Introduction
Schelling's Treatise on Freedom and the Possibility of Theodicy

Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith (1809) is now one of Schelling's more celebrated writings, having received a good deal of attention over the last half century, especially since Heidegger's lectures on the *Philosophical Investigations* were published in book form in the early seventies. Indeed, these lectures, along with notable reevaluations of Schelling's thought as a whole undertaken by such important figures as Walter Schulz, Manfred Frank, and Slavoj Žižek, have tended to give the *Philosophical Investigations* a special place and authority within Schelling's corpus.[1] Although there are many complex reasons for this, two warrant mention over the others: increasing recognition of Schelling's significance as a critic of German Idealism who anticipated many of the most important trends to emerge in its wake and his role as herald of a radical approach to the problem of freedom as one connected intimately with the freedom to do evil. In this latter respect, the *Philosophical Investigations* represents a feat of sustained and sinuous thought, a remarkable synthesis of Pascal's *esprit de géometrie* and *esprit de finesse,* that seeks to transform the Leibnizian notion of theodicy left in ruins by Kant's critical project. Since this specifically theodical perspective on Schelling's consideration of evil has received less intensive treatment in most of the important recent interpretations of the *Philosophical Investigations*—among which those of Heidegger and Žižek have acquired particular prominence—we should like to introduce our translation by providing a brief sketch of this very aspect of Schelling's treatise, one that we think is particularly fecund in and of itself, but that also casts light in interesting ways on the interpretations offered by Heidegger and Žižek.[2]

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To this end, our introduction is divided into three principal sections. The first deals with the modern notion of theodicy and the philosophical response to it; in this latter regard, Kant's concept of radical evil seems to us of particular significance, and we accept Richard Bernstein's observation that Kant's concept of radical evil in fact spells doom for the theodical project as conceived by Leibniz.[3] The second explores Schelling's fascinating attempt to recast the nature of theodicy in the treatise on freedom. The third provides a very brief survey of how this attempt has been received and why the theodical impulse in Schelling's treatise has been overlooked or dismissed.[4]

The second part contains the core of our arguments about the significance of Schelling's treatise, and it may be appropriate to give a brief summary of them here. We wish to advance in bare outline a somewhat provocative contention, that Schelling makes a very strong and radical attempt to revive theodicy overcoming the weaknesses inherent in the line of theodical thinking, running from Leibniz to Hegel, that led to the definitive rejection of theodicy. We argue that Schelling risks a theodicy that incorporates a much tougher and more perspicuous concept of evil. This profoundly dynamic theodicy eschews closure; God's creation unfolds in constant struggle, in an unrelenting, unstable tension between opposed ways of bringing a world into being that is the pure combat of becoming. Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Schelling's thought is the conviction that God's creation is not justified by its unshakeable rationality, its preestablished harmony à la Leibniz, but by an irremediably unstable balance of forces, a core or "primordial" dissonance in Žižek's apt words.[5] Schelling claims that theodicy cannot be purchased at the expense of life, that theodicy as conceived hitherto was nothing less than a tacit admission that life cannot be justified as it is. Schelling, to the contrary, takes on the great task (and risk) of justifying life by its dynamism alone, by the lure of discovery and the threat of death, which are the wellsprings both of desire and the creative overcoming of despair that is the most compelling justification of life—as Schelling writes in the *Philosophical Investigations:* "Where there is no struggle, there is no life." If this view of life as *polemos* evinces sharply contrasting connections with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the true kernel of Schelling's thought is an extraordinary originality that has perhaps not yet been given its due.[6]

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The Theodical Project

Leibniz's beginning

Modern theodicy originates with Leibniz and the *Essays on Theodicy* (*Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*) he published in 1710. One could not implausibly argue that Leibniz's treatise is a baroque encomium to the claim that *nihil est sine ratione,* "nothing is without a reason." Everything that is has a reason for being, a rationality (a preestablished harmony) lies submerged in all existence and explains or, at the very least, offers an explanation why things are rather than not—in other words, the fact of being as opposed to pure nothingness is rationally accessible; the whole is intelligible and, hence, it may be grasped by a human mind, which is not as radically different from the divine mind in a qualitative as in a quantitative sense.[7] As Hans Blumenberg suggests, this unabashed triumph of rationality affirms in the strongest possible way that the world is caught in the webs of reason, that there is a perfect rational order binding together ostensibly chaotic dispersion into a world-system whose end is the expression of pure rationality itself: this is indeed the best of all possible worlds.[8]

If we read Leibniz's claim that "nothing is without a reason" from a different point of view, as Heidegger bids us to,[9] we can come to grasp the notion of evil that Leibniz relies on in making his case for the overwhelming rationality of the world. "Nothing is without a reason"; nothing is that which has no reason to be, which cannot explain (and thereby legitimate) its own existence. For Leibniz evil is this nothing, this pure privation of being that cannot be thought other than as a wont of being, of that which is good simply because it *is*. Having no being of its own, evil is entirely parasitic and dependent on the beings to which it relates.

