

Freedom and Self-Grounding

A Fundamental Difference between Schelling and Schopenhauer

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Zusammenfassung

Schopenhauers Ausführungen zur ‚transzendentalen Freiheit‘ besitzen auffallende Ähnlichkeiten zu Schellings früherer Beschreibung der ‚formellen Freiheit‘ in der *Freiheitsschrift*. Ungeachtet der scheinbaren Nähe der beiden Philosophen argumentiere ich für die These, dass ihre zwei Freiheitsauffassungen einen bedeutenden Unterschied aufweisen: Bei Schopenhauer ist das intelligible Wesen des Menschen „grundlos“, während es bei Schelling „selbstgründend“ ist. Nach einer Charakterisierung des Unterschieds beider Freiheitsauffassungen gehe ich auf dessen entscheidende Folgen für zwei Fragestellungen ein. Einerseits ermöglicht Schellings Begriff der ‚Selbstgründung‘ die ausnahmslose Gültigkeit des Satzes vom Grund und der damit einhergehenden Notwendigkeit, bei Schopenhauer beschränkt sich das Gründen hingegen auf das Feld der Erscheinung. Andererseits kann bei Schelling nur die Selbstgründung des intelligiblen Wesens den Anforderungen der moralischen Verantwortlichkeit gerecht werden: Um verantwortlich für mein Wesen zu sein, muss ich das Wesen ursprünglich gründen.

At first glance, Schopenhauer’s account of transcendental freedom looks strikingly similar to Schelling’s conception of formal freedom, developed a few years earlier in the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift* (SW VII, 382–89). Both philosophers affirm that the ultimate locus of freedom is outside of time—and thus outside the chain of causality that determines appearances. Both claim that we are ultimately responsible for what we do, since each of our actions follows necessarily from who we are for all eternity. And both draw upon Kant’s transcendental account of freedom with its distinction between the empirical and the intelligible character.

In fact, the overall proximity of Schopenhauer’s philosophy to Schelling’s did not go unnoticed by early reviewers of *The World as Will and Representation* (first edition, 1818), even if they did not specifically mention the closeness of their accounts of freedom.¹ One anonymous reviewer takes this to the extreme, writing that “all [Schopenhauer’s] main ideas coincide with those of

¹ For an overview of the early reviews, see D.E. Cartwright (2010): *Schopenhauer. A Biography*. Cambridge, 380–93. For a reprint of these reviews, see R. Piper (ed.) (1917): “Die zeitgenössischen Rezensionen der Werke Arthur Schopenhauers. Zweiter Teil, 1819–1825”. In: *Jahrbuch der Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft* 6, 47–178.

Schelling”. Even with respect to those places where Schopenhauer insists on his originality, “Schelling has said everything [already], only differently”.² For his part, Schopenhauer, clearly aware that his account of transcendental freedom is vulnerable to this line of criticism, goes on the offensive whenever he mentions Schelling’s ideas on the subject. In the prize essay on freedom (1839), for example, he accuses the older philosopher of misleading his readers by not clearly acknowledging the Kantian source of his account of formal freedom in the *Freiheitsschrift*, and thus of trying to pass off Kant’s ideas as his own (FW §4; III, 608).³ Gone is the praise for Schelling that Schopenhauer had expressed in the first edition of his dissertation (1813), where he had referred to Schelling’s “very valuable” elucidation of Kant’s views on freedom.⁴ Schopenhauer would now have us believe that the close resemblance of his account to Schelling’s is due, not to the latter’s influence, but rather to the common influence of Kant on them both.⁵

To what degree Schelling *also* influenced Schopenhauer is difficult to determine, though their strikingly similar wording suggests a debt to the language of the *Freiheitsschrift*, if nothing else.⁶ What is remarkable, however, is that Schopenhauer never acknowledges any substantive differences between his account and Schelling’s. He seems to take for granted that they are both saying the same things, even though he never shies away from criticising Schelling on other topics. I will argue in this paper, however, that there is a decisive difference between the two accounts—a difference that has to do with the ultimate grounding of freedom. For Schelling, the intelligible deed is a radical *self-grounding* of the eternal essence of the human being. For Schopenhauer, the eternal essence of the human being is *groundless*. Moreover, I will argue that

² W. Hoffmann (ed.) (Oct. 1819): *Litterarisches Wochenblatt* 4, no. 30, 234–36. Reprinted in Piper (1917), 83.

³ Citations of Schopenhauer refer to the work and section number, followed by the volume and page number in (1960): *Sämtliche Werke*. Ed. by W. Frhr. von Löhneysen. Frankfurt am Main. FW = *Preisschrift über die Freiheit des Willens*; GM = *Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral*; P = *Paralipomena*; SG = *Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*; WWV = *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

Translations of texts by Schopenhauer and Schelling are my own.

⁴ A. Schopenhauer (2012): *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason and Other Writings*. Trans. and ed. by D.E. Cartwright / E.E. Erdmann / C. Janaway. Cambridge, 188. The line is also quoted in M. Koßler (1995): “Empirischer und intelligibler Charakter: Von Kant über Fries und Schelling zu Schopenhauer”. In: *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch* 76, 195–201, 196. After referring to the Kantian account, Schopenhauer adds that Schelling has given “eine sehr schätzbare erläuternde Darstellung davon” (a very valuable, illuminating presentation of it).

