

Schelling's Moral Psychology in the *Freiheitsschrift* and *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*

Michelle Kosch

There are a number of philosophical projects underway in the *Freiheitsschrift*, not all equally central or equally successful, and not, so far as I can see, all jointly consistent. I am going to focus on one: the account of *empirical human moral agency* the text presupposes. Since it seems not perfectly obvious that Schelling owes us such an account (by his own lights), I will start with some reasons for thinking he does (1.). Then after laying out the philosophical issues (2.) I will look at the *Freiheitsschrift* and other texts of the period and extract an account from them (3.). I will conclude by describing two problems with that account (4.).¹

1.

A fair portion of the text of the *Freiheitsschrift* is devoted to criticism of a way of thinking about human agency that Schelling attributes to a number of philosophers, on which, as he says, we can make sense of freely willed good actions but can make sense of evil actions only as not (or not entirely) freely willed.² The question of how to remedy that deficit is presented as one central concern of the essay. The desideratum is an account of agency that allows for evil on a conception that is positive in the double sense of involving both a “positive perversion [*Verkehrtheit*] or reversal [*Umkehrung*] of principles” and a genuine exercise of agency rather than a mere failure to exercise agency.³ Otherwise put, there must be a *principle* of evil (*i.e.*, a unitary characterization: defective actions or dispositions cannot simply be a chaotic agglomeration); and there must be an account of *what an agent is doing* in acting on that principle (an account on which she is not merely passive in the face of forces external to her will).

¹ Earlier versions of this article were presented at two conferences at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich in 2016 and 2018. I am grateful to the audiences at those two conferences for valuable feedback, to Daniel Whistler for written comments on the first draft, and especially to Thomas Buchheim for his generous support and intellectual engagement over the course of the project.

² I have discussed this general topic in earlier work. What I say here partially reframes the issues and considers new texts; but it is intended to be on the whole consistent with those earlier discussions.

³ AA I 17, 137 | SW VII, 366. All translations are mine.

We have no choice but to see this as a concern that stands on its own feet, since it does not follow from any of the plausibly related concerns in the essay. So, for example, Schelling is (at this time) increasingly occupied with the project of articulating a conception of human and divine personhood that would enable him to think about the relation of the human to the divine on the model of an interpersonal encounter. But that project does not require an account of human freedom whereon it is freedom for evil in this positive sense.

Nor does the cosmology of the *Freiheitsschrift* require such an account. It is consistent with it, but it does not require it; and in fact it is clear from the text that the relation of dependence between these two projects is meant to run in the opposite direction: our cosmology has to account for a human capacity for evil in this positive sense, consistent with theodicy, and so is constrained in some important sense by our moral psychology. (Lest that seem an odd claim, it is worth pointing out that this is the way the ‘problem of evil’ was handed down from the tradition; and it is within this very traditional framework that Schelling approaches it.)

Nor does the project of articulating a conception of freedom meeting this constraint appear to have a primarily scriptural motivation. Schelling does not present his concern as being with a philosophical accommodation of the Christian doctrine of original sin. He uses the word *Sünde* in the essay only very rarely. Although there are a number of scriptural references, these are offered as canonical depictions of a set of phenomena with which the reader is assumed to be independently acquainted. They are not intended to provide our only or main route to acquaintance with those phenomena.

Nor, finally, is that acquaintance described as something purely introspective. What we are told instead is that the ‘philanthropism’ of contemporary moral psychology is inconsistent with *observed phenomena*. Schelling tells us that human evil “is manifest”⁴ and that we are able to observe, even in non-human nature, phenomena that are manifestly the “effects” of evil.⁵ But something observable both in itself and in its effects is an empirical phenomenon. Thus, the evil will to be accounted for must be an empirical phenomenon. (I emphasize this because it might seem tempting to infer, from the fact that Schelling’s moral psychology is not naturalistic, that it must concern something other than empirical human psychology. The second does not follow from the first and is ruled out by too many remarks in the text to be plausible on its own.)

⁴ AA I 17, 126 | SW VII, 354.

⁵ AA I 17, 146 | SW VII, 377.

2.