Leibniz equates lack of being with evil. This is the root concept of evil that Leibniz calls "metaphysical evil" in the *Essays on Theodicy* and, it also applies to the two other basic categories of his famous threefold distinction, moral and physical evil. With this conception of evil Leibniz is able to make the familiar defenses of God's goodness, omniscience and omnipotence. But, what is more, he is able to defend the indwelling rationality of creation as system by showing that evil cannot have any other function in the perfect order of the system than an ancillary one, the function of a servant. What emerges from

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this way of thinking is a reinterpretation of evil that situates it usefully within the context of modern systematic thought; evil as negation becomes the loyal servant of system and, as such, evil works good. Having no existence of its own, evil can be nothing more than an expression of being's own limitation, the necessary condition for the articulation of the overall rationality of the system, the highest good of all.

If this connection of evil with the unfolding of system is distinctively new, the justification of evil as servant of a good that retreats from our limited vision the closer it comes to its own purity is as old as Christian apologetics.[10]

Hegel's Culmination

Hegel is the culminating point of this distinctive line of thought. He shows a substantial debt to Leibniz to the extent that his own pursuit of theodicy, while indelibly shaped by Hegel's own preoccupation with Kantian dualism, refines and complicates some crucial assumptions of Leibniz's thought. As Hegel wrote in his "Introduction" for the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History:*

> The aim of human cognition is to understand that the intentions of eternal wisdom are accomplished not only in the natural world, but also in the realm of the [spirit] which is actively present in the world. From this point of view, our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God (such as Leibniz attempted in his own metaphysical manner, but using categories which were as yet abstract and indeterminate). It should enable us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may be reconciled with the negative aspects of existence; and it is in world history that we encounter the sum total of concrete evil.[11]

Although it would be a mistake to efface the extremely important and obvious differences between Hegel and Leibniz, it is worth noting that, in both cases, evil as negation, as the paradoxical expression of negativity, "das nichtende Nicht," seems to play a crucial role in the successful self-definition of the system or, in Hegel's terms, in the dialectical self-realization of the absolute. Nonetheless, Hegel is hardly candid about the association of negation with evil—he is, to say the least, not as direct as Leibniz—and with good reason. For Hegel turns

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the Leibnizian association of negation with evil and imperfection on its head in order to overcome this association and thereby rid his system of any traces of the difficulties immanent in the Leibnizian theodicy. Indeed, he gives negation a fundamentally positive dynamic role in the structure of his system, as the elusive and restless energy of thought itself, without, however, granting it any positive (i.e., finite) being of its own. This role is immediately complicated by its deeply ambiguous nature, a product of the profound conceptual transformation of which it is the beneficiary; in this respect, one has only to recall the remarkably polysemous description Hegel sets out in the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* where he refers to the negative as an "ungeheure Macht," which is the "energy of thought, of the pure I."[12] It is a "monstrous power" indeed that cannot be defined in any positive way other than by reference to what it brings about. But, to paraphrase Goethe's Mephistopheles, this power is still one that works good; it brings about its own dissolution in the end, the accession to the absolute.[13] The problematic ambiguity of negation is purely Hegelian; it reflects the difficult transition from finite to infinite, from negation as limitation to negation as helpmate of the whole—both views are possible, but one comes from the weakness of finite thought, while the other from the strength of infinite thought.[14]

Hegel directs the essential patterns of Leibniz's thinking to very traditional ends in that he construes evil to be a moment in the realization of the absolute that can be seen entirely differently and more benevolently with the advent of infinite thought; in other words, if one could see from the point of view of God or the God-like philosopher, one would see that evil is productive, that it really is a necessary moment in the positive labor of the self-realization of the absolute. Here is the essentially reconciliatory position so characteristic of Hegel, one that manifests itself explicitly in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,* where he equates evil with cognition, with the "cleavage" (*Entzweiung*) or contradiction, that is both a necessary aspect of cognition and one that is overcome in the dialectical *Aufhebung* through which a reconciliation of the contradiction is enacted.[15]

With this all too brief survey, we wish to make two central points about theodicy and the conception of evil developed to function within this theodicy.

First, it is evident that theodicy as conceived by the philosophers also presents a God suitable for the philosophers. While Leibniz tries

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to avoid the "lifeless machine" of Spinoza, his God has many more affinities with Spinoza's than one might think—the essence of God for Leibniz is very much pure rationality, God being nothing more than the fullest expression of systematic rationality, the *prima causa* and first origin of all that is. In Hegel, matters are none too straightforward, but God is still primarily a principle of systematic rationality, if in the Hegelian case, this rationality is dynamic and dialectical. Here it should come as no surprise that Hegel's most far-reaching systematic work is the *Science of Logic,* which endeavors to outline the self-realization of the absolute as a logical process, that is, a process of thought, *logos* or *ratio,* coming to the fullest expression of its essential nature.

