free but necessary.[33] At best, we can demonstrate the *possibility* and perhaps the probability of a certain form of divine action.

In fact, there are indications throughout Schelling's late lectures that by "comprehending" (*begreifen*) he means "understanding how something is possible." For example, in the 1842 *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, he notes that philosophical religion is needed to comprehend *as possible* what is already recognized as *actual* in mythology (SW XI: 250).[34] And throughout the *Philosophy of Revelation*, there is a similar dynamic with respect to actuality and possibility. Schelling notes that if the divine decision to become flesh had not been revealed as actual, human reason would never have regarded it as possible (SW XIV: 28; cf. SW XIV: 10). Much later, he even claims to establish the possibility of Christ's miracles through the unique features of the Incarnation (SW XIV: 188). Such examples suggest that revelation shows us the actuality of what reason on its own would not have regarded as possible. The task of philosophy, then, is to comprehend

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[32] "Since I take the understanding that we achieve in this life to be intermediate between faith and vision, I think that the more progress someone makes toward understanding, the closer he comes to that vision for which we all long." Anselm, "Cur Deus Homo," 237.

[33] Interestingly, Schelling does mention the "moral necessity" of the Incarnation (SW XIV: 167), a term that comes from Leibniz. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 203 (Part II, §132). Given Schelling's views on divine freedom in his late philosophy, this moral necessity cannot be an absolute necessity as it had been in the *Freiheitsschrift*. For Schelling's treatment of moral necessity in the *Freiheitsschrift*, see Mark J. Thomas, *Freedom and Ground: A Study of Schelling's Treatise on Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 161-63.

[34] The key phrase: "als möglich, und demnach philosophisch zu begreifen" (to comprehend as possible, and thus philosophically). Cf. "The task of a philosophy of revelation can only be to make the content of [revelation]…comprehensible, i.e., to show it as possible." F.W.J. Schelling, *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, ed. Walter E. Ehrhardt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1992), 426.

revelation by understanding how the actual is indeed possible. But that would mean we are still dependent on revelation to establish its actuality—in particular, what God's free decisions actually are, since understanding how they are possible does not prove they are actual. Possible moons are not actual moons: we still cannot see the moons without the telescope.

So, if Schelling is really *seeking* understanding of revelation (without arriving at full knowledge), and if he presupposes some form of Christian faith in the background (as I suggested earlier), then we can say that Schelling's philosophy of revelation is an exercise in *faith seeking understanding*—that is, theology. That is probably not a conclusion he would like, and it certainly goes against his self-understanding in the *Philosophy of Revelation* lectures. But there is, after all, a great tradition of thinkers who creatively blend philosophy and theology, including Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. We could number Schelling among them.

Interestingly, there is a late Schelling text in which he seems more open to the possibility of a philosophical theology along the lines I have indicated—perhaps even allowing for a form of religious faith. This is the 1846 preface to Henrich Steffen's posthumous writings. There he emphasizes the role of possibility we just discussed: if a presentation of Christianity is really going to satisfy the human spirit, then it needs to make evident to reason the *possibility* of the conditions (*Verhältnisse*) on which the main Christian teachings are based (SW X: 404-5).[35] But what is new in the text is the link Schelling draws between (1) insight into possibility and (2) the different forms of belief: "For all believing is believing in the *actuality*; [it is] blind when an insight into the *possibility* is missing…; [it is] enlightened [*erleuchtetes*] when the possibility is seen" (SW X: 406). Here Schelling distinguishes two forms of believing (blind or enlightened) based on whether the believer comprehends what is believed—that is, sees how it is possible.

Schelling then adds something decisive for understanding whether we can dispense with faith in revelation as the telescope. Even if one has insight into the possibility of some fact, that does not eliminate the need for faith. Why not? As noted already, if something is possible, it does not follow that it is actual: "One could perceive the possibility but not believe in the actuality. God does not necessarily do what it is possible for God to do. That he has *actually* done [some act]—that must always be *believed*" (SW X: 406). Here Schelling seems to concede that faith has an indispensable role to play in establishing what is actual, a role that will never become irrelevant, no matter how much philosophical insight into revelation we might gain. So, if we throw