If we are to be able to say that evil is manifest, we must also 1. be able to say which observable phenomena constitute the extension of the term, at least to some approximation (that is: the *Freiheitsschrift* must presuppose at least some first-order normative principles); and we must further 2. be able to recognize these phenomena as the actions of empirical human beings (that is: the essay must presuppose at least some theses in empirical moral psychology). My topic is the second set of presuppositions; but the path to them leads through the first set.

Schelling does not articulate his first-order normative presuppositions in the *Freiheitsschrift*, but the preponderant characterization of evil is as involving a sort of egoism, self-seeking, “aroused selfhood [...] that [...] has torn itself entirely free from the light or the universal will”,⁶ “self-will [that strives] to be, as particular will, that which it is able to be only in identity with universal will”,⁷ elevating one’s “selfhood to the place of the dominant will of the universe, instead of making it into the basis or organ”.⁸

So, briefly put, the observable phenomena are ones in which an individual privileges her own ends or good in a way that disregards or actively usurps the legitimate claims of others, that violates some legitimate ordering of the claims of multiple individuals on one another or the claims of some (perhaps divine) authority. That is an intuitive characterization. It is consistent across a range of texts in this period of Schelling’s authorship. It is also consistent with the Kantian and Fichtean characterization of one important subset of morally defective actions (a proper subset, since it is not clear how actions that violate self-regarding duties can fall under this characterization – but then it is not wholly clear that Schelling recognizes the existence of such duties in this essay or other writings of this period).

Kant, of course, agrees that morality is inconsistent with at least some manifestations of partiality to self. Fichte takes this further in that for him both the moral end of independence and the reasons for action that flow from it are taken to be fully agent-neutral.⁹ Privileging my ends, my welfare, or even my moral virtue over those of similarly situated others is morally forbidden. Doing this is ‘egoistic’ in a familiar sense of the term. In an 1806 discussion of Fichte’s recent work,¹⁰ Schelling described this thought (“for example, of the reprehensibility of self-interest, and how the individual must subordinate itself to the race”)¹¹ as the universally accepted moral assumption that one can count on approval for mouthing (as, he there suggests, Fichte does).

⁶ AA I 17, 165 | SW VII, 399f.

⁷ AA I 17, 135 | SW VII, 365.

⁸ AA I 17, 156 | SW VII, 389.

⁹ Cf. *System der Sittenlehre*, GA I/5, 209–213. Translations are mine.

¹⁰ *Anti-Fichte*, SW VII, 1–91.

¹¹ *Anti-Fichte*, SW VII, 50.

That is not a ringing endorsement of the thought itself, but the text of the *Freiheitsschrift* is completely devoid of any expression of disagreement with this universally accepted assumption, and Schelling's own characterization of morally evil action is, as we have seen, consistent with it. This agreement about first-order normative principle is worthy of note: there exists a level of description at which it is fair to say that Schelling and Fichte agree that some actions (or dispositions) can be observed to fit that description, and those are the evil ones. Notice also that there is at least a thin motivational account attached to the description: people who so act are moved by partial self-concern rather than impartial concern for all.

The agreement is noteworthy because the most salient target of the criticism in the passage with which I am concerned does look to be Fichte. The passage I have in mind is the discussion of the 'actuality' of evil from VII, 366–373,¹² the passage bracketed by two references to an 1807 essay by Franz Baader on this topic. An important part of that passage is this:

According to them, the sole ground of evil lies in sensibility, or in animality or the earthly principle, insofar as they oppose heaven not to hell, as is fitting, but rather to earth. This representation is a natural consequence of the doctrine according to which freedom consists solely in the domination of the intelligent principle over sensible desires and inclinations, and the good comes from pure reason [*aus reiner Vernunft*], according to which there is, understandably, no freedom for evil (insofar as here the sensible inclinations predominate); more precisely however evil is entirely cancelled. (AA I 17, 141 | SW VII, 371)

Of course, there is a family of views here, and Leibniz and Kant are targets as well, but it is Fichte's 'philanthropism' in the *System of Ethics* that Schelling comes back to discuss explicitly at VII, 389.¹³ (Notably, the term 'philanthropism' occurs in these two passages, and nowhere else.) It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Schelling has chiefly in mind Fichte's explanation of evil as the psychological expression of the power of inertia (*Trägheit*) in nature in *System of Ethics* §16.¹⁴

The problem is specified in the passage at VII, 371¹⁵ above as the conjunction of two claims, on the one hand that

(1) the rationality of an action is a necessary condition of the freedom of that action

and on the other that

(2) the rationality of an action is a sufficient condition of the moral goodness of that action.