The upshot of this is that the philosophical attempt to demonstrate the rationality of the world is a bulwark support of modern science's drive to impose human authority over nature. In this respect, one could argue that the God of the philosophers is merely the instrument of a revolutionary coup d'état by which human reason takes hold of nature, and, in doing so, is exoterically justified by the accessibility of nature to human reason—theodicy becomes the tool of purely human ambitions for hegemonic mastery over an only apparently hostile nature.[16]

Second, the notion of evil that accompanies this profound (and profoundly veiled) anthropocentric system-building *eros* is a curious one, which shows its origins in the Christian tradition while also taking on a new role as a solid systemic citizen, a deceptive "source" of differentiation and systemic definition that serves the rhetoric of modern revolutionary philosophy. Why deceptive? Here negativity is made to have a positive dynamic energy—negativity fuels difference and transition, and this positive function risks conferring on evil as the purely negative a shadowy, only virtual positivity that menaces systemic integrity.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the notion of evil as negation, as an ever unreal force, leads to obvious questions about the adequacy of this theodical project to the realities of human experience. If one may accuse Voltaire's *Candide* of being somewhat unfair to Leibniz, there should be little question that Voltaire's attacks must be taken into account because they do point out the gap between philosophical imagination and unavoidable reality. In this regard, all one has to do is ask a question, the very question that

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haunts Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment:* What systemic good does a murder achieve? And who can think of this systemic good in an impartial way? Who among us can think with God? And what if this murder is itself systemic, a rude parody of the thesis that evil is a tool of the good, participating in a divine rationality that may be beyond us? Is this rationality not necessarily beyond us?[17]

The Kantian Intervention

These questions are not merely insistent, they are definitive, and in modern philosophy a different way of dealing with evil exists alongside the theodical project we have just described that attempts a more adequate response to them. Kant is the crucial figure here; his exploration of radical evil provides the basis for the alternative theodicy of Schelling and represents a momentous break in the tradition in modern German thought that runs from Leibniz to Hegel; indeed, Hegel's focus on reconciliation may be interpreted as a most powerful reaction to Kant's refusal of theodicy.

Kant's thought finds itself in a particular bind.[18] He seeks to provide an adequate account of the nature of evil while not overturning the faith in science that theodicy has attempted to foster in the modern era. He partakes in the modern revolution while also attempting to deal with its "excesses of enthusiasm." Kant's attempt to justify faith in science is too complex and well-known to address here, suffice it to say that his daring project of delimiting the proper bounds of reason is guided by an apparently paradoxical intention: to defend and advance the authority of reason by having it engage in a critique of its proper realm of activity.[19] But, in this respect, it is important to note at the outset that Kant decisively forgoes the route of theodicy as his famous brief essay, *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy* (1791), attests. Instead, Kant develops his concept of evil within the context not of metaphysics but of morality.

This of course makes sense, since theodicy is a striving to explain the function of evil with relation to God. Whether that be the traditional God of the theologians or the God of the philosophers, the purpose of theodicy in either case is ostensibly directed toward the whole first and only latterly toward the role of human beings within it. Kant removes the focus of philosophical investigation away from God to human beings. Hence, evil for Kant is an essentially human problem to be dealt with in the sphere of morality. This is an exceedingly bold

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move and one entirely consistent with Kant's project of autonomy while also showing in great clarity the difficult ambiguities that attend this project and have led to long and complex debates over Kant's position: whether he celebrates a notion of autonomy that essentially replaces God with human beings or whether he is engaged in renovating (and thereby restoring) the relation of God to human beings.[20] The key problem here, as Schelling understood so well, is one of freedom. For Kant, freedom is the highest goal of modern thought and must be presupposed if moral agency is to have any meaning for human beings.

Kant's thinking about radical evil introduces evil as a propensity (*Hang*) in human beings that is basic (i.e., radical, reaching to the root or *radix*) and ineradicable. In doing so, Kant seems to confer on evil a status that had hitherto been denied it, the status of positivity—no longer is evil simply that which is not. Now, indeed, evil can be a positive guide for action. But one has to be careful to set out the various elements of Kant's complex teaching in order to avoid substantial misunderstandings and thereby distort Schelling's own attitude toward Kant.

The most important aspect of Kant's conception of radical evil is to assert that evil can be a guide for action. But the exact nature of this guidance needs to be made clear. The traditional notion of evil as deficiency or a wont of perfection suggests too that evil can be a guide for action but only based on the deficiency or frailty of the actor or agent, and this deficiency was typically associated with matter and, thus, with our material selves and the host of inclinations or motivations connected with them. Evil as a guide for action in this sense meant nothing more than succumbing to such inclinations.