⁵ Schopenhauer uses a similar line of defence with respect to his other ideas that are close to Schelling’s—in particular, the primacy of the will. See J. Norman / A. Welchman (2020): “Schopenhauer’s Understanding of Schelling”. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*. Ed. by R.L. Wicks. Oxford, 49–66.

⁶ Koßler observes that Schopenhauer inherits the language of “intelligible essence” (*das intelligible Wesen*) from Schelling and the identification of this essence with one’s “own deed” (*eigene Tat*). See Koßler (1995), 198–200.

this difference has significant consequences for two sets of issues: (1) the universality of necessity and the principle of ground, and (2) the requirements of moral responsibility.

Why contrast the two philosophers on this point? First, it helps to clarify the precise relationship between Schopenhauer and Schelling, two philosophers whose careers overlapped and whose positions sometimes look remarkably similar—at least at first glance. As the early reviews of Schopenhauer make clear, the relationship to Schelling was an issue from the beginning of his career, and commentators on both thinkers have recently turned more of their attention to it.⁷ To be sure, there is no evidence that Schelling ever critically engaged with his younger—and not yet famous—contemporary; however, we know that Schopenhauer studied the *Freiheitsschrift* intensively during his formative years,⁸ and he refers to Schelling with some frequency in his works—often with some colourful insult. I hope to show that, with respect to their views on freedom, their relationship is not a simple matter of influence (or plagiarism), nor is it simply a matter of two post-Kantians rehearsing Kant’s teaching, as Schopenhauer suggests. Instead, their two accounts reveal possibilities for developing Kant’s views on freedom in subtly different directions—and with far-reaching implications.

The second reason for contrasting the two philosophers’ accounts of freedom is more philosophical than historical, and it has to do with the value of their close resemblance. Because the two accounts are so similar, a detailed comparison can reveal the nuances of their differences and thus allow us to better appreciate the distinctive features of each. In particular, the contrast with Schopenhauer allows us to appreciate the significance of self-grounding in Schelling’s account: this form of grounding makes possible a genuinely positive conception of freedom, in contrast to Schopenhauer’s negative conception. It thus allows Schelling to satisfy the conditions of ultimate moral responsibility in a way that Schopenhauer’s very similar account cannot.

⁷ See Norman/Welchman (2020), especially the references in n. 4. Norman and Welchman focus on Schopenhauer’s criticisms of Schelling with respect to intellectual intuition and the metaphysics of the thing in itself. Although a couple of previous studies have noted the similarities of the two accounts of transcendental freedom, neither of these studies treats the difference that is the focus of this essay. See Koßler (1995); L. Hühn (1998): “Die intelligible Tat. Zu einer Gemeinsamkeit Schellings und Schopenhauers”. In: *Selbstbesinnung der philosophischen Moderne. Beiträge zur kritischen Hermeneutik ihrer Grundbegriffe*. Ed. by C. Iber / R. Poci. Cuxhaven/Dartford, 55–94.

⁸ Schopenhauer’s handwritten commentary in his personal copy of the *Freiheitsschrift* has recently been published. See (2021): *Schopenhauer liest Schelling. Freiheits- und Naturphilosophie im Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie. Mit einer Edition von Schopenhauers handschriftlichen Kommentaren zu Schellings “Freiheitsschrift”*. Ed. by P. Höfele / L. Hühn. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt.

Before turning to the difference between the two accounts, I will begin by sketching their background and common features in a bit more detail.⁹ I will then devote the second section to showing how and why the intelligible essence is groundless for Schopenhauer, but self-grounding for Schelling. In the third section, I will consider the systematic consequences of this difference for the philosophers' views on the universality of necessity and the requirements of moral responsibility. Finally, I will conclude by raising the question of the possibility of self-grounding.

1. Common Features of the Two Accounts of Freedom

In the background of practically everything in the accounts is Kant. Schopenhauer's claim that Schelling is simply paraphrasing Kant's ideas without giving him credit is certainly an exaggeration; as mentioned already, it is likely part of Schopenhauer's strategy to downplay his own debt to Schelling.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the shared Kantian framework of the accounts helps to explain many of their similarities, regardless of the precise influence Schelling exercised on Schopenhauer's thought. In particular, both accounts are clearly rooted in Kant's resolution of the conflict between freedom and necessity, the subject of the Third Antinomy in the first *Critique*. Kant famously resolves this conflict by means of his distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Within appearance, freedom is impossible: every event, including every human action, is determined by causes that precede it in time, stretching back into the distant past. Underlying appearances, however, are things in themselves, which are not in time and thus not subject to the causal law, which only applies to what comes to be in time.

Accordingly, one can think of the same human subject as determined in appearances with respect to its *empirical character*, but also undetermined—and free—with respect to its *intelligible character*, as a thing in itself (cf. *KrV*, A 535–41 / B 563–69).

With this Kantian background in mind, let me identify six main features shared by the two accounts. First, both Schelling and Schopenhauer follow Kant in affirming that freedom is not possible in time—and thus that it can only be timeless, beyond appearance. In fact, much of Schopenhauer's prize essay on freedom is devoted to demonstrating that the will's actions are not

⁹ My analysis of Schelling will focus on the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809), with an occasional glance at the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) and the *Weltalter* (1811–15). Although Schopenhauer's most focused treatment of freedom is contained in the prize essay on free will of 1839, I will draw from texts across his revised corpus to the extent that they illuminate his views on freedom and grounding. The cross-references in the revised editions of his writings clearly indicate his intention that the reader interpret them in light of one another.