Taken together, these two claims present a problem for the possibility of free evil actions. This is a specifically moral psychological problem, not soluble by the cosmological moves by which Schelling hopes to make human freedom compatible with divi-

¹² AA I 17, 136–142 | SW VII, 366–373.

¹³ AA I 17, 156 | SW VII, 389.

¹⁴ Cf. also Schelling's discussion of *Trägheit* at *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 139f.; 155 | SW VII, 369f.; 389.

¹⁵ AA I 17, 141 | SW VII, 371.

ne goodness. It is the problem of how there *could be* an action that is both free and morally evil.

The peculiar commitment of rationalist theories like Kant's and Fichte's – what informs (2) – is that partiality is morally forbidden in virtue of being irrational. To privilege myself over similarly situated others is to ascribe to the fact that I am the agent or patient at issue an importance I cannot justify – 'it is me' being the wrong *kind* of consideration, something we can see as soon as we notice the results of generalizing the line of reasoning, and so cannot reflectively endorse. If I do endorse something with this upshot, the explanation must (typically at least) be some failure of practical reflection that renders it confused or incomplete. This failure is what Fichte explains with reference to *Trägheit* in *System of Ethics* §16.

The worry (and this is a reason, in addition to the explicit references, to think that Fichte is the primary target here) is that such failures of reflection are all that evil can amount to on Fichte's view. We never *do* what we clearly see to be irrational;¹⁶ if what we do is in fact irrational, that is because its irrationality is obscured by our own failure to deliberate thoroughly and systematically. That failure is itself explained by something about our nature: an inborn propensity to reflective sloth which is one manifestation of the natural force of inertia and which an individual is not always, on her own, in a position to counteract.¹⁷

So a certain sort of intentional malice is impossible on this view; but more worrisome still (for Schelling) is that these failures of practical reflection are themselves failures of agency, because the disposition to reflect practically – to systematize the contents of all of the attitudes conflict among which makes up the extension of practical irrationality – is the disposition in virtue of which we are agents to begin with. This is, of course, what informs (1).

3.

So, assume that what we mean by evil is at least privileging one's own interest over the interest of similarly situated others (where that subsumes violating the duties assigned to one by relevant cooperative conventions). The question then is: what alternative account of the choice of it does Schelling offer?

We can perhaps approach this question via an apparently more straightforward one: which of (1) or (2) does he deny? Is it that I am supposed to be able to freely do this, even though doing it involves some irrationality? Or is it that it can be rational to do this, and that is why I can freely do it? Is it the link between freedom and rationality that Schelling wants to sever, or is it the link between rationality and the good? Or both?

¹⁶ Cf. *System der Sittenlehre*, GA I/5, 176 f.

¹⁷ Cf. *System der Sittenlehre*, GA I/5, 185–187.

This question is harder to answer than it ought to be.

Before trying to answer it, I want, first, to deny that we can take Schelling's musings about atemporal acts of choice to allow him to bypass it. Not even Kant (who of course held one of the historical precursors to that atemporal choice view) thought he could bypass this question. The act of the faculty of choice (*Willkür*) that determines intelligible (and thereby empirical) character is one in which the *first* link, the one between freedom and rationality, is severed.¹⁸

It is initially tempting to think Schelling intends to take a similar position; but this position is not obviously consistent with the text.

One problem is that Schelling plainly wants to deny that evil is the absence of rationality or a mere deficiency of rationality, and to insist that if we are to have a positive account of evil we must have an account of how the intellectual principle can be active in it. That ambition is not obviously consistent with the choice to deny (1) and affirm that we are positively free to do irrational things. In fact, it fits much better with the choice to deny (2) and affirm that rationality can be put to evil use as well as good.

Schelling's denial of the thesis that 'the good comes from pure reason' seems to support an interpretation on which rationality is not a sufficient condition for moral goodness – that is, on which Schelling intends to deny (2). This interpretation also seems also to fit well with Schelling's later theological voluntarism about value; and this speaks in its favor to those who believe, as I do, that the *Freiheitsschrift* is a step on the way to that later view.