To read Kant in this way is problematic. Kant does not associate our physical inclinations and motivations with evil, and one of the primary reasons for this is that they are not in themselves subject to moral judgment until there is a notion of choice involved. Indeed, if there is no notion of choice involved, if someone acts wholly in accordance with physical inclination, it is very hard to discern any notion of agency at all (something that Sade was quick to notice and exploit).[21] Agency can only be invoked if there is an underlying freedom that allows for choice, and it is one of the most powerful aspects of Kantian thought to insist that this freedom, precisely as freedom of the will, is the *sine qua non* of moral existence and that,

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without such freedom, it is quite difficult to understand how moral action could be possible in any way.

Kant maintains that there is choice, and that this choice determines the moral nature of the actions. What kind of choice is this? Choice always implies criteria on which a choice can be made, and for Kant these criteria are weighed rationally. If the choice is one that pursues rational ends for the sake of those ends, it is rational and good. If, however, the choice is one that pursues ends, whether rational or not, for any other sake, then the action is evil. To explain this, it is necessary to investigate Kant's moral theory in somewhat greater detail.

A good choice is one that pursues rational ends; it is exercised for the sake of the moral law, for the sake of duty, and both duty and law are universal in so far as they are the products of reason in the form of a categorical imperative, an imperative that by its very nature must be universal. An evil choice is one that is exercised for the sake of inclination, that is, the inclination of a particular individual. And this inclination, as personal, subjective, and deeply contingent, is thereby turned into a maxim of action that subordinates to its particularity the universality contained in the moral law and duty attached to it. For Kant, radical evil is precisely this chosen subordination of that which is universal to that which is particular, of the inherent universality of reason to the inherent particularity of personal inclination. This reversal of the relation between universal and particular is the "perversion" at the heart of Kant's conception of radical evil, and it represents a very powerful innovation in the tradition, since it insists on the primacy of choice and the autonomy of the subject that can act positively in an evil manner.

In looking at evil as the pursuit of one's own inclinations over those of duty or the moral law, Kant comes rather close to his great predecessor and teacher, Rousseau. In condemning the subordination of the whole to the part, the will of the many to the will of one, Kant seems to follow what Rousseau says in Book IV of *Emile:*

> . . . the good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked man orders the whole in relation to himself. The latter makes himself the center of all things, the former measures his radius and keeps to the circumference. Then he is ordered in relation to the common center, which is God, and in relation to all the concentric circles, which are the creatures.[22]

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The importance of Kant's concept of evil for our purposes is its expression of the power in human beings to do good or evil and the placement of that power in the will. Evil is no longer merely a lack, a parasitic negation, but a force than can threaten to subvert or pervert the claim to structure and coherence of the moral law that binds free individuals together; the basic character of evil, then, is that, in contravening the moral law, it seeks to become a law of its own.[23]

Yet, there is an additional problem in Kant's account of radical evil that is not only quite relevant for Schelling but also for a better grasp of the basically divided nature of Kant's thought, a division which Hegel sought to solve in one way, and Schelling in another.[24]

The freedom to choose to act according to maxims either in accordance with or contravention of the proper hierarchy of universal and particular, of the moral law and personal inclination, is a curious one. For how can there be a propensity for evil in a being that must in some sense always be completely free? Specifically, if human beings are free to act either for good or evil, how can they be said to have a propensity to act for the evil—does this propensity not restrict their freedom; indeed, does this propensity not suggest that they are not free at all?

Kant does try to address this issue by creating a notion of moral disposition (*Gesinnung*) that "inclines and does not necessitate," but ultimately the problem remains: How can one consider someone as good or evil, as having a propensity to either without undermining the notion of freedom or spontaneity essential to autonomy? In other words, how can one reconcile the kind of radical autonomy that is of the very essence of Kant's philosophical project with the notion of character, disposition, or any other limiting qualities? For some commentators this attempt to combine Aristotelian *hexis* with Kantian spontaneity is misguided and, by its very nature, destined to failure, for others, like Goethe, it indicates Kant's peculiar form of esotericism whereby he attempts to clothe his revolutionary pursuit of autonomy in the guise of a variant of traditional notions of original sin[25]; for still others this awkward combination of innate quality with freedom points to the greatest incoherence of Kantian thought, the attempt to derive necessary rules from freedom, a problem that has been otherwise referred to as the "Kantian paradox" or which has been seen as the clearest indication that the Kantian project is inherently unstable, a tissue of ambiguities concealed by a conscious rhetoric of concealment.[26]

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All these cases turn on Kant's apparent intention to combine autonomy and spontaneity with some notion of inhibitive normativity, the inherently problematic creation of an identity that defines but not to such an extent that freedom is ever relinquished. Schelling works through this difficult combination of necessity and freedom with great daring and skill in his attempt to explain evil in the *Philosophical Investigations,* and his response is very much determined by the problem that Kant's own thinking isolates; for Schelling attempts to place normativity in the very essence of the whole, in God, while leaving to human beings the freedom to ignore or subvert that normativity. If radical evil in Kant places a certain kind of question mark behind his thinking about autonomy, suggesting a pessimism about human beings that courses through all of Kant's thought, Schelling, in striving to overcome that pessimism, takes it to a more dangerous brink, an "abyss of freedom," that Kant could not have countenanced.