¹⁰ Cf. Hühn (1998), 55.

free as they unfold temporally: each is necessarily determined by a combination of motives and the will's unchangeable character, just as any natural process is determined by causes that precede it (cf. FW §5; III, 620). In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling doesn't exactly endorse temporal "pre-determinism" within appearance: he believes that it reflects a subordinate standpoint and is really a disguised contingency that is not sufficiently organic. Nonetheless, pre-determinism is superior to the alternative—the undetermined, arbitrary willing of actions—for reasons I will mention later (cf. SW VII, 383f.). In any case, neither way of conceiving human actions in time is compatible with a meaningful sense of freedom.

What then does freedom look like outside of time? This brings us to the second common feature of the two accounts: the ultimate location of freedom is the eternal being or essence (*Wesen*) of each human subject. Since this eternal essence is outside of time, it is not causally determined by anything prior to itself. Schopenhauer identifies this essence with the intelligible character in Kant. Indeed, Schopenhauer is effusive in his praise for Kant's account of freedom in terms of the intelligible character: it is among "the most beautiful and profound" thoughts that any human being has ever brought forth (FW §5; III, 621). Although Schelling does not use the term "character" in this context in the *Freiheitsschrift*, it does appear in his brief treatment of absolute freedom in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (SW VII, 430) and the *Weltalter* (WA I, 93). In any case, by locating freedom in the intelligible essence or character, Schelling and Schopenhauer give freedom an essential unity: in its origin, it is concentrated in a single point, in contrast to the multiplicity of human actions within appearance.¹¹ And because freedom is located in this eternal, unchanging character, both Schelling and Schopenhauer have to confront objections about the meaningfulness of regret and conversion, which necessarily unfold over time and require distance between one's past free act of doing wrong and one's present free act of returning to the good (cf. SW VII, 389; WWV §55; I, 407ff., 414ff.).

The third common feature involves a further characteristic of the eternal essence: it is a deed or act (*eine Tat*). Ultimate freedom takes the form of an eternal or intelligible deed. It is noteworthy that Schelling and Schopenhauer are not claiming that this deed is performed by the eternal essence of the human being. This would imply a distinction between deed and essence. Instead, Schelling echoes Fichte in identifying the two: "The essence of the human being is essentially its

¹¹ Koßler notes that this transferral of freedom to the whole of one's intelligible character—and away from individual actions—is anticipated by Jakob Friedrich Fries in his 1807 treatise *Neue oder anthropologische Kritik der Vernunft*. Schopenhauer praises Fries in his notebooks, noting that the basic features of Schelling's account of freedom are already contained in Fries's passage on the intelligible character. See Koßler (1995), 196ff.

own deed” (SW VII, 385). The language of deed or act is less prominent in Schopenhauer, although he too notes that the being and essence of man “must be thought as its free deed” (FW §5; III, 622), and the intelligible character “is to be regarded as an ... act of will” (WWV §55; I, 399). In addition to Fichte, the other source for the intelligible deed is (once again) Kant, who introduces the concept in the *Religionsschrift* to account for radical evil in human nature (B 25–26, 39n). In fact, the connection of the intelligible deed to radical evil and original sin is another common element in both Schelling and Schopenhauer,¹² and Lore Hühn has shown the implications of this tragic dimension of freedom in her essay on the intelligible deed in the two philosophers.¹³

The fourth common feature has to do with the relationship between the eternal essence and the individual actions of the human being as they unfold in time. These individual actions follow from the eternal essence; what we do in time is a result of what we are for all eternity. Schelling expresses this in terms of necessity: each free action follows immediately and necessarily from our inner being (SW VII, 384, 385). For Schopenhauer, the connection between essence and action is not so immediate. This is because human action is determined by multiple factors: our empirical character and motives, which are causes that motivate action through knowledge. Nevertheless, because our empirical character is the appearance of our intelligible character, one can still regard this intelligible character as the ultimate source of individual action. Thus, Schopenhauer concludes: “Everything depends on what one *is*; what one *does* will follow as a necessary corollary” (FW §5; III, 623).

The fifth common feature is the conclusion that Schelling and Schopenhauer draw from all of this. Because our actions in time follow from who we are for all eternity, we are morally responsible for each of these actions. Both intend their accounts to satisfy the conditions of ultimate moral responsibility. Moreover, despite the extremely theoretical character of their reflections, both contend that we each have an inkling of that responsibility which is fully revealed in speculative truths. Schelling, acknowledging how incomprehensible those truths are for our common way of thinking, points to the feeling we each have that we are what we are from all eternity (SW VII, 386). A trace remains in consciousness of our eternal deed, and thus we are conscious that we are who we are through our own fault (SW VII, 387). Similarly, Schopenhauer

¹² Cf. SW VII, 388; WWV §70; I, 551f. According to Theunissen, the transcendental deed for Schelling “is supposed to be identical with the Fall” (M. Theunissen [1965]: “Schellings anthropologischer Ansatz”. In: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 47, 174–89, 185, note 15). This seems imprecise. The intelligible deed includes the fall, but it also determines the individual’s acceptance of grace as well as morally good actions.