Furthermore, it makes sense that this should be the picture, given that the references that bracket this discussion of the actuality of evil (in footnotes 13 and 21) are after all to Baader's 1807 essay in the *Morgenblatt* titled 'On the Proposition that there can be no Evil Use of Reason', in which Baader argues against the titular proposition. Baader argues that evil arises not from the absence of reason or the failure to use it, but from its positive misuse, its perversion, and corruption. (Notice that whatever perversion or corruption he has in mind cannot be a perversion or corruption of reason itself sufficient to render it *unreason* – since the idea that evil is *unreason* is just what he takes himself to be arguing against.) Experience and linguistic usage, Baader writes, testify to the existence of "an evil spirit" (*ein böser Geist*) in human beings; one need be in the grip of no particular ideology to see this; in fact only philosophers with whose 'theories and systems' the idea is inconsistent are inclined to deny it.¹⁹ So evil is not the failure of reason to master sensible inclinations; evil is itself a spiritual phenomenon. Schelling's continual reference Baader therefore suggests that (1) cannot be the proposition Schelling means to reject.

¹⁸ This is how I understand Kant's claim, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, that we can give no account of a rational origin of evil; cf. *Rel.*, AA VI: 43.

¹⁹ *Über die Behauptung*, 35 f.

Now if we conjoin the idea that evil is a kind of 'self-seeking egoism' with the idea that, far from being irrational or arational, this disposition actually has its roots in a use of reason, we have not a Kantian/Fichtean picture, indeed, but a picture that is nevertheless familiar in a couple of guises. One is the topic of Book II of Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*: the view that the reasons that we have support actions that further our own self-interest.²⁰ The second is the standard Humean view on which reason is subordinate always to some end given by the passions, with no ends intrinsic to it, and unable to rule out any substantive end however egoistic.²¹

So, the view that there is some Sidgwickian dualism of practical reason, and the view that reason has no ends intrinsic to it, are two ways of filling out a claim that reason is engaged when creaturely self-will revolts against universal will. Either would give us a way of understanding Schelling's insistence that evil does not simply amount to irrationality.

But that is so far just speculation: neither way is spelled out in the text of the *Freiheitsschrift*. In fact, there is no positive account of practical reason at all in the *Freiheitsschrift*. Schelling talks about 'practical reason' in the essay only when referencing Kant's second *Critique*;²² and he refers to reason as something with a possibly practical valence only when criticizing his opponents: disparaging that moral philosophy in which 'the good comes from pure reason', or denying that anyone could be virtuous "out of pure reason".²³ He uses the word 'reason' in his own voice (as it were) exclusively to refer to its theoretical use.²⁴

So, it is tempting to look at other texts of the period – for example the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, which contains the most worked-out thoughts on psychology of anything written in this period—for clarification. But if we succumb to that temptation, the reading I have just proposed is in trouble. For not only do we not find this speculation confirmed there; in fact, this option seems to be simply ruled out by the picture of human psychology we find in those lectures.

Consider the discussion of spirit,²⁵ Schelling describes spirit (*Geist*) in a broad sense as having three potencies: character (*Gemüth*), spirit (*Geist*) in a narrower sense, and soul (*Seele*). Character is the 'dark principle' of spirit, the unconscious source of drives. Spirit in the narrower sense is "that which is truly [*eigentlich*] personal in the human being, and therefore also the true potency of consciousness [*Be-*

²⁰ Cf. *Methods of Ethics*, 119–195.

²¹ Cf. Hume, *Treatise*, 265–68.

²² Cf. AA I 17, 124 | SW VII, 352.

²³ AA I 17, 177 | SW VII, 413.

²⁴ A remark at AA I 17, 176 | SW VII, 413 ("By contrast, a system in which reason actually knows itself must unite all demands of both spirit and heart, of moral feeling as well as most rigorous understanding") does not constitute a counterexample to this claim. Saying that a system in which reason knew itself would have to show the consistency of the demands of moral feeling with the demands of the understanding is a far cry from saying that reason is practical. Thanks to Thomas Buchheim for pressing me to clarify this point.