Schelling's Response

To this point, we have outlined major conflicting tendencies regarding theodicy that Schelling tries to face squarely in his *Philosophical Investigations.* Let us bring the various strands of our discussion together now in order to give a brief account of the complex problem Schelling seeks to solve.

On the one hand, Schelling perceives with his customary acuity the utter inadequacy of conceptions of evil designed—or so it may seem—to serve the ends of theodicy, of a justification of the world as friendly to the modern pursuit of hegemony. On the other hand, Schelling also perceives the danger in Kant, that Kant's repudiation of theodicy, coupled with his development of a more far-reaching concept of evil, cannot help but put in question the place of human beings in the world, in turn opening the way for radical assertions of the world's ever frustrating inscrutability.

The great gamble of the *Philosophical Investigations,* its central striving, is to affirm both the project of theodicy and the more powerful concept of evil that Kant developed. What Schelling seems to have understood is that the unreality of the privation concept of evil is just as much an admission of the frailty of theodicy as the adoption of a more powerful concept of evil, one that does not serve any systemic

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purpose, which cannot be contained but at any given time threatens to burst the bounds of system. And here is one of the central points of Schelling's approach, that evil introduces a necessary imbalance into the system of the world, that this imbalance is itself the origin and life of the system, the impulsion to the self-revelation of the absolute or God. Yet, evil is not on that account a good systemic citizen, it is essentially chaotic or anarchic and, as such, it always threatens to turn system to its own ends, to make system its servant; precisely this terrible tension is the essential medium of life, of the organic struggle of forces that constitutes the true basis of the whole. Vitality becomes the highest value, a vitality that exists only because of the ceaseless struggle of forces.

Schelling builds these points out of an unusual interpretation of the whole as resulting from the union of two different (and largely opposed) ways of being, ground and existence, an interpretation ostensibly derived from his explorations of nature.[27] It is important not to underestimate the innovative character of this distinction which Schelling's own explanatory apparatus, the association of ground and existence with darkness and light, tends to confuse by suggesting an affinity with traditional notions of chaos and order, nothingness and being, or infinite and finite. Since this distinction both depends on, and departs from, the expected usages of the metaphysical tradition, we need to look at it on its own merits, considering ground as a principle of inwardness or contraction and existence as a principle of expansion—ground tending to retreat into darkness, existence tending toward light as an essentially creative unfolding.[28]

This conflict emerges mysteriously with the word, the utterance of the *logos* or *ratio,* which is the self-revelation of the pure light, the pure principle of form and intelligibility that is God. In this regard, what is so surprising and puzzling about Schelling's account of the emergence of the word is the apparent arbitrariness of it. While Schelling does claim that the word must reveal itself, he does not explain why it must reveal itself. Nor does he offer an account of why the word emerges in any specific beginning. In both cases, Schelling avoids explanations because they would limit God's freedom. But this limitation presents a striking problem.

Slavoj Žižek has rightly called attention to this problem,[29] that the point of beginning in Schelling has the character of the arbitrary, and this is a very important problem because Schelling quite strikingly

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departs from the orthodox notion of divine necessity; namely, if God is as he must be, then he cannot not have been or been in a way other than he is. But Schelling tries to play a careful dual game here. He suggests, in line with the tradition, that God always is even when that "is" refers to a presumably "dormant" being within the ground. The emergence of God by means of the ground is not in fact the transition from nothingness to being (hence, the caution about conflating Schelling's terms with traditional conceptual distinctions) but the point of revelation of a being that in some sense was always already there, even if "dormant"; here it is also important to stress that the ground only emerges with the revelation; it is in fact the latter's very condition of possibility.