¹³ Hühn (1998).

notes the feeling of certainty we have about our own responsibility (FW §5; III, 618), which thus functions as a sign pointing beyond appearance to our intelligible character (FW §5; III, 623).

Finally, the extremely high demands of eternal freedom lead both philosophers to describe it in divine terms, thus implying that to be free is—in some sense—to be divine. Of course, the eternity that they ascribe to the intelligible essence is itself a traditional attribute of God. Beyond that, Schopenhauer uses the word *allmächtig* (omnipotent) in describing the will's freedom: The will gives rise not only to its actions but also “its world”, thus assuming the place of the Creator (WWV §§53, 55; I, 377, 413). Elsewhere Schopenhauer states baldly: “If our will is *free*, it is also the primordial being [*Urwesen*]” (P §118; V, 280). For his part, Schelling notes that through the intelligible deed the human being is “outside the created” (SW VII, 386). And earlier in the *Freiheitsschrift*, he refers to freedom as a “derived absoluteness or divinity”, which he calls the “central concept” (*Mittelbegriff*) of all philosophy (SW VII, 347). In light of these divine aspects of freedom, it is not surprising that what I regard as the central difference between the two accounts also pertains to two different ways of conceiving the supreme being—a point to which I will return below.

2. A Fundamental Difference: Groundlessness versus Self-Grounding

I would now like to focus on that fundamental difference, which has to do with the ultimate grounding of the eternal deed or essence. One can pose the question: Is that essence grounded? In other words, is there some ground that determines that it be the way that it is? Of course, both Schelling and Schopenhauer affirm that the intelligible essence has no determining ground outside itself: this was the whole point of locating freedom outside of time. But does that mean that it has no determining ground at all?

For Schopenhauer, the answer is yes. The intelligible character is a *groundless* will (WWV §20, 28; I, 166, 233). We can see why it has to be groundless if we consider the significance for Schopenhauer of the *Satz vom Grund*, the “principle of sufficient reason” or the “principle of ground”. In fact, the principle is the subject of Schopenhauer's 1813 dissertation, a work he continued to regard as the “foundation of [his] entire system” over thirty years later (SG *Vorrede*; III, 7). In this work, Schopenhauer distinguishes four forms of the principle, corresponding to four different kinds of ground: the ground of becoming, the ground of knowing, the ground of being, and the ground of acting. However, the principle of ground in any of its forms only applies to appearance, not to things in themselves. This is because the principle for Schopenhauer is the

general expression of our *a priori* forms of knowing objects, and thus it only has validity with respect to the world as representation (*Vorstellung*) or as it appears to us (cf. WWV §2; I, 34f.). Now the intelligible character of each human being is not a representation or appearance: it is a thing in itself, which Schopenhauer famously identifies with the will. And since the principle of ground only applies to appearance, the intelligible character or will is not subject to the principle and thus not grounded by anything—it is groundless. Schopenhauer sums this up: “[S]ince the will is not appearance ... but thing in itself, it is not subject to the principle of ground ... thus it is not determined ... by a ground, [and] so it knows no necessity—that is, it is *free*” (WWV §55; I, 395).

Here one might object: It does not follow that the will is groundless if it is not subject to the principle of ground. As a principle, the *Satz vom Grund* makes a universal claim: everything to which the principle applies must be grounded. That means that the will, by not being subject to the principle, *need* not be grounded—but by itself this does not exclude the possibility of it actually being grounded. However, for Schopenhauer, not just the principle of ground but the very concept of ground is tied to appearance. Indeed, one of his criticisms of Kant’s theory of freedom is that Kant makes the thing in itself a ground or cause of what appears, thus applying a form of our knowledge to things in themselves (cf. WWV *Anhang*; I, 673). We can therefore say that everything to which the principle of ground applies is grounded, and nothing to which the principle of ground does not apply—that is, nothing beyond appearance—is grounded, including the intelligible character of the human being.¹⁴

Before turning to Schelling, there is one final thing to note about groundlessness in Schopenhauer—something that will prove decisive for distinguishing his position from Schelling’s. In the passage I cited, Schopenhauer directly infers the freedom of the will from its groundlessness. To be free simply means not to be grounded and thus not to be necessary. As Schopenhauer himself acknowledges, this concept of freedom is purely *negative*: it is the denial of the necessity that comes from being grounded (WWV §55; I, 395; cf. FW §1; III, 521).¹⁵

¹⁴ In addition to grounding, Schopenhauer also limits *individuation* to appearance. As Christopher Janaway notes, this creates a problem for his account of transcendental freedom, which requires individuation among the intelligible characters of different human beings. See C. Janaway (1999): “Will and Nature”. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*. Ed. by C. Janaway. Cambridge, 138–70, 150.

¹⁵ Beyond this negative concept, Schopenhauer recognises freedom in the renunciation of the will, which cannot be expressed perfectly in abstract concepts. To understand this renunciation, one needs to draw on examples from experience—in particular, descriptions of the lives of saints. See WWV §68; I, 520–24. I thank Dennis Vanden Auweele for calling my attention to this passage.

