



**kabiri**

The Official Journal of the

*North American  
Schelling Society*

***Freedom and Ground: A Study of Schelling's  
Treatise on Freedom,***

by Mark J. Thomas

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023)  
356 pp., \$38.95 (Paperback), ISBN 9781438492995

---

Reviewed by Carlos Zorrilla-Piña

There are few careers in the history of philosophy that are as long lived or as prolific as that of F.W.J. Schelling; and in the midst of that uniquely prolific career, hardly any work that can more fittingly claim the title of watershed moment than his 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and the Objects Therewith Connected*. With his outstanding piece of scholarship, Mark J. Thomas, who has for years wrestled with the depths of this notoriously challenging work, has now done an invaluable service to anyone wishing to share in its heights.

The stated goal of *Freedom and Ground* is to carry out a rigorous and comprehensive examination of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* by reading it as on the whole devoted to giving an answer to the problem of ground. More specifically, the author claims that Schelling tackles the challenge of elucidating human freedom by banking on the plurality of senses in which ground can be thought, and carefully deploying those senses to satisfy the otherwise disparate demands of rational unity and individual self-determination. Following this interpretative line, he convincingly argues that the key to Schelling's approach rests in his insistence that human freedom can only take place embedded in a



multifaceted and complex “network of grounding relations”<sup>1</sup> and can be understood neither by simply turning a blind eye to rational demands of systematicity, nor by having too rigid and reductive an understanding of that in which that systematicity consists. This approach involves going beyond tradition’s exclusive understanding of ground as thoroughly determining antecedent—in favor of acknowledging alternative senses according to which ground can likewise operate as enabling condition and begetting matrix. That acknowledgment alone, Thomas argues, allows for compliance with the demand for universal grounding—or the insistence that nothing be surrendered to disjointedness and absolute contingency—precisely insofar as it qualifies its application, where appropriate, in order that those ineliminable features of reality that would otherwise clash with the demand may not only be accommodated beneath its mantle but in fact draw their strength from it.

Schelling’s acknowledgment of the multivocality of grounding, Thomas further insists, did not simply allow Schelling to introduce freedom into a system indifferently permissive of it but, much more importantly, furthermore to erect what Thomas refers to as a “system of freedom,”<sup>2</sup> i.e., a theoretical account in which freedom is the central concept in and through which all other elements—even those that at first glance may seem most distant, indeed, more directly opposed to freedom—receive their ultimate interconnection. And if, as Eric Voegelin once proposed, Schelling’s greatest strength as a thinker is his unmatched ability to weave skillfully together opposing tendencies under the arc of a higher living unity, then this is a strength on which Thomas’ work not only shines light but also itself practices, devoting as much attention to human freedom *per se* as to the titular “objects therewith connected.” These objects or issues are legion; but he groups them in three main headings, which he considers each in turn: the problem of pantheism, the problem of evil, and the problem of determinism. The methodical way Thomas’ book works its way through the issues that fall under this threefold problematic deserves some attention, however synoptical it must remain.

After stating his goals and carefully setting the stage for their pursuit, Thomas begins by diagnosing the reasons the attempt to thematize freedom within the framework of a system would be problematic in the first place, and also explains in what sense a more nuanced understanding of grounding relations may nonetheless offer the means by which to integrate that tension into the overarching harmony of a living or progressive unity (Ch. 1). The account then concentrates on explaining Schelling’s staple understanding of the copula in judgments as an encapsulation of the essential mutual implication of the laws of identity and of the ground, thereby also clearing the way for an

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, *Freedom and Ground*, 249.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, *Freedom and Ground*, 19.



integration of difference and growth into an otherwise uninformative sameness (Ch. 2). Banking on the foregoing and further drawing out the different possibilities it opens for the characterization of divine grounding, Thomas then follows Schelling in staking the compatibility of divine infinitude with finite autonomy, thereby preempting any pantheistic concerns regarding the alleged effacement of the difference between creator and creature (Ch. 3).

In an effort to understand correctly the intricacies of how Schelling tackles some of the other problems related to human freedom—and most importantly how freedom hangs together with good and evil—Thomas then turns to what is without a doubt one of the greatest contributions of his work. He engages in establishing what he calls “the distinction within the distinction,”<sup>3</sup> by which he means a clarification of the true and yet oftentimes misrepresented meaning of Schelling’s famous distinction between the operative modes of essence as ground of existence, and as that which exists on the basis of the former. The case Thomas makes—incidentally against philosophical heavyweights such as Heidegger—is not only lucidly argued, but also well supported with evidence from some of Schelling’s other works and two key letters addressed by Schelling to fellow philosophers Georgii and Eschenmayer (Ch. 4). The clarification of the central distinction structuring Schelling’s *Freedom Essay* puts Thomas in a perfect position to dive into the problematic of evil and irrationality, both in general as well as in theodicean terms. In this context, the reader is treated to one of the most compelling elucidations of the infamous “*nie aufgehende(r) Rest*,” which Thomas rightly links to Schelling’s dynamical method of explanation and his transformation of a geometric rationalism into a living one (Ch. 5). After having broached God by way of Schelling’s engagement with the question of theodicy, the book then comes face to face with that most enigmatic of Schelling’s notions: the Unground or primordial ground. Putting his previous results to good use, Thomas throws a light on the role that contrasting notions such as the Unground, self-affirmation, love, and indifference all play in Schelling’s processual characterization of divine revelation (Ch. 6). The final chapter goes back to Schelling’s dissolution of the conflict between libertarianism and predetermination by proposing that all actions of a self-conscious individual are genuinely free because ultimately grounded in her “radical *self-determination* through an eternal deed”<sup>4</sup> (Ch. 7). The book is then capped with some concluding remarks pointedly summing up its main arguments and findings.