The fact is, however, that the point of God's emergence does seem arbitrary and this arbitrariness points to a troubling concern, since the inchoate remainder in the ground persists as a threat to undermine the integrity of God's existence, his logos-being or emergent rationality—it remains as a darkness from which God cannot seem fully to extricate himself, despite Schelling's ambivalent and questionable protestations to the contrary (especially toward the end of the *Philosophical Investigations*). Simply put, Schelling's attempt to reconcile God's necessary nature with his freedom is beset with fundamental conflict and reveals one of the central ambiguities in Schelling's thought: God seems to play a delicate balancing act in his own self-revelation, which both *may* (as conditioned by the ground) *and must not* (as somehow overcoming this condition) end in a disastrous contraction back into the ground.[30]

This supposedly impossible possibility of disastrous contraction is of such importance because Schelling transposes the struggle in God, whose outcome, however unsure, *must* nonetheless "express" God's triumph, to human beings as the highest form of creaturely being, as the ultimate reflection of God's nature in the hierarchy of creation. This transposition is indeed the way of defining the dependent and independent aspects of human beings, dependent because human beings emerge from the ground in God, independent because the ostensibly necessary unity of ground and existence in God becomes their possible disunity in contingent human beings; for, if ground remains a condition in God, it need not do so in human beings. In other words, the ambiguity merely hinted at as an impossible or negative possibility in regard to God, becomes very explicitly possible in regard to

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human beings whose contingency makes them the site of incessant conflict, nature's struggle with itself. If God is that in which existence triumphs over the ground, no matter how perplexing or unconvincing that triumph may be, in human beings this triumph is simply never secure at all, and those cases where human action is dominated by the contracting principle of ground are expressions of evil; evil being a perversion of the relation of ground to existence in which ground as the selfish (and self-conscious or "rational") will of the individual seeks to turn the whole to its own advantage, to make of the whole a pliant servant, to be no longer a condition of the revelation of the whole but that for which the whole is conditioned—in a word, it seeks to become absolute.

Žižek refers to this perversion of the relation of ground and existence as the creation of a *universal singularity* and goes on to say:

> Man is the only creature which can elevate itself to this duality and sustain it: he is the highest paradox of *universal singularity*—the point of utmost contraction, the all-exclusive One of self-consciousness, *and* the embracing All—a singular being (the vanishing point of *cogito*) which is able to comprehend/mirror the entire universe . . . with the appearance of man, the two principles—Existence and its Ground—are posited in their distinction, they are not merely opposed to each other: *their unity also has to be posited*—that is to say, each of them is in the same breath posited as united with its opposite, as its opposite's inherent constituent. In other words, from the previous *indifference* of the two principles we pass to their *unity*—and it is here that we encounter freedom as freedom for Good and Evil, since this unity can take two forms, the form of the true or of the perverted unity . . .[31]

What Žižek calls a universal singularity can be vividly clarified by reference to Sade, whose work could act as paradigmatic of Schelling's bolder characterization of evil.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous essay "Must We Burn Sade?" (*Faut-il brûler Sade?*) makes precisely this point, that Sade's entire oeuvre is aimed at transforming his singular singularity, all the more shocking for its bizarre and brutal features, into a universality, claiming more or less distinctly and clearly that the "polymorphic" perversity his novels never tire of depicting in myriad profusion is actually an accurate portrayal of the true nature of human beings,

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provided we are free and courageous enough to accept this nature.[32] In Sade's world, the passions of the body rule with the active collaboration of the mind; the most brutal acts are "spiritualized"—"elegant" form being conferred on them—and they are the subject of careful, ostensibly "learned" disquisition, the true "torch of philosophy." Indeed, this "spirituality" first lends interest and piquancy to the passions, as if their products could be the subject of exquisitely precise mathematical deductions brought forth into the most monstrous sensual form. Nothing could be more exemplary of Schelling's expression of a kind of evil which is the product neither of a lack nor a deficiency, but rather of a positive, vital force, one in which all the powers that are typically associated with the good, such as rationality, rigor, and probity, come to serve the most brutal and selfish impulses, the ever varying whims of physical desire, of the most "earthly" appetites.

Here one glimpses the deeper movement of Schelling's thought along with its powerful affinity with Kant; for the subordination of reason to the advocacy of the body, its serving as an instrument for the complication and elaboration of the body's necessarily selfish pleasures, is the ultimate affront to reason as inherently universal, as authorizing a categorical imperative—once the body's dictates become categorical imperatives, nothing but the most extreme rejection of the universal as such, as something to which all could assent, is achieved. This brings us back to the Sadean revolutionary who deploys all the resources of reason in service of the most particular, evanescent and selfish interests and, what is more, clothes those selfish interests in the guise of universal principles, this being a part of the titillation his perversions provide—here is the will to power gone mad, the possibility of the universal as something that is inherently egalitarian fades away, and all that can remain is the imposition of the universal by force as a *proton pseudos,* the more or less arbitrary basis for the ascent of the particular to universal hegemony or, as Wirth says, for "the propensity of the creaturely, as the child of the super-creaturely, to shun the abyss of its origin and the abyss of its future and move towards itself and affirm the presence only of itself."[33]

Now, one may interject that Schelling's thinking as described here really does not seem to differ all that significantly from the notion of radical evil Kant develops. Schopenhauer certainly saw it

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this way and, in his typically vituperative manner, criticized Schelling for merely rehashing what Kant had already said more clearly and consequentially. But here Schopenhauer is surely wrong because he fails to acknowledge—or tacitly rejects—the way that Schelling returns evil to its status as a fundamental aspect of being and not only of one being. In other words, by transposing the divine structure onto human beings, Schelling immediately ties the whole to the part, whether in harmony or conflict and, in so doing, avoids the division of the concept of evil into metaphysical and moral spheres—here the moral is the metaphysical and vice versa. Schelling thereby returns the question of evil to its wider ontological context while incorporating the stronger concept of moral evil he found in Kant.[34] This combination lays the foundations for reviving the problem of theodicy by combining a palliative normativity that legitimates the whole with a force that threatens actively to undermine all normativity.