Schelling, by contrast, does not regard the concept of freedom as purely negative. This is reflected in his answer to the question of whether the intelligible essence is grounded. To be sure, this essence is not determined by some ground outside itself. Instead, it is *self-grounding*, and this self-grounding activity is the positive dimension of freedom. Schelling expresses the self-grounding of the intelligible essence using the language of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*: "It is real self-positing, it is original and fundamental willing, which makes itself into something and is the ground and basis of all essence [*Wesenheit*]" (SW VII, 385). Like Schopenhauer, Schelling uses the language of will or willing. But unlike Schopenhauer, this willing is free precisely because it is self-determining. Far from being the absence of ground, absolute freedom is a kind of grounding.

Because we are so used to the language of self-determination, it is easy to miss the radical nature of what Schelling is claiming. Our ordinary understanding of self-determination is implicitly temporal: when I determine myself, I am already determined in the present moment and from that state determine what I will be in the future. This presupposes a distinction between my future self that is determined and my present self that does the determining. But for the intelligible essence there is no such temporal distinction. It determines itself, but in order to do so it must already be determined. This is because "there is no transition from the absolutely undetermined to the determined" (SW VII, 384). Accordingly, in order for the intelligible essence to determine itself it must already be determined by itself. This requires that the self-grounding of absolute freedom be radically circular and reflexive,¹⁶ like the *Tathandlung* in Fichte, which Schelling himself cites. No doubt this kind of circular grounding is impossible within time—and one might very well question its possibility outside of time as well. I will return to the question of its possibility at the end of the essay.

I will mention in passing that one of the difficulties with Schelling's account of the intelligible deed is that it leaves unclear what place God has as creator of free beings. This is directly connected to the divine characteristics of freedom, which I mentioned at the end of the last section. True freedom seems to usurp the place of the Creator. More specifically, if the intelligible essences are self-grounding from all eternity, any grounding of those essences by God would seem to be redundant—if not incompatible with their own self-creation.¹⁷ Indeed, one of

¹⁶ By "reflexive" I mean that it acts upon itself—that is, its action is *self-directed*. My use of the term does not imply reflection or consciousness, as it sometimes does in German.

¹⁷ Schopenhauer simply rules out the possibility that God could be the creator of free beings: "Theism and moral responsibility of the human being cannot be combined [...] If our will is *free*, it is also the primordial being [*Urwesen*], and vice versa". P §118; V, 280.

the remarkable things about the section on formal freedom is the absence of direct references to God, although Schelling alludes to the status of the intelligible essence at the “beginning of creation” and claims that through the intelligible deed the human being is “outside the created” (SW VII, 385–6). One possible way of addressing the problem would be to distinguish two kinds of grounding: determination of the essence versus bringing forth into being. The self-grounding of the intelligible deed for Schelling is first and foremost a determination of the essence. This leaves open the possibility that God’s creative activity primarily involves bringing creatures into being.¹⁸ In any case, a full discussion of this question would require an examination of the meaning of the remarkable phrase “derived absoluteness” used earlier in the *Freiheitsschrift* (SW VII, 347) as well as of the concept of “begetting” (*Zeugung*) (SW VII, 346), which Schelling elsewhere associates with the bringing forth of something absolute (cf. SW V, 405).¹⁹

I should also note that Schelling sometimes uses language that seems to suggest that he holds the position I have attributed to Schopenhauer. For instance, he lists “groundlessness” as one of the attributes of primordial being earlier in the *Freiheitsschrift* (SW VII, 350), and he refers to “groundless freedom” in the *Weltalter* (WA I, 93). However, there is a passage in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* that I believe allows us to resolve the discrepancy. There he notes that for an act of absolute freedom one cannot give a *further* ground (SW VII, 429). I interpret this to mean that the act of freedom is groundless with respect to a ground beyond itself, but this does not mean it is absolutely groundless, since it is self-grounding.

But couldn’t one interpret groundlessness in Schopenhauer in the same way? After all, he refers to the human being as “his own work” (WWV §55; I, 403), which seems to suggest a form of self-grounding or self-making. However, for the reason mentioned already, timeless self-grounding is impossible for Schopenhauer: it would extend grounding and the principle of ground beyond appearance where they properly belong. Moreover, although Schopenhauer occasionally uses the language of act and deed when discussing the will’s intelligible character, this language cannot refer to a *self-constituting* act, as it does for Schelling. This is because Schopenhauer rejects the notion that the will as a thing in itself has any object, direction, or aim:

¹⁸ Cf. the passage much earlier in the work: “Dependence does not determine the essence, and only says that what is dependent, whatever it might be, can only exist as a consequence of that on which it is dependent; dependence does not say what it is or what it is not” (SW VII, 346).

¹⁹ Michael Theunissen identifies this problem (“how the absoluteness that lies in freedom can also be non-absoluteness, i.e., posited”) as the “main problem” of the *Freiheitsschrift*. Theunissen (1965), 178. Binkelman demonstrates some remarkable parallels between “derived absoluteness” in Schelling and “appearing absoluteness” (*erscheinende Absolutheit*) in Fichte. See C. Binkelman (2015): “Derivierte Absolutheit: Die Bedeutung des transzendentalen Idealismus Fichtes für Schellings *Freiheitsschrift*”. In: *Schelling-Studien* 3, 115–31, 124ff.

“Indeed, the absence of any goal, of all limits, belongs to the essence of will in itself, which is an endless striving” (WWV §29; I, 240).²⁰ If the will’s act lacks any direction, it cannot be *self-directed*—and thus it cannot be self-determining. This accords with Schopenhauer’s repeated insistence that the concept of freedom is only negative, containing “merely the denial of necessity” (WWV §55; I, 395). Self-determination would require a positive conception of freedom.