²⁵ Cf. SP, AA II 8, 154–165 | SW VII, 465–472.

wußtheit]”.²⁶ In spirit in this narrow sense the desires and pleasures that are present unconsciously in character become conscious, become, he says, will (*Wille*), which he seems to want to define here as conscious desire, and which he calls “truly the center [Innerste] of spirit”.²⁷ Soul, by contrast, is “the truly divine in the human being, and thus the impersonal”.²⁸

Spirit (in the narrow sense) is the seat of the will, which has two sides, “a real [side], which concerns the individuality of the human being, the self-will [*Eigenwille*, also willfulness]; and a universal or ideal side, the understanding”.²⁹

The two sides seem initially related to another (tripartite) distinction Schelling draws between potencies of spirit in the narrow sense: 1. “the potency of self-will, of egoism, that would be blind without the understanding”; 2. opposed to this, “the highest, which is the understanding itself”; and between these 3. the actual will: “From understanding and self-will together the middle potency, c) the true [*eigentliche*] will that thus appears again here in the point of indifference”.³⁰

If we take the two sides thought seriously, these are best seen as two aspects of will: that on the one hand it is the will of an individual; and that on the other hand it is informed by a universal principle or principles (where ‘universal’ means, at minimum, both non-egoistic and non-idiosyncratic). It seems that the capacity for good and evil will be rooted in this two-faceted character of the will, a double character that (as we have seen) had been announced as a desideratum, but not explained in detail, in the *Freiheitsschrift* itself. Further, it seems that here, as in the *Freiheitschrift*, it is the ineliminability of the individuality of human agency that makes evil a standing possibility.

Let me note and set aside for the moment that this desideratum might seem not to have been met insofar as the intellectual principle characteristic of spirit does not itself have two sides. This means that there are not obviously two principles here, because individuality or the ‘real ground’ is not obviously a principle. If we look back at the *Freiheitsschrift*, we can see that this is consistent with Schelling’s description there of the understanding as the “universal will” (*Universalwille*) that stands in opposition to the “self-will of the creature”,³¹ that is the principle of “unity” and “order”,³² that is “light set into nature”³³ – and also consistent with the absence of a description of anything resembling an opposing *principle*. I will return to this aspect of the account in both texts in a moment.

Surprisingly, in the Stuttgart lectures, Schelling goes on to explain that freedom of the sort he wants to account for is *not* actually explained by the structure of spirit (in

²⁶ AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 466.

²⁷ AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 467.

²⁸ AA II 8, 160 | SW VII, 468.

²⁹ AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 467.

³⁰ AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 467.

³¹ AA I 17, 133 f. | SW VII, 363.

³² AA I 17, 143 | SW VII, 374.

³³ AA I 17, 133 | SW VII, 362.

the narrow sense) just outlined, but rather by the fact that spirit is situated in a kind of intermediary role between character and soul. We see this in these passages:

But his freedom truly consists not in this relationship –not in its [situation in the] middle between understanding and self-will, but rather [in its situation] between the first and third, the lowest and the highest potency [*viz.* character and soul]. Thus in order to cognize completely the essence of freedom, we must consider the third potency. (AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 467)

True human freedom consists precisely in the fact that the spirit is subordinate to the soul on the one hand, and stands above the character on the other. (AA II 8, 164 | SW VII, 470f.)

In what looks like a departure from the picture in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling then explains that spirit, *because* it is capable of illness (*Krankheit*), error (*Irrthum*), sin (*Sünde*) and evil (*Böse*), cannot be the “highest”³⁴ in the human being; the highest is soul,³⁵ and soul is the highest because it is the incorruptible link to the divine,³⁶ incapable of evil or illness (ordinary linguistic usage being in error on these matters).³⁷

Soul is “the truly divine in the human being, and thus the impersonal”.³⁸ Its essence is love³⁹ – impartial benevolence – and soul is also the seat, within the human being, of the moral principle. Kant had this right, Schelling tells us, insofar as he saw that what morality fundamentally requires is impersonality:

Allow the soul in you to act, or act always as a holy man – this is in my opinion the highest principle wherein the truth of the different moral systems, epicureanism and stoicism, comes together. Kant has only the formal expression of this principle. ‘Act in accordance with your soul’ means just: act not as a personal being, but rather entirely impersonally; do not disturb through your personality [the soul’s] influence in yourself. (AA II 8, 166 | SW VII, 473)

The obvious problem with using these Stuttgart lectures to fill in the interpretation I have proposed is that they portray soul, not spirit, as the seat of reason, and reason as the incorruptible faculty for receiving the moral truth: the truth that one must act impersonally. Reason knows no distinction between persons, knows no ‘subjectivity’, and could not in principle be misused toward egoistic ends. Instead it is the misuse of the *understanding* that is at the root of evil.

