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Schelling on freedom, evil and imputation: A puzzle

Robert Stern

Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence
Robert Stern, Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, 45 Victoria Street, Sheffield S3 7QB, UK.
Email: r.stern@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is focused on F. W. J. Schelling's view of freedom during the period of the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809) and related works. It is argued that the standard way this has been understood may be too simplistic. On this standard interpretation of his view, evil is made a matter of free choice by the agent, but where the choice does not concern individual actions, but the choice of the agent's essence in an atemporal act. As a result of this choice, it is argued, Schelling can then make evil imputable. By contrast, I argue that for Schelling freedom does not involve choice, but necessity, but in a way that is still internal to the agent and hence non-coercive, and thus in a way that remains free and makes evil imputable. How Schelling comes to have this view is considered, and some responses are given to ways it might be challenged both interpretatively and philosophically.

As is well known, the issues of evil, freedom and imputation were of central interest to the German idealists including Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and a host of more minor characters such as Reinhold, Crusius, Ulrich, and many others. Not only did they have different ways of handling the problem between them, but also several individual philosophers seemed to change their views over the course of time, including perhaps Kant, but certainly Schelling. In this paper, I want to focus on Schelling's position around the period of the *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809)—or *Freiheitsschrift*—and to suggest that the standard way this has been understood may be too simplistic.[1] This will then introduce a new interpretative and systematic difficulty with Schelling's position, which I will attempt to resolve.

Let me begin by sketching the standard or traditional way that the *Freiheitsschrift* is understood on these issues. Although much in this text remains murky and contested, there is general agreement that when it comes to the issue

of human evil, Schelling wishes to take it seriously as a real feature of our existence, rather than downplay it either because of concerns over how it relates to God's goodness, or to our own natures. On the former issue, he offers an ingenuous argument to show how God's creation can be good while still allowing for the *possibility* of evil, which is then made actual through our freedom and hence is imputable to us alone, rather than God.[2] And on the second issue, he argues against more moderate or 'philanthropic' positions, which treat evil as either ontologically or anthropologically less substantive—for example, as a mere privation on the one hand, or as not a matter of genuine agency on the other. The key to doing so, Schelling makes clear, is to see evil as a matter of freedom and hence as fully imputable to us as agents. Then on the standard interpretation of his view, this is achieved by making evil a matter of free choice by the agent, but where the choice does not concern individual actions, but the choice of the agent's essence in an atemporal act. As a result of this choice, it is argued, Schelling can then make evil imputable. The bare bones of the standard account can be sketched as follows:

1. Freedom is necessary for imputation.
2. Freedom requires choice between options.
3. We have the atemporal option to choose a good or evil essence.
4. Therefore, if we have an evil essence, this can be imputed to us.

Now, of course, there then remains much that is potentially puzzling about this view, particularly how to make sense of a position that is said to include the idea of atemporal choice; but this difficulty is familiar, and has been the subject of various interesting discussions, such as the work by Michelle Kosch, Charlotte Alderwick, and others.[3]

But here I want to raise a different kind of problem, both at the interpretative and the systematic level.

Beginning at the interpretative level, my concern is that in the *Freiheitsschrift* and in related texts such as the Stuttgart seminars of 1810, Schelling seems to clearly deny that choice is a necessary or a sufficient condition for freedom, using some fairly standard arguments that have often been used against so-called indifferentism, or what Schelling calls here "the equilibrist" [der Aequilibristen]. Schelling's concerns can be seen clearly from this passage in the Stuttgart seminars, where he warns against indifferentism or "aequilibrium arbitrii" as a concept of freedom that we must "get away from":

> The adherents of this equilibrium only see freedom where it is preceded by indecision. According to the equilibrist, the reason for the resolution does not only not lie in the predominance of the motives, which could be called an external necessity, but if they want to be consistent, not even in the most intrinsic and inner nature and quality of the willing and deciding being. But precisely that choice [Wählen] is evidence of lack of freedom rather than complete freedom. He who truly wills [will] does not choose—he who chooses does not know what he wills and therefore does not will it either. Choosing everything is the result of an unenlightened will [Willens]. Anyone who has reached virtuosity in virtue or vice no longer chooses. Let us only pay attention to ourselves, to which type of person our respect is directed: it is certainly not the undecided ones or even more the ones who only make up their minds after a long process of choice.—Hercules standing at the crossroads and wondering "should I choose virtue or vice?" is not a pattern worthy of imitation for us. Indecisiveness is what God hates most.
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> "So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." [Revelation 3:16] (SP, p. 87 and p. 89, my translation).