3. Implications of the Difference: Necessity and Moral Responsibility

I would now like to develop the significance of this difference between the two accounts. First, it is interesting to note that this difference mirrors a distinction between two ways that the primacy of God has been expressed in the history of philosophy. In the Aristotelian tradition, God is designated as the *uncaused* first cause; for Spinoza, God is cause of himself, *causa sui*. The parallel is no coincidence: both freedom and the supreme being require an absolute beginning, which is either groundless or self-grounding, and we noted above that both Schopenhauer and Schelling use quasi-divine terms to describe freedom.

One might be inclined to think that the difference between groundlessness and self-grounding is mostly a matter of language, since both express the absolute character of freedom. In what follows, I would like to show that the difference has two decisive implications. The first of these has to do with the universality of the principle of ground and the question of necessity. As we have seen, Schopenhauer denies that the principle applies to what is free, thus rejecting its universal truth: the question *why* does not always have an answer. In fact, Schopenhauer claims that the “genuine philosophical way of viewing the world” is not to ask about its *why* but to ask about its *what* (WWV §53; I, 379). This restriction of the principle of ground is essentially connected to Schopenhauer’s views on necessity, since he regards *being necessary* as synonymous with *being grounded* (WWV *Anhang*; I, 623). As a result, freedom and necessity are essentially opposed: what is free is ungrounded and thus contingent. It is true that Schopenhauer, following Kant, speaks of the unification of freedom and necessity (WWV §55; I, 396). But, like Kant, this unification is really a separation into different domains: necessity in the domain of appearance, freedom in the domain of the intelligible. In any case, because the intelligible

²⁰ In the passage leading up to this quotation, Schopenhauer had anticipated the question: ‘What does the will *will*?’ or ‘What does the will strive for?’ After all, every will has an object of its willing. Schopenhauer rejects this line of questioning because it confuses the thing in itself with appearance. To provide an object for the will would be to give its ground (a ground of motivation or acting), but grounding only applies to appearance (WWV §29; I, 238f.).

character of each human being is contingent, Schopenhauer can conclude: “Du könntest auch ein anderer sein [you could be someone else]” (P §118; V, 278). Freedom lies in who you are for all eternity, and who you are for all eternity is not necessary.

In Schelling’s *Freiheitsschrift*, the role of the principle of ground is not as explicit as it is for Schopenhauer. Towards the beginning of the text, Schelling does claim that the “law of ground” is just as original as the law of identity (SW VII, 346); however, I would argue that the “law of ground” in this context does not refer to the traditional principle of sufficient reason, even if it is essentially connected to the latter.²¹ Nevertheless, in his treatment of the formal concept of freedom, Schelling gives indirect indications that he affirms the universality of the traditional principle. The clearest of these indications is his rationale for rejecting the common notion of freedom as a capacity to will arbitrarily or without determining grounds. Like the swerve of atoms in Epicurus, this would introduce contingency or chance, which Schelling firmly rejects: “Chance [*Zufall*] is impossible; it conflicts with reason as well as the necessary unity of the whole” (SW VII, 383). Nor is this exclusion of contingency limited to the realm of appearance, as it is for Schopenhauer. A little later in the same section, Schelling rules out the possibility that the intelligible essence could determine itself “without any ground”, since this would lead back to the arbitrary conception of freedom he had already rejected (SW VII, 384). Thus, even in the intelligible realm, nothing is without a reason or ground.²² We can therefore see one of the implications of Schelling’s difference from Schopenhauer. By conceiving the intelligible deed as self-grounding rather than groundless, Schelling is able to preserve the universality of the principle of sufficient reason: everything has a ground, including the ultimate act of freedom.

Along similar lines, the self-grounding of freedom allows Schelling to unite freedom and necessity in a way that is quite different from their unification in Kant and Schopenhauer. Unlike the latter, Schelling does not separate freedom and necessity into different domains; instead, he brings them together as two sides of a single act (cf. SW VII, 385). Put most succinctly, this act is *necessary* because it is grounded or determined, and it is *free* because it is self-grounded or self-determined.²³ In confirmation of this unification of freedom and necessity, it is noteworthy

²¹ The traditional principle of sufficient reason is *regressive*: it moves from what is grounded to the ground. It states that everything must have a ground. In the passage where Schelling refers to the law of ground, however, the principle is creative or *progressive*: it moves from the ultimate ground (God) to the grounded. Because God is infinitely creative, he grounds all that is. This progressive “law of ground” explains why the traditional principle of sufficient reason is true: everything is grounded, because God grounds all that is.

²² Hermanni calls this Schelling’s “intelligible determinism” (F. Hermanni [1994]: *Die letzte Entlastung. Vollendung und Scheitern des abendländischen Theodizeeprojektes in Schellings Philosophie*. Vienna, 145).