There is a further striking aspect of the characterization of reason in the Stuttgart lectures, and that is Schelling’s description of it as being “more something passive, surrendering itself”,⁴⁰ – in contrast to the understanding, which is “more active, engaged”.⁴¹ “If one says of someone, he showed much reason, one always means by that

³⁴ AA II 8, 158 | SW VII, 467.

³⁵ Cf. AA II 8, 158–160 | SW VII, 467 f.

³⁶ Cf. AA II 8, 160 f. | SW VII, 469.

³⁷ Cf. AA II 8, 160 | SW VII, 468.

³⁸ AA II 8, 160 | SW VII, 468.

³⁹ Cf. AA II 8, 168 | SW VII, 473.

⁴⁰ AA II 8, 166 | SW VII, 472.

⁴¹ AA II 8, 166 | SW VII, 472.

not so much that he displayed activity as that he displayed submission to a higher motive.⁴²

If we then return to the *Freiheitsschrift* and ask whether it is consistent with this part of the picture, we see what I have noted already, namely that understanding seems to be the (only) intellectual faculty with practical employment there. At the end of the essay Schelling also seems to describe reason as something passive;⁴³ but for the most part it seems the view is rather that reason is not a practical faculty at all. What is certain is that in the essay it is their possession of understanding – not reason – that makes human beings (in contrast to animals) capable of both evil and good. At least that is what is suggested by this passage:

In the animal, as in every other natural being, that dark principle is indeed effective; but it is not yet born into the light in [the animal] as it is in the human being; it is not spirit and understanding, but rather blind craving and desire; in short, there is no fall possible here, no separation of the principles, where there is as yet no absolute or personal unity. (AA I 17, 142 | SW VII, 372)

So on the interpretation that is emerging, spirit (not soul) is the practical aspect of the human being; understanding (not reason) is the intellectual faculty that has a role in the will, that is engaged in practical deliberation; and it is understanding (not reason) whose perversion makes itself manifest in the evil will.

The question I asked at the beginning of this section can be answered differently once we have brought this distinction into play. Now it seems plausible that Schelling *does* want to deny (1), replacing it with

(1') an action's conformity with the understanding (*Verstandesmäßigkeit*) is a necessary condition of the freedom of that action

which together with

(2) the rationality (*Vernünftigkeit*) of an action is a sufficient condition of the moral goodness of that action

(which he seems to affirm explicitly in the Stuttgart lectures), is perfectly consistent with the desideratum that a free choice of evil be possible. Actions can be free without being rational because they can display understanding without displaying reason, and their display of understanding is what sets them off from the instinct-driven behavior of beasts.

What exactly am I doing when I am displaying understanding but not reason in my decision-making, on the proposed account? To understand this we might look again for a foothold in Fichte. Though I am far from sure Fichte is particularly rele-

⁴² AA II 8, 166 | SW VII, 472. Schelling expresses the same view about the understanding being that in virtue of which human beings are self-active, reason being a passive and receptive faculty, in the review of Niethammer (1808), cf. AA I 18, 35f. | SW VII, 516.

⁴³ Cf. AA I 17, 178 | SW VII, 415.

vant here, as a matter of fact in the *System of Ethics* Fichte does use “understanding”⁴⁴ to designate what is called in English ‘instrumental reason’;⁴⁵ and he does describe understanding as what is employed when one acts according to the “maxim of self-interest”⁴⁶.

The view we would be attributing to Schelling, on this interpretation, would be something like this: freedom relies on the intellectual capacity for instrumental rationality. Call that capacity ‘understanding’. There is a different capacity – call it ‘reason’ – which is the capacity passively to receive the moral truth. Reason is incorruptible; but it is also inactive. The active intellectual faculty is corruptible in virtue of being yoked to self-will as its real ground. Its only real principle is ‘universal will’. But there is a standard, characteristic perversion that is almost like an opposing principle: the principle of enlightened self-interest.