Schelling is here raising a familiar worry for indifferentism or the "equilibrist" as follows. Either, what the agent wills is based on some sort of ground, as a result of which willing does not involve any choice—instead the will of the agent follows what it thus has reason to do. Or, the agent steps back from that ground and hence occupies a neutral space where their options remain open, but then they have no reason to go one way rather than another, and so are

left in indecision, or they just arbitrarily plump for one option rather than another, which is not rational and therefore is not free.[4] Moreover, as Schelling points out at the end of the passage, and as will be relevant later, in moral cases it is a sign of vice rather than virtue that different options seem viable to the agent: for example, the moral agent should not be faced with a *decision* or *choice* whether to tell the truth or not—lying (for example) should not even appear as an option to them, so that has he puts it in the *Freiheitsschrift*, aequilibirum arbitrii is "the plague of all morality" (FS, p. 57). Thus, on Schelling's anti-indifferentist account, it appears that choice is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom: the virtuous agent is free but makes no choices (so it is not necessary), and the agent who chooses without following reason is just behaving arbitrarily, and so is not free (so it is not sufficient). Schelling thus suggests strong systematic reasons to reject indifferentism. It seems that the traditional account therefore cannot claim that in Schelling's view, to make good or evil free and hence imputable, the agent must have made a choice between them, as this would put him in the same camp as the indifferentism he is clearly rejecting.[5]

However, Schelling's position is made more complicated if we then ask what position he adopts instead, given that he rejects indifferentism. For, the usual alternative to indifferentism is *intellectualism*.[6] This view holds that the agent's will does not make a groundless choice between options, but instead the agent wills its actions based on reasons, which then settle how it is best to act (though some intellectualists allow that an equilibrium of reasons is possible in some cases, but that this is not the norm and is not the locus of freedom but rather of unfreedom and chance, or what Descartes calls "the lowest grade of freedom" (Descartes [2017], p. 46)). Having rejected indifferentism, Schelling might therefore be expected to opt for intellectualism instead, holding that the agent's will is determined by reasons.[7]

However, he does not do so, where in the passage we have been discussing, he makes this clear by criticizing the Leibnizian position on creation, understood here by Schelling as the view that God chooses to will the creation of this world because it is the best option available to God. Schelling writes: "Were he to only act ex ratione boni; then this would be the very least degree of liberty: then the reason why he acts thus would lie not in himself, but in the quality of the good. Therefore, the Leibnizian choice of the best world or the Optimismus is not worthy of God" (SP, p. 89). In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling criticizes Leibniz for seeking to avoid Spinozistic determinism by claiming that reasons merely incline without necessitating, objecting that this is still akin to the indifferentism Leibniz was also trying to reject.[8] But in the Stuttgart seminars passage above, I think he is making a further point against Leibniz: namely, if God creates this world because it is the best, he acts on a ground which lies outside himself, in a fact about the world, and thus this creation is therefore not grounded in God's own nature or essence, which is what makes it unfree.

