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## Schelling on God and Man

FRITZ MARTI

THE core question of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was: How is objective scientific knowledge possible? Kant found that the objects of science are phenomena. God is not a phenomenon. It is not possible to conceive of God as an objective entity. Theology as objective science is impossible.

The theme of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is: How is moral obligation possible? Heteronomous commands cannot possibly be obligatory, in conscience. Only a free being can be responsible. The fact of our moral responsibility makes it impossible to consider God as a heteronomous lawgiver. Moral theology is impossible as a study of allegedly binding heteronomous commandments.

How then is theology possible at all? This question is a central one in the minds of Kant's successors. Kant himself had opened the discussion.

The theological parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason* deal with "the transcendental ideal (prototypon transscendentale)."<sup>1</sup> "The intention of reason with its ideal is total determinateness [of reality]<sup>2</sup> in line with rules a priori" (599). "In everything which exists one necessarily finds a universal determinateness, and what lies at its ground is a *transcendental ideal* which constitutes the highest and complete material condition of the possibility of whatever exists. The thinking of any object whatsoever is led back in content to that highest condition" (604). "Not as a *sum* [Inbegriff] but as a *ground* [Grund] does the highest reality form the basis of the possibility of all things" (607). "Now if we hypostatize this idea we will, in so doing, try to define it with all its predicates, and call it one, simple, self-sufficient, eternal, etc. The notion of such a being is the concept of God, and in this way the ideal of pure reason becomes the object of a transcendent theology. However such a use of the . . . idea would go beyond the character and purpose of the idea. For reason grasped this idea as the very

1. Page references in the text are to the second edition (of 1787) of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

2. The insertions in square brackets are mine.

ground of every concept of reality, but did not demand that the idea be a thing in turn, nor be given objectively. Such a thing is a fiction [Erdichtung] by means of which we sum up what we know of the idea, as if it were a separate being. We have no right to do so, nay we may not even assume the possibility of such a being, by way of an hypothesis" (608). If, illegitimately, we still do it then: "The ideal, though it now turn into a fiction, is first *realized* [realisiert], i.e., turned into an object, then *hypostatized*, and finally, through a quite natural process<sup>3</sup> of reason, even *personified*" (611). In so doing we follow ratiocination (Verstand) which argues "that it would seem that only in an *intelligence* could things be tied into order" (611). In short: God is not a thing, not a separate objective entity, but the idea of God is the ground of the very possibility of strictly conceiving an objective universe.

It may not be superfluous to stress the difference between ground and cause. The category of causation is a constituent of objectivity. But to seek a cause of the objective world as such is meaningless. In the world of objects, the series of causes is endless, and Kant might say with Thomas Aquinas "si procedatur in infinitum in causis efficientibus, non erit prima causa efficiens," but he would reject the inference: "Ergo est necesse ponere aliquam causam efficientem primam."<sup>4</sup> Kant would admit, of course, that a first efficient cause is what most if not all men call God. The *Critique*, however, teaches: One cannot speak of a cause of the causal order. Neither can one ignore the question concerning the ground of causation. Obviously it is that which St. Thomas means when he says: "necesse est ponere aliquid quod sit per se necessarium, non habens causam necessitatis aliunde, sed quod est causa necessitatis alii."<sup>5</sup>

To operate with the concept of cause, beyond the world of objects, means to transcend the legitimate domain of ratiocination. If God were an objective entity, a thing among other things, then it might be possible to infer the existence of God from the existence of things or events immediately dependent on such a God, e.g., from miracles.

3. In his *Philosophy of Mythology*, Schelling investigates this natural process.

4. *Summa Theologica*, Q. 2, Art. 3, Resp.

5. *Summa Theologica*, Q. 2, Art. 3, Resp. While A. C. Pegis in 1945 still translates "est causa necessitatis alii" by "causing in others their necessity," in 1933 the Benedictines and Dominicans of Austria and Germany had in their translation already used the word "Grund" instead of "cause."