²³ One can therefore distinguish three layers of necessity in Schelling’s account: (1) the empirical necessity of causal pre-determinism within time; (2) the necessity with which individual actions follow from the intelligible

that the language of alternative possibilities is completely lacking in Schelling's account. Unlike Schopenhauer, he does not claim that we could have had a different intelligible essence or that our intelligible deed could have taken a different form.²⁴

As an aside, I should note that there is a development in Schelling's understanding of the relationship between freedom and alternative possibilities in his subsequent work. In the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) his account is similar to that in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He claims that "all true, i.e., absolute freedom is also an absolute necessity" and rejects the notion that freedom requires a choice between competing possibilities (SW VII, 429). But this changes, beginning in the *Weltalter*: eternal freedom is "free to reveal itself and not to reveal itself" (VIII, 300). Along these lines, Schelling in his later works understands creation as a free act to the extent that God also had the freedom *not* to create.

If Schelling—at least in the *Freiheitsschrift*—does not believe that our intelligible essence could have been different, how can we be responsible for that essence? This brings me to the second implication of the difference between self-grounding and groundlessness, which has to do with the consequences of this difference for moral responsibility. As we have seen, both Schelling and Schopenhauer affirm that we are ultimately responsible for our actions, because these actions follow from our eternal essence, which is free. Essentially, we are ultimately responsible for what we do, because we are ultimately responsible for who we are. But how exactly are we responsible for who we are? It is my contention that the self-grounding of Schelling's account provides an answer to that question, while Schopenhauer's account cannot. In fact, one might state this even more strongly: something like Schelling's account of self-grounding may be the only way to account for ultimate moral responsibility.

To see why this is the case, we need to turn to the passage in Schelling's formal account of freedom that immediately precedes his references to self-positing and the intelligible deed. His previous discussion had established that individual actions follow with necessity from the inner necessity of the intelligible essence or being. So Schelling proceeds to ask about the meaning of that inner necessity. Before defining it in terms of a self-positing deed, he calls attention to an alternative, false conception of the intelligible essence and why that false conception is

essence; and (3) the necessity of self-determination, which Schelling designates "inner necessity". One might be tempted to interpret the phrase "inner necessity" in terms of (2). However, if that were Schelling's meaning, the repetition of "necessity" in this sentence would not make sense: "The individual action follows from the inner necessity of the free essence, and thus itself with necessity" (SW VII, 384).

²⁴ This matches what Schelling says about divine freedom later on in the *Freiheitsschrift*. He rejects the Leibnizian notion that God chooses between possible worlds, instead affirming the unity of possibility and actuality in God (SW VII, 397f.).

problematic: “If that essence were a dead being [*Sein*] and from the perspective of man something merely given to him, then, since action can only follow from it with necessity, all accountability and freedom would be abolished” (SW VII, 385). For our purposes, the key phrase is “something merely given to him” (*ein ihm bloß gegebenes*). If our essence is merely given to us, we are not truly responsible for it. And since all of our actions follow from that essence, we would not be responsible for those either.

Here we can see the problem with Schopenhauer’s purely negative conception of freedom as groundless. It is true that the intelligible character for Schopenhauer is not “given”, in the sense that it is not bestowed by some agent or some cause outside itself. However, it is “given” in the sense that it is simply presupposed as a *datum*. From all eternity, I simply find myself with a given character. One might defend Schopenhauer by noting that he follows Schelling in identifying this character with an act or deed; it thus cannot be said to be a “dead being”, to use Schelling’s phrase. Nevertheless, the intelligible deed for Schopenhauer is not self-determining or self-grounding, and thus the form that it takes is simply “given”. Schelling’s point is that this “givenness” does not allow me to be responsible for who I am. It matters little if my character or act of will is not grounded or determined by anything else, if I do not ground or determine it myself. Likewise, Schopenhauer’s contention that each of us could have had a different character, even if true, does not give us responsibility for the character we actually have. Self-grounding of my essence is the only way I can be responsible for that essence.²⁵ Otherwise it is not my own doing, it is not “up to me”—and if it is not up to me, I cannot be held accountable for it.

One can also apply Schelling’s implicit critique of Schopenhauer to Spinoza’s conception of divine freedom, with which Schelling’s account is sometimes compared.²⁶ Spinoza defines a free being as “what exists out of the necessity of its own nature and is determined to act by itself alone”.²⁷ It is true that this resembles the accounts of both Schelling and Schopenhauer insofar as Spinoza affirms that the actions of a free being follow from its nature. However, if that being

²⁵ In his critique of Schopenhauer’s account of transcendental freedom, Bryan Magee notes that in order to cause my original make-up, I must already have an original make-up (B. Magee [1983/1997]: *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*. Revised edition. Oxford, 208). The implication (which Magee does not draw) is that I can only be responsible for my original make-up through a radically circular self-grounding. Galen Strawson has a similar insight, which I will discuss below.

²⁶ Hermanni, for instance, designates Schelling’s account of formal freedom as a “unification of Kantian and Spinozist ideas”. Hermanni (1994), 146. See also W.G. Jacobs (1995): “Die Entscheidung zum Bösen oder Guten im einzelnen Menschen (382–394)”. In: *F.W.J. Schelling: Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*. Ed. by O. Höffe / A. Pieper. Berlin (*Klassiker Auslegen* 3), 125–48, 128.