This then suggests that Schelling is opting for a third account of freedom, which is neither indifferentist nor intellectualist, as he has found both of these options wanting, while in the *Freiheitsschrift* it is the alternatives of indifferentism and determinism that he rejects. In this text, the third view is specified as conceiving of action as "an inner necessity springing from the essence of the acting individual itself" (FS, p. 49); and the third option he has in mind is also made clear in the Stuttgart seminars, where based on his understanding of the Kabbalistic idea of contraction, he explains creation as arising from the necessity of God's nature which leads him to contract, which (he suggests) is what makes this creation through contraction truly free:

> This act of restriction [Einschränkung] or descent on the part of God is voluntary [freiwillig]. Hence the explanation of the world has no other ground than the freedom of God. Only God Himself can break with the absolute identity of His essence and thereby can create the space for a revelation. To be sure, all genuine, that is, absolute, freedom is an absolute necessity. For it is impossible to adduce any further ground for an act of absolute freedom; such an act is because it occurs in such a given manner, that is, it is unconditional and thus it is necessary. (SP, p. 86 and p. 88)

In explaining why this contraction is part of God's nature,[9] Schelling helpfully cites some lines from Goethe to make this clear to his audience: "Whoever wills greatness must concentrate himself; Only in self-restriction is the master

revealed."[10] On this view of freedom, therefore, what the agent does is governed by some kind of determinacy which is necessary, but this does not restrict or limit the nature of the agent, as it is only in this way that the nature or essence of that agent is properly realized. In this manner, Schelling can argue, freedom involves not arbitrariness and choice, but necessity, but in a way that is still internal to the agent and hence non-coercive, and thus in a way that remains free, in a manner that intellectualism does not.[11] Let us call this conception of freedom "freedom as necessitation from essence," or "essentialist freedom" for short. Moreover, we can see why Schelling thinks that the mistake the indifferentist makes is not to reject intellectualism, but to reject essentialist freedom, as he claimed in the passage we quoted previously but which now is clearer: "According to the equilibrist, the reason for the resolution does not only not lie in the predominance of the motives, which could be called an external necessity, but if they want to be consistent, not even in the most intrinsic and inner nature and quality of the willing and deciding being." Schelling seems to be saying here that the indifferentist may be right to reject intellectualism, which still treats the ground for action as lying in a reason outside the agent, not in the sense that the agent cannot grasp it *as* a reason, but that what *makes* it a reason is not based on this grasping; indeed, according to the intellectualist, the agent can only grasp it *as* a reason because it already is, hence making intellectualism an "external necessity." Nonetheless, for Schelling the indifferentist is wrong to reject essentialist freedom, according to which the ground for the action likes "in the most intrinsic and inner nature and quality of the willing and deciding being."

In the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling makes it clear that he is adopting this third conception of freedom when he writes:

> Hence, the intelligible being can, as certainly as it acts as such freely and absolutely, just as certainly act only in accordance with its own inner nature; or action can follow from within only in accordance with the law of identity and with absolute necessity which alone is also absolute freedom. For free is what acts only in accord with the laws of its own being and is determined by nothing else either in or outside itself.
>
> At least one thing is achieved with this notion of the matter, that the inconsistency of the contingent is removed from individual action. This must be established, in every higher view as well: that individual action results from the inner necessity of a free being and, accordingly, from necessity itself, which must not be confused, as still happens, with empirical necessity based on compulsion (which is itself, however, only disguised contingency). (FS, p. 50).

On this account, the agent does not need alternative possibilities to be free, and so choice is not required for freedom, nor is the agent determined to act by reasons that lie beyond themselves in a way that constrain them from outside; rather, they act freely by acting in accordance with their own nature or essence, just as Goethe's "master" or Schelling's God "concentrates itself" because such contraction is required as a condition of their own form of being.

But now, having clarified Schelling's position, where does that leave us regarding his account of good and evil? How can acting in accordance with good or evil count as free on this account, if it is not a freedom that derives from some sort of radical choice, as on the traditional interpretation? And what happens with imputation? And when Schelling presents his own account of good and evil, does not he himself make it sound like he thinks it does involve a radical choice—which is of course why the traditional reading has proved so popular. So what can we say about such passages, and how might we make philosophical sense of Schelling's position regarding evil, freedom and imputation in some other way? Schelling's position in the *Freiheitsschrift* is often accused of being inconsistent—might this be another case where Schelling fails to successfully draw together the strands of ideas in this transitional phase of his thinking?