It is such inferences for which people usually look when they ask for proof. As early as 1795, at the age of twenty, Schelling had warned: "As soon as we enter the realm of proof we step into the territory of the conditional" (I, 308).<sup>6</sup> And in his long footnote we read: "The proposition: God is, is the most unproven, unprovable, *groundless* proposition, as groundless as the first principle of criticism: I am!— Yet still more unbearable for a thinking head is the jabber about a plurality of *proofs* for the existence of God. As if one could make *probable* a being which is intelligible only through itself, through its absolute *oneness*; as if it were a *manysided*—historical—proposition. . . . One can read such advertisements as: *Essay of a new proof for the existence of God*. As if one could make essays or trials of God, and at any moment discover something new about God! The reason for for such most unphilosophical essays, like the reason for every unphilosophical procedure, lies in the inability to abstract (from the merely empirical) and, in this case, in the inability to perform the highest abstraction. Incapable thinkers would fain imagine the being of God, not as *absolute* being, but as an *existence* [Dasein] which is not absolute *by itself*, but allegedly absolute merely because one does not happen to know of anything higher. This is the empirical concept which a man will form of God, if he is incapable of abstraction. . . . It is remarkable that even our language distinguishes between *real* (which is present in sensation, what acts upon me, to what I react), *existent* (what is *at all*, in space and time), and *being* (what *is*, by itself—simply independent of all conditions of time). Having completely mixed these three concepts, how could one expect to have even the slightest notion of what a Descartes or a Spinoza meant? While they spoke of absolute being, we substitute our crude notions of real, or at best the pure concept of *existence*, which is valid only in the phenomenal world, but is utterly meaningless outside."

A few years later, in 1799, Fichte wrote: "For me, God is a being entirely free of everything of sense and of every sensuous attribute, and I cannot even attribute to God the concept of existence which I can understand only as relating to the world of sense."<sup>7</sup>

6. Quotations from Schelling are cited by volume and page of the *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart and Augsburg, 1856–1861). I to X indicate the ten volumes of the Erste Abteilung, XI to XIV the four volumes of the Zweite Abteilung. The translations are mine.

7. Fichte is quoted from *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1844f.). The translation is mine.

Schelling in later years says: "There is no proof of the existence of God as such, because *there is no existence of God as such* [keine Existenz Gottes überhaupt]. The existence of God is instantly and immediately definite; from an indefinite being of God one cannot get anywhere. This is why neither Descartes nor his followers could obtain any *knowledge* [Wissenschaft]" (xi, 274).

Schelling means positive knowledge of the really actual God, not the merely conceptual knowledge of the essence of God, a knowledge which stops short of the existence. Schelling calls the mere knowledge of the concept or of the essence negative because it does not have the merit of negating attributes—sensuous attributes for instance—which do not pertain to the divine essence. Such negative philosophy, or negative theology, has long been available, and Schelling stressed that fact as early as 1809, in his crucial book *On Human Freedom*:<sup>8</sup> "Since nothing is before God or outside of God, God must have in himself the ground of his existence. This is what all philosophers say; but they speak of this ground as of a mere concept, without making it real and actual. This ground of his own existence, which God has in himself, is not God absolutely considered, that is, not insofar as he exists. For it is only the ground of his existence, it is the *nature* of God in God. Though inseparable from God, it is yet a being distinguishable from God. . . . God has in himself an inner ground of his existence, and in that respect the ground precedes God as existent; yet in turn God is also the *prius* of the ground, because the ground could not be, as such, unless God existed *actu*" (vii, 357 f.).

This passage formulates the motive of Schelling's later quest for what he calls positive philosophy. His terminology requires comment, and a few historical comparisons may not be amiss. The term "negative" had systematic significance for Nicolas of Cusa, who warned us that the statements of positive theology turn easily into superstition unless corrected by negative theology. The latter points out the inadequacies and the onesidedness of positive statements. Similarly, negative philosophy is a necessary prerequisite for Schelling's positive philosophy. The first volume (xi) of his *Philosophy of Mythology* has two parts, the first an "Historical-critical Introduction" (xi, 1) and the second a "Philosophical Introduction into the Philosophy of Mythology, or Presentation of Purely Rational Phi-