The End of Theodicy?

What concept of theodicy does this combination create? Commentators may be divided as to its exact nature, but almost all agree that Schelling is working within the traditional confines of theodicy. They note that the transposition of an apparently stable structure in God to human beings as an unstable structure absolves God of responsibility for evil and, thus, fulfills one of the primary conditions of theodicy.[35] But they also note that the transfer of the locus of evil to human beings as a positive concept still leaves the question open of why God should permit this evil in his creation, a sort of evil that, by its very nature, presents a challenge to God—as a positively negative concept, evil now seems to have a far greater power because it always threatens to undermine God. Evil is no longer an obedient servant but a surly and dangerous one who seeks to rid himself of his master.

The commentators' difficulty stems from nagging doubts about whether the attempt to combine traditional theodicy with a much more aggressive concept of evil, one that seems to make a mockery of theodicy, is in fact possible. From this standpoint, it seems that Schelling's daring combination of incompatibles in fact fails. Even

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Heidegger, one of Schelling's most formidable (and, at least initially, sympathetic) readers, sees Schelling's failure precisely in his attempt to remain within the tradition of theodicy, and for Heidegger that means systematic thought, while asserting a much more generous account of freedom and the reality of evil that is inseparable from it:

> That is the difficulty which emerges more and more clearly in Schelling's later efforts with the whole of philosophy, the difficulty which proves to be an *impasse* (*Scheitern*). And this *impasse* is evident since the factors of the jointure of Being, ground and existence and their unity not only become less and less compatible, but are even driven so far apart that Schelling falls back into the rigidified tradition of Western thought without creatively transforming it. But what makes this failure so significant is that Schelling thus only brings out difficulties which were already posited in the beginning of Western philosophy, and because of the direction which this beginning took were posited by it as insurmountable. For us this means that a second beginning becomes necessary through the first, but is possible only in the complete transformation of the first beginning, never by just letting it stand.[36]

Heidegger suggests that the very dissonance Schelling discovers in the *Philosophical Investigations* simply cannot admit of reconciliation with the notion of system, that it leads to the final destruction of this notion since it shows with unparalleled acuity that which system must ignore or sacrifice in order to maintain its own legitimacy. This fundamental freedom, a freedom that cannot be possible other than as an affront to system, refuses to obey, for this refusal is its very essence, an essence that is expressed by the ground and the anarchic impulse it "contains"; hence, any system must also seem to be merely a fiction, a "ruling by fiat" whose authority can never be absolute, can never achieve the apparent calm of Leibnizian reason or Hegelian reconciliation.

Žižek comes to a view that is not that much different but strikes more directly at the key problem of contingency. As we noted before, the apparent contingency lingering in the emergence of the word must cast a long shadow on any attempt to assert even God's necessity; indeed, this is the most sensitive point of the entire analysis. How can God's emergence into existence be both necessary

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and contingent: In other words, can a coherent concept of God successfully, that is, harmoniously, combine necessity and freedom? And if, indeed, God's emergence into existence is somehow necessary and free, does this necessity not in a very significant way undermine the homology between God and human beings that Schelling is otherwise careful to preserve? One might argue with some justice that this difference is so immense that it vitiates the entire comparison and points to what seems to be an indelicately forced aspect of Schelling's thought, a purely dogmatic and, as such, seemingly arbitrary desire to preserve the most important elements in the tradition of theodicy against an analysis of human being that cannot but destroy them.[37]

From this point of view (and perhaps this point of view only) one is hard pressed to distinguish Žižek from Heidegger in regard to the essential thrust of argument, since both identify the basic frailty of Schelling's attempt at reconciliation in the problematic nature of his assertion of a homology between God and human beings that seems to admit of its own impossibility and, in doing so, tends to undermine the identity between God and human beings that must be the crucial foundation for any form of theodicy. If God is simply not like human beings, and the question of necessity and contingency raises the specter of this difference like none other, there may be no way to reconcile the two, and no way to explain how all the qualities that are intimately connected with God could in any way be connected with human beings other than as useful fictions or projections that are indistinguishable from fictions.

Coda

But a different view may be argued if one risks the conjecture that Schelling in effect redefines theodicy as a way of preserving it within the context of his much more adventurous concept of evil. To explore this conjecture, we have to look at the purpose of theodicy, the ends to which theodicy is put, once again.