In order to address these issues, it may be useful to begin by citing one of the key passages that have led interpreters to treat Schelling as an indifferentist:

> Man is in the initial creation, as shown, an undecided being [ein unentscheidenes Wesen]—(which may be portrayed mythically as a condition of innocence that precedes this life and as an initial blessedness)—only man himself can decide. But this decision cannot occur within time; it occurs outside of all time and, hence, together with the first creation (though as a deed distinct from creation). Man, even if born in time, is indeed created into the beginning of the creation (the centrum). The act, whereby his life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity: it also does not temporally precede life but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is eternal by nature. Through this act the life of man reaches to the beginning of creation; hence, through it man is outside the created, being free and eternal beginning itself. (FS, p. 51)

Unsurprisingly, commentators have generally taken this passage to show that Schelling subscribes to some doctrine of freedom as choice, according to which (as Alderwick puts it), "in order to be free, the agent must choose her essence in an atemporal act" (Alderwick [2021, p. 116]), where then the main problem that is discussed is how to make sense of an act that is atemporal in this way.

However, if what I have said above is correct, there is a deeper problem here, which again is both interpretative and systematic: how is this choice-based account of freedom consistent with Schelling's anti-indifferentism, and how can it avoid the arguments that Schelling himself raises against this idea of choice?

Now, one solution to these problems might be to develop a kind of dual-level account, which is perhaps implicit in the views of most interpreters on this issue, and which might be suggested by the comparison that is often made between Schelling and an existentialist like Sartre. That is (putting it simply), Sartre could be read as claiming that deciding on our 'projects' is a matter of radical choice, but after that certain courses of action will follow without further choice but as flowing from the original commitment that was made to the project, which then makes those actions free. In this way, too, Sartre might seem to combine radical choice at the level of projects with anti-indifferentism at other levels. Likewise, something similar could be said of Schelling: whether one opts for a good or evil nature is a matter of radical choice, but once this choice has been made, then certain options will then follow that conform with that nature, but which are free because one way or the other it has been freely chosen. So, to use the well-known example Schelling mentions at this point in the discussion (FS, p. 51): Judas made some timeless choice in favor of evil, but after that what he does will largely follow from his nature as a consequence of this choice, and hence be free. In this way, one can reconcile the passages that talk about radical choice by taking them to apply to one level, while taking the passages that reject indifferentism as relating to a different level. Schelling would then be understood as arguing that our nature itself is a matter of choice, making him an indifferentist at this level in deciding whether to be good or evil; but then whatever we do as a result of the nature we have chosen is free because it follows from that nature, making him an essentialist about freedom at this level. This dual-level view might therefore be outlined as follows:

1. If X does A freely, it is imputable to X.
2. If X chooses their nature they possess it freely, and hence this nature is imputable to X.
3. If what X does follows from a nature that has been freely chosen and hence is imputable, then X acts freely and imputably.
4. X's nature as good or evil is a matter of choice.
5. So a good or evil nature is imputable to X. (by 2 and 4)
6. X's actions follow from X's nature.
7. So these actions are imputable to X. (by 3 and 6)

Thus, to take Judas as an example: his evil actions would be free and hence imputable not because he chose them, but because they follow from his nature as evil—but this nature itself is imputable to him because it was chosen, which is required if the actions which follow from his nature are to be imputed to him in turn. Moreover, it could

be argued that this nature has to be a matter of radical choice, because until one has chosen one's nature groundlessly in this way, there is then no essence from which one's actions can necessarily follow, and so the essentialist view of freedom cannot apply at this level.

However, while this account might perhaps help fit together Schelling's various comments as addressing different stages of this argument and so saying apparently incompatible things that can hereby be reconciled, it nonetheless comes at a considerable interpretative cost: for, as we have seen, Schelling seems to argue *in favor* of his view that freedom is acting necessarily in accordance with one's nature by *rejecting* the view that freedom is a matter of choice, so it is hard to see how Schelling could subscribe to premise (2) in the argument above. In addition, given those arguments, it would seem that he would also have to reject the argument above, as he would then have to say that a nature chosen groundlessly in this way would not be imputable to the agent at all, as it would not be freely acquired but a matter of random picking and hence in fact not a matter of genuine agency. Thus, in the end the incompatibility between the indeterminist and essentialist readings of Schelling's view of freedom remains unresolved on this account: the dual-level solution therefore seems to fail, and another option needs to be found.