8. Translated by James Gutmann (Chicago, 1936). I have translated this passage.

losophy" (xi, 253). This presentation is a critical survey of the main results of occidental philosophy, results which Schelling by no means rejects. They are negative in much the same critical sense in which the negative theology of Cusanus is indispensable. They also constitute the body of negative philosophy in a derogatory sense: they are bent upon essences but cannot thereby grasp existence. Gaunilo's perfect island is an essence but does not necessarily exist. Gaunilo, Thomas, Kant, and Schelling reject the ontological argument which would cull existence from essence. Schelling holds that the start must be made from existence—from the "I am who am" (Exodus 3:14; compare Schelling xiii, 270<sup>o</sup>)—and that the concept of divine essence is an inference a posteriori. The start, of course, must be nonfinite existence, nonconditional existence; in short, God as act. In that act there is nothing of a concept, that is, no dichotomy between an object or essence known, and a knower. And since reason is necessarily bent upon its object, sheer existence as yet nonobjective is beyond the reach of reason, beyond the knower. However, reason can acknowledge what sheerly is, what "is altogether" ('απλῶς Ὄν) or "what only is." But as acknowledged it is no longer sheer existence, it is no longer *as act*. Nor can act be known before it occurs. It is known a posteriori. What is known a priori is the necessary. Free act can not be known as necessary. But the very freest can be recognized as what it is, as God. In 1811, Schelling wrote, in his book on *The Ages of the World*:<sup>9</sup> "God in his highest self is not revealed, he reveals himself; he is not real, he becomes real, precisely in order to be manifest as the most utterly free being [das allerfreieste Wesen]" (viii, 308). The utter freedom of God is outside and above reason. Yet it is neither irrational nor forbidden to reason. Schelling seems to stand very close to Augustine's *credo ut intelligam*. God being the very ground of our freedom, and our reasoning—as Kant stressed—being possible only as responsible act, that is, through freedom, we can recognize the act of God, though never as an object of reason, yet as the immanent ground of reason itself. What is *absolutely* immanent in reason is what makes reason itself possible, as reason. Our reasoning would be nothing but a flight of obsessive ideas, were it not for the fact that our reasoning is a response to the perpetual invitation extended to us to become free. And indeed when, by means of reason,

9. Translated by Frederick Bolman (New York, 1942). I have translated this passage.

we master a problem, we experience the freedom of that mastery, nay, we find in this experience a sample case of the free life for which we are meant. This meaning of our life, this freedom always yet to be attained, this human vocation which we can joyfully acknowledge and embrace, is nothing we ourselves have picked, in the way in which, for instance, we pick our profession. It was picked for us, even before we were born. And if you would ask who picked it—a question of mythologizing trend—the answer is: God.

In recapitulation then of an already quoted word of Schelling, we can say: "There is no existence of God as such" (XI, 274). There are only acts of God. And, as far as we are concerned, these acts amount to a perpetual summons or, in other words, they are the ever-repeated invitation to us, in ever-new circumstances, to become free, by means of making ourselves responsible. If you tell me this is, at bottom, Kantian ethics, I agree. But it goes beyond Kant. Kant would not admit the possibility or, as Schelling more justly says, Kant did not see the possibility of recognizing a posteriori that every summons to responsibility, every invitation to freedom which we receive, is of God. For, if it were not, if it were not the unconditional call it is, then it would be an obsession, a happenstance psychological fact which would keep us captive in sheer conditionality and would make freedom impossible.

What Schelling calls negative philosophy or purely rational philosophy does negate the would-be philosophy of objectivism, which would turn the *I* into an *It*, and which is no philosophy at all. In Schelling's view, the two great exponents of negative philosophy were Fichte and Hegel, and its initiator—in more recent times and long after a Plato, an Aristotle, a Plotinus, and an Augustine—was Kant. Kant and Fichte and Hegel had made quite clear that the core of reason is responsibility, and that responsibility is free act. Also that God is the very spirit of freedom. But, so Schelling tells us, those three had not clearly seen that the sheer freedom of God is beyond reason, and beyond concepts. To recognize it would mean to go beyond, to go back of concepts, and to come upon acts, calls, invitations which—a posteriori—can be recognized as being of God.