We have already suggested that theodicy arises as the bulwark of the modern scientific revolution; its purpose is to make the broadest claims for the intelligibility and accessibility of the world to human rationality and, thus, to human domination. The dream of mastering

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nature and thereby overcoming the meanness of our mortal estate is underwritten by theodicy—absolute knowledge is possible, the human mind can accede to complete understanding because thought and being are one. This is the boldest claim of theodicy, and it is also a very controversial claim about theodicy itself because it assumes that God becomes the tool of the philosophers, of an *eros* to dominate that has nothing of piety about it;[38] that the notion of mastering nature is merely a coded way of expressing the ascent of human beings from their mortal estate to that of a god.

Kant scuppers this exuberance, and it has been argued that Kant in fact sees nothing more pernicious than the elevation of human beings to the status of gods.[39] But this may not be a fair statement. It seems to us much better to claim that Kant is terribly ambiguous, that his thinking shows the greatest tension between the desire to elevate and to level human beings, as noted previously, the desire to save the true nature of enlightenment aggression by curbing its most dangerous excesses. In this Schelling is very much Kant's disciple and his philosophical journey reveals the intolerable nature of the tensions in Kant, their inherent instability.[40]

In our opinion, the *Philosophical Investigations* is one of Schelling's most daring attempts to make sense of the tensions in Kant by reinterpreting their instability as the very essence of a theodicy of life, as the living surface of a whole justified by its vital dynamism. Here a central point for Schelling is precisely that a homology between God and man must not be possible; to the contrary, such a homology would be the highest expression of evil itself, a sort of cosmic suicide, because its achievement would mean not only the disappearance of God but that of man as well. What we suggest here, then, is that theodicy understood in the modern sense as ultimately demanding (and also despairing of) such a homology, whether openly or covertly, is indeed a most terrible form of evil, a leap into madness that seeks to close the universe at the cost of life itself; the search to become a god leaves human beings in the tatters of aging Oedipus, strangers to themselves and the world—this surely is the essence of evil as Schelling sees it. Hence, the corrosive irony is that the modern theodicy of life is indistinguishable from an evil condemnation of life (and, ultimately, of itself as an untenable and unfortunate fiction).

Schelling's daring reformulation of theodicy reflects a unique oscillation between this madness and a sobriety of reconciliation,

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between the desire to be a god and the desire to live as a human being, between the tragic and comic sides of human striving; Schelling's theodicy is one that sees struggle as the end of creation and the very wellspring of life. Imbalance and dissonance are of the essence and, without them, all turns into meaningless indifference, the *Ungrund,* a rejection of the constant interestedness that is life, its tirelessly changing fusion of contraction and expansion. As Schelling writes in the 1815 draft of the *Ages of the World:*

> All life must pass through the fire of contradiction. Contradiction is the engine of life and its innermost essence. From this it follows that, as an old book says, all deeds under the sun are full of trouble and everything languishes in toil, yet does not become tired, and all forces incessantly struggle against each other. Were there only unity and everything were in peace, then, truly nothing would want to stir itself and everything would sink into listlessness.[41]

One might well accuse Schelling of being rather naive. But he is in fact showing a deeply Goethian respect for the integrity of struggle, for the recognition that evil emerges from the unquenchable desire to overcome the ambiguous terms of human life in a brutal pursuit of quietude, a quietude that can only be a form of self-destruction, whether it emerges in monastic self-immolation or in the more brutal pursuits of domination that haunt the history of the twentieth-century as well as our ceaseless striving for control over our bodies and the earth.

Hence, the reformulation of theodicy Schelling advances is one that respects the whole as a necessarily free and unstable interplay of essentially tragic and comic forms of striving; it is a dynamic structure which reflects Schelling's point that the absence of a complete homology between God and human being, expressed through the instability in the human synthesis of ground and existence, is the grave dissonance that works life, the evil that works good.

But Heidegger and Žižek cannot be so easily dismissed. For has Schelling merely renewed the traditional view of evil as servant of the good in a remarkably circuitous way, has he merely engaged in a complex subterfuge that has not managed to conceal itself all that well? One might respond in typically Schellingian fashion by suggesting that he both does and does not. While Schelling invokes this

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traditional view, he also seems to undermine it by suggesting that evil is not a loyal systemic servant but rather one who always threatens to become master and may (and rather ambiguously must not) have the power to do so. For Schelling, fundamental instability is of the essence of theodicy; the ineradicable possibility of collapse creates the manifold tensions from which the whole emerges as a vibrant plenitude. Indeed, these manifold tensions—the tensions of restless life itself—must be present at every moment; since instability endows the moment with an alluring promise of being that is the foremost gift of theodicy, a theodicy always threatened and ever restored, at once ending and beginning anew.

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