To see that that option might be, we now need to consider another significant passage from the *Freiheitsschrift*, which precedes the one we have just cited:

> At least one thing is achieved with this notion of the matter, that the inconsistency of the contingent is removed from individual action. This must be established, in every higher view as well: that individual action results from the inner necessity of a free being and, accordingly, from necessity itself, which must not be confused, as still happens, with empirical necessity based on compulsion (which is itself, however, only disguised contingency). But what then is this inner necessity of the being itself? Here lies the point at which necessity and freedom must be unified if they are at all capable of unification. Were this being a dead sort of Being [ein totes Sein] and a merely given one with respect to man, then, because all action resulting from it could do so only with necessity, responsibility [Zurechnungsfähigkeit] and all freedom would be abolished. But precisely this inner necessity is itself freedom; the essence of man is fundamentally *his own act*; necessity and freedom are in one another as one being [Ein Wesen] that appears as one or the other only when considered from different sides, in itself freedom, formally necessity. The I, says Fichte, is its own act; consciousness is self-positing—but the I is nothing different from this self-positing, rather it is precisely self-positing itself. This consciousness, however, to the extent it is thought merely as self-apprehension or cognition of the I, is not even primary and all along presupposes actual Being, as does all pure cognition. This Being, presumed to be prior to cognition, is, however, not Being, though it is likewise not cognition: it is real self-positing, it is a primal and fundamental willing, which makes itself into something and is the ground of all ways of being [Wesenheit]. (FS, pp. 50–51).

I would understand this passage as follows: Schelling begins by arguing as before that actions are not externally determined in a contingent way, but come about as a result of a kind of internal necessity. He then argues that for this to be possible, the entity in question cannot be a mere 'dead being' or material object, as agency itself is not part of the essence of such a being as the agent lacks a will; but agency is part of the essence of a self, for as Fichte argued, to be an agent is to be self-positing, so that an act in which this agent posits itself is free as it thereby realizes its nature *as* self-positing. Thus, what makes a self-positing agent free is not that it is self-positing as such (so to speak), but that to be self-positing is its essence as an agent, and so follows of necessity from that essence, which is why the self-positing agent is free. There is thus a distinctive kind of self-reflexive structure here: to be self-positing is essential to an agent, which is why that agent is both free in self-positing (because self-positing realises its nature as an agent) and why this freedom is necessary to it (because only in this way does it realise its essence).[12]

But what does 'self-positing' mean in this context? Schelling makes this clear by then turning in the next paragraph to the human case, as he explains in a sentence we omitted last time we quoted from this paragraph:

> But, *in their immediate relation to man*, these truths are valid in a much more definite sense than in this general one. Man is in the initial creation, as shown, an undecided being—(which may be portrayed mythically as a condition of innocence that precedes this life and as an initial blessedness)—only man himself can decide. But this decision cannot occur within time… (FS, p. 51, my emphasis)

As the first sentence makes clear, the Fichtean passage above was just making a general claim about agency, but Schelling now moves on to how these claims relate to human beings—and as human agents, we are human because we are faced with the decision to be good or to be evil, which just is our nature as human beings.[13] As a result, it is thus *part of our human essence* to be faced with this choice. But then it follows that our essence qua self-positing beings *is* our capacity to choose, and freedom consists in acting in accordance with our essence, not in the choice as such. There is thus nothing free about choice in itself (the anti-indifferentist is right), and freedom consists in realising one's essence (the essentialist account of freedom is right)—but in our case, as we are faced by both good and evil as options as part of our nature,[14] so in our case what it is to be free turns out to involve positing ourselves in the one way or the other. Choosing between vanilla and chocolate ice cream, or even between being a philosopher or an astronaut, is not a necessary or sufficient condition for freedom, as being faced with these choices is not part of our nature as self-positing beings who thereby determine our nature, as such choices are not relevant to that nature and so do not posit it—but by contrast, the choice between good and evil indeed *is* a realization of that nature, as this is what we fundamentally are, namely beings faced with this choice. This choice therefore constitutes freedom for us, but not on indifferentist grounds which claim that freedom simply *is* choice, but on essentialist grounds which claim that freedom *is realizing our essence*—and in this case, to be faced with this choice *is our essence*, so in making the choice we are free in essentialist terms, not indifferentist ones.