In Schelling's own words, the entire argument runs thus: "Kant forbids transcendence in metaphysics. Yet he forbids it only for dogmatizing reason, that is, for a reason which would start from *itself* and, by means of inferences, would reach what exists. But he does not

forbid another way, of which he did not think, because that possibility had not occurred to him. This reverse way starts from what *sheerly* exists, from the nonfinitely *existent*, in order to reach the concept of the highest *being* [Wesens], as *posterius*. Reason can acknowledge what *sheerly* is [jenes bloss Seiende, ἀπλῶς ὄν] absolutely *outside* of reason, just because there is nothing of a concept in that being. That being is the opposite of every concept. Yet, while so positing it, reason still intends to make what is outside and above reason, in turn, into a content of reason. It becomes the content of reason if recognized as God, a *posteriori*. Reason posits the conceptless being, in order to reach the concept. It posits what transcends reason in order to transform it into the absolutely immanent, and in order to have this *absolutely* immanent at the same time as existent, which is possible only in this way. For even negative philosophy already had this absolutely immanent, but not as actually existent. . . . What is a priori incomprehensible because it is not mediated by any antecedent concept, becomes comprehensible in God, that is, it attains its concept in the concept of God. What exists non-finitely [that is in utter freedom] or what reason can not contain, becomes immanent for reason, as God. . . . God is not, as so many imagine, what is transcendent. God is what transcends reason and is made immanent, i.e. is made the content of reason. That this has been overlooked constitutes the great misunderstanding of our time.” (XIII, 170)

A dozen pages earlier, Schelling states clearly in what manner positive philosophy proceeds in a way opposite to negative: “In positive philosophy I do not start from the concept of God, as previous metaphysics had endeavored, and as the ontological argument had started from. On the contrary, I must drop this very concept, the concept of *God*, in order to start from the sheerly existing, in which nothing can be conceived except the existing presence,—and in order to see whether from here there is a way to the godhead. . . . If now the godhead is the *what*, the essence . . . then I do not go from it to the being but, on the contrary, from the being to the essence. Here the being is *prius*, the essence *posterius*.” (XIII, 158)

Schelling's later terminology, “negative” and “positive” philosophy, does not mean a break with his earlier position. Two or three decades earlier, in 1806, he had already voiced what we might call his “empiricism,” had not the customary use of the word “empiricism” endowed it with a very un-Schellinglike meaning. Schelling



said: "We know nothing but what is experience, says *Kant*. Quite correct; but that which alone is in experience is precisely the living, the eternal, or God.—The existence of God is an empirical truth, nay it is the ground of all experience.—He who has grasped this and has intimately understood it, has acquired a sense for Naturphilosophie.—This philosophy is not a theory. It is the real life of the spirit in and with nature." (VII, 245)

Theories are fashioned as reasonable guesses of what might be the case. Theories deal with the probable. But the godhead is no mere probability. Even the "being" of Parmenides was an anticipation of the later theological insight of a Plato, an Aristotle, and of the medievals, that the *essence* of God is what cannot not be. At twenty-three, Schelling had already said: "that to speak of God as a probability is a true blasphemy." (I, 486)

The later Schelling calls it an insight of positive philosophy, to know that the being of God is *prius* and the essence *posterius*. What he calls negative philosophy is the knowledge of essence. The proposition "God is Being, does not actually affirm that God *is*. It is not an existential but merely an attributive proposition. However, this to-be-Being is also a being, only not the being of God *as God*. Descartes thought he had proven the latter, by means of the ontological argument, but he had only proven the essence, posited in thought. This we can also call the pure being-in-reason, or the being of God enclosed in the *idea*. Being, quite universally speaking, is not *an* idea, but *the idea itself*. Insofar as God is only the Being, he is only in the idea, eternal to be sure, but only in the sense in which we call truths eternal which are posited in pure thought." (XI, 273) "The concept developed so far is only the concept of divine being a priori, that is, the concept we have of this being *before* its actual being." (XII, 58)