That sounds reasonable. Unfortunately, there are two problems.

4.

The first is that this interpretation has Schelling disagreeing with the Baader text he has professed agreement within the footnotes bracketing the section of the *Freiheitsschrift* I have been discussing. Contra Baader, there can indeed be no evil use of reason, on this picture.

This would be a difficulty. Schelling could hardly have missed the fact that Baader begins that essay by floating (and then *rejecting*) the idea that one might want to distinguish between understanding and reason, and say that the former can be perverted but that the latter is incorruptible and unsusceptible to misuse. Baader writes: one might have common linguistic usage at least partially on one’s side

if one wanted to call ‘understanding’ unmodified [*Verstand schlechthin*] the understanding of the animal as its skill with respect to its animal ends, and [to call] ‘reason’ its skill with respect to its higher end. (Über *die Behauptung*, 35)

However, Baader continues, one would have neither common usage nor the facts of the case on one’s side

if one wanted further, and maintaining the above restriction on the sense of both words (understanding and reason), to designate the root of the essence or awfulness [*Wesen oder Unwesen*] of the depravity of the human being by saying: the human being who gives up his reason becomes merely an animal with an understanding, and sinks to the level of the latter,

⁴⁴ GA I/5, 110.

⁴⁵ The ‘instrumental’ label can be misleading: in fact, instrumental reason is usually taken (also by Fichte) to subsume logical and mereological as well as causal reasoning.

⁴⁶ GA I/5, 182. In calling on this text, we must add the caveat that the same capacity is engaged in all practical deliberation, including that subordinate to the moral end, the end given by practical reason (cf. GA I/5, 153–156). Fichte does not distinguish in these contexts between understanding and reason as distinct capacities. As we will see in the next section, neither does Schelling.

whereas reason in him is incorruptible, and of it itself there can be no evil use. (Über die *Behauptung*, 35 f.)

That is exactly what Baader accuses Jacobi – the ostensible target in that essay – of having done. This ‘animal with understanding’ language is also the language Fichte uses in the *System of Ethics* to designate the person at the stage of moral development at which he is able to use his rational capacities to reason prudentially on a self-interested basis:

What then could the human being’s maxim be, at the level of reflection at which we have left him? Since no other drive comes to consciousness beyond the natural drive, and this is directed at pleasure and has desire as its motive, this maxim can be none other than the following: one must choose what promises the (intensively and extensively) greatest pleasure; in short, the maxim of one’s own happiness. This last may be sought also along with the happiness of others, according to the sympathetic drive, but the satisfaction of this drive and the desire that arises from it, and thus one’s own happiness, nevertheless remains the final aim of action. The human being at this level becomes an animal with an understanding. (GA I/5, 167)

Others, for instance Schiller, use the same language in a similar way:

Inner sense, or the capacity to affect oneself through thought, specifically distinguishes the human being only as a type of animal with understanding and as a higher sensible being; but only his rationality, or the capacity to act according to pure thought, can distinguish him from the animal as a different genus. However spiritual something may be that moves him to feeling, as soon as he is immediately determined through this feeling, he determines himself merely as an animal with understanding: for everything is called an animal that acts a certain way because it feels a certain way. (Schiller to F. C. von Augustenburg on 11.11.1793, 308)⁴⁷

Schelling does not use this language – it is to be found nowhere in the texts of this period – and that is because he denies that there *is* animal understanding.⁴⁸ So at VII, 372 f.,⁴⁹ he agrees with Baader that the evil human being is *lower* than an animal, but gives a different explanation: only the human being has understanding and spirit (*Verstand und Geist*) and so only the human being is capable of the ‘*personal* unification’ of dark and light principles; and for that reason only the human being is capable of their perversion: evil.