Thus, in a way Alderwick is correct when she writes that "Freedom, for Schelling, must entail the ability to choose *against* as well as in line with the rational order" (Alderwick, 2023, p. 108]),[15] and hence to choose evil as well as good. However, this is not because, as she thinks, Schelling holds this choice is itself required for freedom as such, but that the capacity to make that choice is part of our essence, which is why our freedom requires us to have this capacity—but for God, who has a different essence, it would not be required for his freedom at all. As a result, despite allowing for an indifferentism with regard to good and evil, the position I attribute to Schelling is not itself indifferentist as such. For, indifferentism is a general claim about freedom—but on this interpretation of Schelling, the focus is just on the choice between good and evil, which is not free because it fits the indifferentist model in a general way, but because it is our essence to be faced with this choice. Hence, Schelling can reject the general indifferentist model as applied to action as a whole, but still hold that good and evil specifically are matters of choice—but taken in itself, such choice is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom on Schelling's account as I interpret it here, but they only become so based on an essentialist claim rather than based on indifferentism. Thus, what constitutes freedom is acting on our essence, which involves this choice at only one level, namely between good and evil—and which constitutes our freedom not because choice is freedom, but because at this level it is our essence to be faced with this choice. Thus, indifferentism and the essentialist view I propose remain distinct.

But still, even if this reading might escape the interpretative worries that seemed to plague the dual-level reading (as this new reading makes Schelling an essentialist about freedom all the way down and so in a manner that seems consistent), it may still seem to raise a systematic worry: namely, insofar as it still treats good or evil as a manner of radical choice for the agent, is not that choice still very hard to understand and explain, even if it is now not being claimed to be free as the connection between freedom and choice have been severed? Do not we have to have already chosen between being good or evil to say that either good or evil actions follow from our nature, and how can we explain that choice as both are equally compatible with our natures which only become one or the other once the choice is made? So how can we have any grounds to explain our choice between them in the first place, which now seems to render any explanation of that first choice impossible?[16]

However, a response to this could be that from Schelling's perspective, this is maybe not a bug but a feature: for, as Sebastian Gardner has argued, perhaps one of Schelling's key points is precisely to claim that here we get

beyond the Principle of Sufficient Reason, so that "what Schelling has done is allow the question, *Why is there evil?*, to receive the answer, *For no reason*—he has supplied conditions under which this counts as the complete and correct answer" (Gardner, 2017, p. 153]).[17] More moderately, at least from the point of view of the agent, it can be argued that it cannot appear to them that they act on a reason. For, with respect to our discussion, this is perhaps plausible because here we are dealing with a choice which cannot be settled one way or the other by reasons, as the reasons that might lead one to pick the one over the other will only come into view once the choice has already been made: so the good person will see reasons to prefer good actions over evil ones, and the evil person will see reasons to prefer evil actions over good ones, but such choices will be settled only once an original choice has been made, which will itself be a case of equipollence. Thus, until the agent has opted for good or for evil, the agent will have no decisive reasons that are apparent to it *as* reasons, so by definition this original choice is radical because groundless in this sense, and hence not something we can really understand as a choice—which is why Schelling puts it outside time or in a "life before this life" (FS, p. 52).