"Only what is Being itself *can* be God. But, on that account, it is not already God." (XII, 25) "The proposition, God is Being itself, means that God, considered in his pure essence, is merely that which *will be*." (XII, 32) "This expresses a free relation of God to his being. . . . In *this* sense, God is outside of being, above being . . . utter freedom to be or not to be." (XII, 33) "In this respect, God is only the power to exist . . . the immediate potentia existendi. But if he were *nothing* but *that*, it would amount to pantheism, i.e. a system of blind being. . . . A pure potentia existendi not merely *can* turn into actus, lift itself into being; it is its very *nature* to take this turn." (XII, 35 f.)

“Thus, God would be blind being, i.e. non-spirit (and therefore non-God). But by negating such a non-spirit he posits himself *as* spirit.” (xii, 40) “The true *concept* of God (not yet his reality) is: God is the being which, by the negation of the opposite, posits itself . . . *as* spirit.” (xii, 42)

I would comment that God, as the object of belief and doctrine, is an inert entity, dead as it were. Yet, believer and unbeliever alike can make the discovery of this deadness and, *in* this sad discovery, they can experience the life of God who summons them to reject what is dead and, at the very least, to long for the living God, if they do not already realize his alive presence in their very discovery. In traditional words: the spirit denies that God is dead. This alive denial is the superrational but not irrational presence.

“Precisely by *not* being what he would be only by nature (*merâ naturâ*) he is God, i.e. the super-natural. . . . But he can not posit himself *as not* being mere essence without positing himself, in another, as purely being, i.e. as being, without turning *a potentia ad actum*.” (xii, 44) This amounts to what has already been quoted above: “There is no existence of God as such. The existence of God is instantly and immediately definite.” (xi, 274)

I should say, God always exists—for us—in the form of a problem, a task, a call, a summons, an invitation. Thus he is always “in another.” In short, Schelling says: “God as such *is* not in existence [Gott an sich nicht seiend] but is utter freedom to be or not to be; he is the *super-being* [der *Überseiende*], as older thinkers already called him.” (xii, 58)

As such he is always pure self-revealing act. And Schelling rightly stresses: “What is sheer act withholds itself from the concept.” (xi, 316) The concept is hindsight. Or, to put it in the grandiose image of myth: “I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and cover you with my hand until I pass by; then I will take away my hand, so that you may see my back, while my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:23) Like the visions of myth, the concept comes after the event. Yet it is the task of the concept to establish the essence, to find the ground.

“God is the groundlessly existent [das grundlos Existierende]. Kant<sup>10</sup> calls this the abyss [Abgrund] for human reason.” (xiii, 164)

10. Schelling is referring to Kant’s sentence: “The unconditional necessity which we indispensably need as the ultimate carrier of all things is the true abyss for human reason.” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 641)

“Indeed this existence is incomprehensible if, by incomprehensible, one would understand what is not comprehensible a priori. Negative philosophy deals with what is comprehensible a priori, positive with the a priori incomprehensible, but only in order to turn it into the comprehensible, a posteriori. What is a priori incomprehensible becomes comprehensible in God.” (XIII, 165)

“It is the *I* which says: I want God outside the idea. . . . To say: I want God outside the idea is to say: I want what is above being.” (XI, 570) The comment seems evident: If God were contained in the idea then there would be no other way to God except through the idea, and philosophically untutored men would be out of touch with God. But Schelling reminds us that “it is conscience—the potential God—which draws men away from selfish will. As he takes this step from active into contemplative life, however, he *steps over onto the side of God.*” (XI, 556) God is free to reveal himself to any man, that is, to become a reality for man. However, “the real God is not also immediately the true God. . . . The true God, God as such, *can* be only in knowledge. . . . God not *known* would not be God. . . . And this relation of man to God can be only a free relation, whereas man’s relation to God outside of God’s truth, as it occurs in polytheism and in mythology, can be nothing but an unfree relationship.” (XI, 176) Still we must remember “that *God* is really at the basis of the gods, that God is the true matter and the *ultimate* content of mythological imagery.” (XII, 120<sup>1</sup>)