[35] Schelling himself emphasizes the word "possibility." Remarkably, in the same passage he explicitly declines to endorse Lessing's line about "the development of revealed truths into truths of reason," even though he had quoted that line earlier in his career (SW VII: 412). He notes the expression is likely to be misunderstood (SW X: 404).

away the telescope, we might have a philosophy that is independent of revelation, but such a philosophy would still be restricted to the realm of what is possible (even if the scope of what is possible is now larger than it was before philosophy took revelation into consideration). If we want actuality and possibility together, we need what Schelling calls "enlightened believing"—in other words, some form of *faith seeking understanding*, theology.[36]

Conclusion: The Tension between Reason and Mystery

We have seen how Schelling claims that revelation is both essential and dispensable for true philosophy. That seemingly paradoxical claim reflects a creative tension in his thought that reaches far back in his philosophical development—at least to the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*. We might express it as the tension between reason and mystery. On the one hand, there is a strong rationalist tendency in Schelling, reflected in his insistence that philosophy see revealed truths for itself. Along these lines, at the end of the *Freiheitsschrift*, he endorses Lessing's line that revealed truths need to be transformed into truths of reason (SW VII: 412). But the ultimate expression of this rationalist tendency with respect to revelation is Schelling's conception of a philosophical religion as religion's final form. His various descriptions of philosophical religion are schematic and reflect his ongoing attempts to work out the concept.[37] But it is clear enough that the project is motivated by a rationalist desire to be free of all dependence on authority—including the authority of revelation. Philosophical religion comprehends rationally what previously was taken on faith (SW XI: 250). Thus liberated from revelation, it takes its place at the end of religious history as "the religion of free insight and knowledge" (SW XIII: 194).

On the other hand, there is a profound sense of mystery in many of Schelling's works—a sense that the ultimate truth of things eludes human language and involves infinite depth. That sense of mystery is perhaps most obvious in works from Schelling's middle period, including the *Freiheitsschrift*,

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[36] Sean McGrath makes the perceptive remark that "Schelling does not, it seems, have any desire to understand a properly theological method in theology." *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling*, 192n47. I agree with respect to Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation* lectures, but I think there are seeds of a more sophisticated understanding of theological method in the 1846 preface—perhaps in response to Steffens's theological writings. Schelling goes on to mention "a theology…in which *real* thinkability is shown" (SW X: 407). Unfortunately, he does not indicate how such a theology is different from his own philosophy of revelation.

[37] For a careful analysis of Schelling's development of the concept, see Thomas Buchheim, "Schellings Konzeption einer philosophischen Religion in Querschnitten ihrer Entwicklung über das Spätwerk hinweg," in *Religionsphilosophie nach Schelling: Mythos und Offenbarung*, ed. Christian Danz (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2024), 151-81.

Clara, and *The Ages of the World*. In the *Freiheitsschrift*, for example, Schelling calls attention to the "irreducible remainder" which can never be resolved in the understanding but remains forever in the ground (SW VII: 359-60). And he develops an account of the eternal deed of freedom that combines rationalist arguments with language that bumps up against the limits of understanding: that free act belongs to "a life before this life" (SW VII: 387).[38] In the *Philosophy of Revelation*, this mysterious tendency is reflected in Schelling's insistence that revelation is essential for philosophy and far exceeds human concepts. Above all, there is a mysterious, paradoxical quality to divine action, which Schelling compares to art: "In the same moment to be both drunk and sober—that is the mystery of true poetic creation [*Poesie*]" (SW XIV: 25).

It is true that Schelling's own treatment of mystery in the philosophy of revelation does not provide much room for mystery within philosophy proper: once a mystery is revealed, he says, it stops being a mystery and becomes intelligible (SW XIV: 11). But it seems to me that Schelling's own philosophy often demonstrates the opposite: a mystery can be revealed and continue to be a mystery, because it has infinite depth that can never be fully exhausted—the same qualities he had ascribed to the artwork of genius in 1800 (SW III: 619-20). And I would suggest the same applies to the mysteries of revelation, which we can seek to understand but never fully comprehend through reason alone. Even if that means we will always need a telescope to see Jupiter's moons.

[38] I have attempted to show how Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* combines reason and mystery in the form of a "living rationalism." See Thomas, *Freedom and Ground: A Study of Schelling's Treatise on Freedom*, 179-81, 258-60.