But finally, of course, one might wonder how this makes imputation possible. If we must treat the choice between good and evil as rationally groundless in this way *from the perspective of the agent*, how can we attribute their decision between good or evil *to* the agent, as it now seems hard to understand it as something they have done *as agents*, who precisely are agents because they act on reasons, rather than random choices—which also seemed to be Schelling's argument against indifferentist accounts of freedom in the first place. So how can this position be stable and allow Schelling to attribute evil to us in the full-blooded sense he wants to do?[18]

In response to this challenge, I would like to make the following suggestion: namely, that for imputation, it is sufficient that the agent sees the options of good and evil as in some way something for them to choose, even if there is from their perspective no rational ground that determines them to go one way rather than the other with the result that we cannot really understand the choice they have made. If we make a rational choice of this latter kind necessary for freedom, then this would make imputation hard—but as we have seen, Schelling does not, as he rejects the intellectualist position as well as the indifferentist one. So for him, this kind of groundless choice does not take away our freedom, as we are rendered free on another basis, namely that in making this choice we are following our essence, which is precisely to be faced by such a choice as self-positing beings. On this essentialist account, the groundlessness of the choice does not make it any less free, as it is precisely in our nature for it be radical and hence groundless.

But still, unless we can understand why the choice was made, how can we impute the action to the agent? Unless we can understand why Judas chose evil over good, how can we impute that evil to him?

Here I think the response can be: the fact that an agent sees evil *as* a choice or option for them rather than something they would have to be forced to do, is enough to impute that evil to them, even if we cannot know why in the end they chose it over the good. For, going back to Schelling's example of Hercules: to a truly good or virtuous Hercules, he would not appear to be faced with the choice of good or evil at all, as to be virtuous is to be aware of no such choice, as such options would be "silenced," to use John McDowell's term.[19] It is therefore not that God is faced with the choice between good and evil but invariably chooses good—rather, it is not a choice for him at all, as evil does not figure for him as an option, and the only way he would take it is if (per impossibile) he was forced to do evil against his nature and hence against his will—in which case he would not be evil at all. However, both good and evil do appear as options to us—as Daniel J. Smith nicely puts it, we fall under "an ethics of temptation."[20] Thus, even if we can assign no rational ground to explain which option is chosen, we can still impute whatever was chosen to the agent, as for this it is sufficient that it *was* a choice, rather than something coerced: for this very choiceworthiness means they can have evil attributed to them, even if we do not know why in the end they chose the one option over the other—the fact that it was an option is enough for imputation, even if we cannot explain why in the end it was chosen by them. And of course, as we all qua human beings see evil as an option as well as the good, and do not have to be forced in one direction or the other, then whichever we turn out to do is imputable to us, even if we cannot in the end say why we went one way rather than another. Thus, as Luther also argued and who Schelling may well be following here,[21] it is sufficient for imputation that the agent is not coerced, which for

Schelling means that the agent acts in accordance with their nature—but because human nature is capable of both good and evil, whichever option we take can be imputed to us on this model as in accordance with our nature and thus our will,[22] even if we cannot ground that choice in reasons in an intellectualist manner, and so cannot ultimately explain it.

So, to summarize, my aim in this paper was to address the following puzzle, which is that Schelling can appear to be committed to four incompatible claims:

1. Imputation requires freedom.
2. We do evil imputably because we can choose between good and evil.
3. We do evil freely because we do so in accordance with our nature.
4. Freedom is acting in accordance with our nature, not choosing.

The first claim seems indisputable as Schelling's view. But the trouble is that Schelling's argument for 3 is to argue for 4, but that seems to rule out 2—but 2 seems very plausible indeed. Many commentators do not see any argument for 4 in Schelling, and so do not see a puzzle here—but I have argued that he clearly supports 4. So, the puzzle is: how can Schelling find a way to accommodate 2 without abandoning 4 and hence 3?