²⁷ *Ethica*, Pars I, Def. VII. Cf. Propositio XVII. (B. Spinoza [1994]: *A Spinoza Reader. The “Ethics” and Other Works*. Ed. and trans. by E. Curley. Princeton, 85).

does not determine its own nature, it is not ultimately responsible for what follows from it. To use an image from Kant's second *Critique*, it is like a turnspit (*Bratenwender*), "which, once it has been wound up, also performs its motions on its own" (AA V, 97). In order to be truly responsible for its actions, the turnspit would have to determine its own nature. One might think that this is true of God in Spinoza's philosophy, since he designates God as *causa sui*, "cause of himself". However, Spinoza simply defines *causa sui* as a being "whose essence involves existence".²⁸ Missing is any self-determining act that could be the source of responsibility for that essence.²⁹

Before concluding, I would like to mention one final way of understanding the significance of the difference between Schelling and Schopenhauer. In several of the passages where Schopenhauer discusses transcendental freedom, he formulates the core of his position in terms of the scholastic principle: *operari sequitur esse*, "acting follows being".³⁰ Schopenhauer endorses the principle, at least when it comes to appearance, where each thing acts in accord with its character or "being". The mistake in most conceptions of freedom, Schopenhauer contends, is that they locate freedom in our actions, but regard our being as necessary. In reality, it is the other way around: our acting follows necessarily from our being (together with our motives), but our intelligible being or essence is free (FW §5; III, 622f.).³¹ "Everything depends on what one *is*; what one *does* will follow as a necessary corollary" (FW §5; III, 623).

When it comes to individual actions, Schelling would also endorse the principle *operari sequitur esse*, since these actions follow necessarily from the intelligible essence. With respect to the intelligible deed, however, Schelling could be said to reverse the principle. *Esse sequitur operari*: what I am follows from what I do. This is because what I do (in the intelligible deed) grounds what I am—otherwise, I could not be responsible for it. Indeed, Emil Fackenheim has placed Schelling in the minority metaphysical tradition of thinkers who reject the absolute priority of being in favour of the absolute priority of freedom and self-making.³²

²⁸ *Ethica*, Pars I, Def. I. (Spinoza [1994], 85).

²⁹ On this point, I disagree with Hermanni, who aligns the intelligible deed in Schelling with Spinoza's concept of *causa sui*. See Hermanni (1994), 146.

³⁰ A passage from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 75, a. 3) is sometimes cited as a source for the axiom, although St. Thomas does not use this precise language.

³¹ Cf. GM §10; III, 707–8; WWV §70n; I, 552.

³² Fackenheim designates this rival tradition "meontological" and names John Scotus Eriugena, Jacob Boehme, Schelling, and Nicolas Berdyaev as representatives. He also refers to the *operari sequitur esse* principle and its reversal in contrasting the two traditions. See E. Fackenheim (1996): *The God Within. Kant, Schelling, and Historicity*. Ed. by J. Burbidge. Toronto, 128f.

4. Conclusion: The Possibility of Self-Grounding?

In the previous section, I suggested that something like Schelling's account of timeless self-grounding may be the only way to account for ultimate moral responsibility. I suspect this sounds rather implausible, especially for the wider philosophical public, most of whom are likely to view the accounts of freedom in both Schelling and Schopenhauer as good examples of the speculative excesses of German Idealism. Nevertheless, there is an influential thinker in the contemporary analytic discussion of freedom who reaches conclusions strikingly similar to Schelling's. In the essay "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility", Galen Strawson argues that "in order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects".³³ This is because "if one is to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be truly responsible for how one is",³⁴ and this can only happen if one brings it about that one is the way that one is. Saying that we can determine who we are through our previous actions does not resolve the problem but merely pushes it back, since our previous actions arose from who we were in the past. Only the truly circular self-determination of a *causa sui* can provide ultimate responsibility. Strawson intends the invocation of the concept of *causa sui* to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. For him it is manifestly impossible that a human being should be a *causa sui*. Nevertheless, his argument is compelling and reflects Schelling's fundamental insight: in order to be responsible for what we do, we must cause or ground what we are.

But is Strawson right that this is impossible? Schopenhauer evidently thought so. In his dissertation on the principle of ground, he calls the notion of a self-grounding *causa sui* a "contradiction in terms" and compares it to the Baron Münchhausen's attempt to lift himself and his horse out of the swamp by pulling on his own hair (SG §8; III, 28)—an image Nietzsche will borrow in his critique of freedom in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§21). Certainly self-grounding or self-causality seems absurd when conceived in purely physical terms, or more generally when conceived in time, where effect must follow cause in temporal succession.³⁵ But this just brings us back to the starting point for both Schelling and Schopenhauer: the Kantian insight that freedom is only possible outside of time, beyond appearance. Schelling readily admits that this is "incomprehensible" for our common way of thinking (SW VII, 386), but so too is the ultimate reality of things. In any case, if Schelling and Schopenhauer are right that the conditions for

³³ G. Strawson (1994): "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility". In: *Philosophical Studies* 75, 5–24, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas offers the classic argument against a *causa sui* (understood in terms of efficient causality): "But we neither find nor is it possible for something to be the efficient cause of itself; for then it would be prior to itself, which is impossible". *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3. (Thomas Aquinas [2006]: *The Treatise on the Divine Nature. Summa Theologiae I 1–13*. Trans. by B.J. Shanley. Indianapolis/Cambridge, 23).

freedom and moral responsibility can only be fulfilled by going beyond our ordinary, time-bound view of the world, then we are faced with a choice. We can stick with a view of the world that is close to experience and common sense but does not leave room for freedom. Or we can entertain a more mysterious picture of reality that allows for freedom and—Schelling would add—the self-grounding necessary for us to be accountable for who we are.

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