Although the limits of this review make it impossible to do justice to the strengths and achievements of Thomas’ work, I will touch upon those that most struck me. For one thing, Thomas’ mastery of Schelling’s philosophical

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *Freedom and Ground*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, *Freedom and Ground*, 232.

context when the latter wrote the *Freedom Essay* is obvious. His attention to the dialogues Schelling sustains with his predecessors—including Spinoza, Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, and, perhaps most importantly, Leibniz—considerably enhances the reader’s understanding of the complexity of the issues at stake as well as her appreciation of Schelling’s proposed solutions. Another crucial strength of Thomas’ work has to do with his conviction that Schelling’s career is best seen as a “path” on which “continuity and disruption exist side by side.”<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned above, Thomas anchors his analysis of the *Freedom Essay* on a close reading of the text itself and very carefully sorts out all the theoretical elements and relations which the latter weaves together; yet he does so without neglecting their long gestation in previous works or the light which their refinement in subsequent works throws on them—something which is admittedly as demanding an exercise as it sounds, but without which no proper understanding of the *Freedom Essay*’s oftentimes sibylline utterances can be gained. It is thus no exaggeration to say that Thomas penetrates the meaning of this pivotal stretch of Schelling’s path in a way that only someone who has patiently studied the philosopher’s vast corpus and who correctly understands both the unity and vicissitudes of its trajectory can do. Likewise noteworthy, of course, is the book’s clarity and rigor. At the outset of his work, Thomas regrets that scholarship around the *Freedom Essay* is oftentimes as cryptic as the essay itself and sets himself the task to arrive at its insights with as much transparency as depth. He fully delivers in this regard. The insights come across sharply and the pages flow with remarkable ease.

In contrast with such numerous strengths, the work suffers from no obvious shortcomings. Pressed to find one, a reader might complain that, while Thomas rightly identifies the philosopheme of the ground as a confluence of two currents of German thought—a rationalistic and a “mystic” one—virtually all attention is devoted to the former, while the latter is left unexplored. This relative omission should not, in my view, be held against the book, given how forthcoming is its author regarding his particular interests and the chosen focus of his work. Less defensible, however, may be the justification offered for this choice. Thomas claims, namely, that though Schelling famously borrowed language from the sixteenth-century mystic Jakob Böhme and others, the insights to whose expression such language is put in service had in fact long been present in Schelling’s thought and can be credited to his own work. I would suggest that this diagnostic is somewhat partial, if not simply inaccurate. In my view, the undeniable fact that the ground philosopheme made famous by the *Freedom Essay* had been either previously operative or somehow prepared by Schelling’s nature-philosophy is less proof of an alleged lack of meaningful influence by Böhme than it is of

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Freedom and Ground*, 14.

how earlier on that influence had found its way into Schelling's thought—albeit indirectly at first. This realization is likely absent from Thomas' analysis because the vehicle for that earlier influence is also overlooked. Indeed, he does not consider to what extent Schelling's nature-philosophy was radically and lastingly transformed by its very early contact with an already heavily "böhmized" Franz Baader, years before the two men personally met upon Schelling's arrival in Munich, and before the latter ever thought to embark upon a study of the shoemaker's writings. Without denying Schelling's own merits, it is reasonable to say that the early and decisive influence Baader facilitated—and which Schelling would, according to his habit, spare no efforts in masking and minimizing—better explains the resonance of both the nature-philosophy as well as of the ideal counterpart with which Schelling would subsequently pair it in 1809 with several features of Böhme's thought beyond mere language and imagery.

The foregoing point nonetheless concerns the—intellectually speaking—minor issue of authorship and has no bearing whatsoever on the lucidity of the analysis to which Thomas subjects the philosopheme of the ground in Schelling's thought. At the end of the day, I know of no better study of Schelling's 1809 *Freedom Essay* than Mark Thomas'. And I believe one would be hard pressed to come up with other works that so cogently advance an understanding of the depth and complexity of the problem of ground, or show just how far its incidence in other philosophical problems reaches, as Mark Thomas' does—a statement that may be extended to the context of analytical philosophy without fear of having gone too far. That Thomas' contribution to this central philosophical problem unfolds in the context of examining one specific figure in one specific tradition of thought does not mean that his contribution's validity is thereby diminished; it much rather means that he has given us two excellent standalone books in one.