Such imagery is natural in human consciousness. “The question is: How does consciousness come to God? But consciousness does not *come* to God; its very first move is away from the *true* God. In the first real awareness there is only one trait [Moment] of God . . . no longer He Himself. Thus, since consciousness, as soon as it *moves* at all, moves away from God . . . God, as it were, is inflicted on consciousness in its very origin [ihm ursprünglich angetan] or: God is in our consciousness, in the same sense in which we say of a man that a virtue is in him, or more often yet a vice, meaning that it is not objective for him, is not something he wants, nor even something he knows.” (XI, 186) “Man, as soon as he *is* and has not yet *become* anything, is consciousness of God.” (XI, 187)<sup>11</sup> “He does not *have* this consciousness, he *is* it. Precisely in *not* acting, in not moving is he the

11. An awkward English phrase. Yet I dare not translate “Bewusstsein Gottes” as “awareness of God,” a translation which would make God objective.

one who posits the true God." (XI, 187) Let consciousness stir, and God is posited in man's dim awareness of a *numen*, or in the clear cut image of a god, or even—if man can maintain his awe—in verbal assertions which pass for theology. All these situations, however, come about by man's act, the act of attentive awareness, the act of imagining, the act of verbalizing, in short, some act of real consciousness.

But "the ground that consciousness is at all in relationship with God can not lie in the first real consciousness, it lies antecedently beyond. Beyond the first real consciousness, however, nothing can be conceived except man or consciousness *in its pure substance* antecedent to all *real* consciousness. There, man is not conscious of *himself* (for this would be impossible without *becoming* conscious, without an act). Therefore, since he must be conscious of *something*, it can only be consciousness of God,<sup>12</sup> but not with an act, e.g. the act of knowing or willing, hence purely substantial consciousness of God. . . . Man in his *original* being has no other meaning but to be the nature which posits God. Originally he exists only in order to be the God-positing being, therefore not being *for himself*, but being a nature turned toward *God*, as it were enraptured in God." (XI, 185) "Man is created into the center of God." (XI, 206)

Schelling is emphatic in saying: "I do not make humanity start with a *concept* of God. On the contrary, human consciousness is originally ingrown in God, as it were . . . It has God *in* itself, not as an object *before* itself." (XII, 120) "However, man can not remain in this being-outside-himself. He must strive to get out of this submersion in God, transforming it into a *knowledge* of God, and thus into a free relationship. But this he can reach only step by step. When he does away with his original relation to God, he does not terminate the relationship as such, for it is eternal, interminable. Having himself become *real*, he falls into the clutches of the *real* God." (XI, 189) The real God is the power of the gods.

Later he may find the free relationship, the relation to the *true* God. Thus, man's life is a theogonic process. Out of the gods must come God, in truth. Though the gods hold sway over groups of men, over nations and eras, we must not forget the final warning of Schelling: "The species, or mankind, has but an indirect relation to God, through some *law* in which God seems to be contained. Only the in-

12. See above, fn. 11.

dividual has a direct relation to God, can *seek* him and, if he reveals himself, accept him." (XI, 556<sup>3</sup>)

This warning leads, of course, back to the Kantian ethics and to what Fichte had stressed, that God summons us to find for ourselves what is our duty at each turn of the road. However, ethical insight is precisely *not* the last word.

"All moral action has its ground in our falling away from God, in our being outside of God, and this makes moral action doubtful. . . . Therefore the *I* now craves God himself. It wants to have *Him, Him*, the God who acts, with whom there is providence, who *as himself actual can actually withstand the fall*, in short who is the *LORD* of being (not transmundane, as is the God who is final cause, but supermundane). In this alone the *I* sees the *really* highest good." (XI, 566)

The testimony is about us: "In this life we so easily assume that our friends and companions are *ours*, whereas they are only God's, free beings, serving none but the One." (IX, 18) The "knowledge of the true God is always in the making, because the true God himself is for consciousness always the one who becomes and who, as the ever becoming, is also called the living God." (XI, 177)

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