One might initially think that this is a way of explaining the compatibility of the interpretation proposed and Schelling’s agreement with Baader here that the absence

⁴⁷ This passage is taken from Schiller’s third letter to Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg (the set of letters that, much reworked, became the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of the Human Being*; cf. *Ästhetische Erziehung*, 99 f.). The context suggests the view is that reason is impersonal, and that actions with moral worth are un-self-interested. This is farther up the same page: “I cannot avoid regarding the human being who possesses it as a more noble natural being; but I can make no merit of it on behalf of his person. In order to esteem him as a rational being, I must first have convinced myself that he would act just as selflessly, steadfastly and justly even if these virtues did not have the appeal for him that they actually have, and their exercise were to cost him as much effort as it now gives him enjoyment.” (Schiller to F. C. von Augustenburg on 11.11.1793, 308)

⁴⁸ Cf. the review of Niethammer of 1808 (AA I 18, 34 f. | SW VII, 515).

⁴⁹ *Freiheitsschrift*, AA I 17, 142 | SW VII, 372 f.

of reason does not put human beings at the level of animals. If animals do not have understanding, then the characterization of evil I have described is not a characterization of the evil human being as *like* an animal with an understanding (as, e.g., in Fichte). That is, Schelling could be making the same point, but refusing to hold fixed the terminology that Baader asks us to hold fixed.

But that is not quite enough for this not to be a problem, as we see once we look at the second problem.

This second problem has to do with the point I mentioned earlier, to which I said I would return. It seems clear that if this solution to the problem of how to account for a choice of evil that is genuinely free is going to work, Schelling has to have a clear and plausible account of the distinction between the operation of understanding and the operation of reason. This is going to be an account on which (1') and (2) are together compatible with the positivity of evil only if accordance with understanding and accordance with reason are *different criteria*.

The worry is that there is quite a bit of textual evidence that points in the opposite direction, in two ways. First, virtually everything Schelling has to say in this period about the operation of the understanding on the inclinations looks very much like what Fichte (to take the most relevant case) would *call* the operation of practical reason. The mental operation involved in applying the understanding to my drives looks like what moves me from unreflective partiality to self and to the present time to increasingly reflective increasing impartiality amongst individuals and amongst times. That is why it makes sense to call the will of the understanding 'universal will', after all, and it is why when the will of the ground is subordinated to it (rather than it to the ground) what we have is good action. But this is just the heart of what practical reason does in deliberation for Fichte.⁵⁰

This already calls into question the idea that accordance with understanding and accordance with reason really are different criteria. But, second, in both the Stuttgart lectures and elsewhere, Schelling explicitly *describes* the understanding and reason as continuous with one another, the operation of the former only a limited version of the operation of the latter. Take for instance these two passages from 1810:

Universally a distinction is drawn between understanding and reason. This is completely incorrect. Understanding and reason are the same thing regarded in different ways. (SP, AA II 8, 164 | SW VII, 471)

Since in the essence of reason there obviously lies something yielding, passive, but on the other hand reason and understanding can in truth only be the same thing, we must say: reason is nothing other than understanding in its submission to the higher, soul. (SP, AA II 8, 166 | SW VII, 472)

and compare these two passages from 1806:

⁵⁰ This fact motivates the caveat in footnote 46 above.

The understanding is just reason and nothing different, only reason in its non-totality [...] The understanding has no life of its own, but only through reason, not as a rigid, but rather as a yielding instrument of the latter. (*Anti-Fichte*, SW VII, 42)

True understanding comes [...] already of its own accord to reason. (*Anti-Fichte*, SW VII, 43)

I cite these passages as evidence that this view that the understanding and reason are not two separate faculties brackets the time period in which the *Freiheitsschrift* was composed. There are variations of this idea in earlier texts as well.⁵¹

So, the *modus operandi* of the understanding as described by Schelling is no different from the *modus operandi* of reason as described by Fichte, and moreover Schelling himself, far from being willing to draw a bright line between understanding and reason, in fact does the opposite.

This second problem looks fatal. If we understand the relation between understanding and reason in this way, the intellectual element which it was so important to preserve (to distinguish human evil from mere animality) really does have to be present in limited quantity (or with limited effectiveness) in order for evil to be possible. Schelling has not given us an alternative to the picture on which evil is a deficiency, and in particular a deficiency in the exercise of the intellect. But that was very clearly what was desired.

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⁵¹ This point about there being no subjectivity in the sense of relativity-to-an-individual in reason, at least as a theoretical faculty – in contrast with understanding’s ‘only relative’ universality – is one that we find earlier as well – for instance in the 1804 *Würzburger System* (cf. SW VI, 142 f.).