And my response to this puzzle is to argue as follows: Choice itself does not make an action free and hence imputable, as in itself choice is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom. But the fact an agent *faces* a choice between two options shows that whichever action they do is compatible with their nature, otherwise the options would not appear to them *as* options for them to will voluntarily, but only as something they could be coerced into doing—and it is then this conformity to their nature that makes the decision they take imputable to them as *their* action. And because our human nature is constituted by this capacity for both good and evil, whichever option we have decided upon can be imputed to us on this basis, even though when it comes to deciding between being good and evil as such, this decision will appear groundless and hence inscrutable to us. In this way, Schelling can deny that our radical choice between good and evil amounts to freedom in itself, and so can reject indifferentism; and he can also reject intellectualism, as reasons only come into view once the choice between good and evil has been made. Nonetheless he can say that such a choice is fundamental to our nature and so say that it is therefore free on essentialist grounds; and because we are faced by such a choice and not coerced, whichever option we choose—for good, or for evil—is imputable to us as in accordance with our nature. As a result, Schelling's apparently incompatible claims can be reconciled, and thus the puzzle I have posed can be resolved.[23]

ENDNOTES

[1] As Dalia Nassar has written recently: "One of the most widespread views about Schelling concerns the relation between his early and late works. It is commonly assumed that there are fundamental differences between Schelling's early idealistic writings and his later proto-existentialist work, and it is often his 1809 essay on human freedom that marks the point of transition—from a rationalist idealism inspired by Fichte and Spinoza, to a position that emphasizes experience and freedom over against reason and necessity" (Nassar (2023, p. 83)). My claim in this paper is that the *Freiheitsschrift* is closer to the earlier outlook than the later one.

[2] Schelling hereby resolves the fundamental aporia with which the *Freiheitsschrift* starts and which constitutes the "most profound difficulty in the entire doctrine of freedom," namely allowing us the ability to choose between good and evil on the one hand which seems required for us to be free, whilst on the other treating "the infinite substance or the primal will" as ultimately responsible for this evil, and thereby undermining its perfection (FS, p. 23).

[3] See for example Kosch (2006), especially Chapter 4, and Alderwick (2021), especially Chapter 5. For further discussion of this topic, there are several relevant papers in Hermanni et al. (2012) and Buchheim et al. (2021). It is also discussed in Chapter 6 in Gerlach, 2019, which raises some of the issues I discuss below.

[4] Cf. FS, p. 48: "[T]he common concept of freedom, according to which freedom is posited as a wholly undetermined capacity to will one or the other of two contradictory opposites, without determining reasons but simply because it is willed…leads to the greatest inconsistencies. To be able to decide for A or –A without any compelling reasons would be, to tell the truth, only a prerogative to act entirely irrationally and would not distinguish man in exactly the best way from

the well-known animal of Buridan which, in the opinion of the defenders of this concept of free will [Willkür], would have to starve if placed between two piles of hay of equal distance, size and composition (namely because it does not have this prerogative of free will)… The main issue is that this concept introduces a complete contingency [Zufälligkeit] of individual actions and, in this respect, has been compared quite correctly with the contingent swerve of atoms that Epicurus conceived in physics with the same intention, namely, to evade fate. But contingency is impossible; it contests reason as well as the necessary unity of the whole; and, if freedom is to be saved by nothing other than the complete contingency of actions, then it is not to be saved at all." Cf. also *The Ages of the World*: "Something would have to be overcome by that very same something, the will in question would have to be in equilibrium and not in equilibrium simultaneously; hence to get out of this situation a power-of-choice [Willkühr] devoid of understanding is devised, which is independent of all motives and abolishes the equilibrium in a mechanical manner, but, on closer inspection, is nothing other than absolute contingency itself" (WA, p. 96, cited and translated Dews (2023, p. 105)).

[5] This issue is noted by Brian O'Connor, who writes: "We also find in the *Freiheitsschrift* criticism of the model of choice upon which the Kantian-Fichtean notion of self-determination is based. Schelling's view is that the conception of freedom offered by his idealist predecessors can explain choice only as arbitrariness. Because the idealists abstract moral personality from actual personality—rendering it purely formal—the choosing agent has no background of preferences; a background which makes those choices the choices that are meaningful for him or her" (O'Connor (2013, p. 4)). While I agree with O'Connor that Schelling rejects indifferentism, I think that objection goes further than he suggests, in rejecting choice as a model for freedom as such, not just formal choice—precisely because once one moves beyond formal choice, the very idea of freedom based on choice is also put into doubt, as then for the free agent only one option will be salient.

[6] I am here using the terminology of "intellectualism" in the way it is used in debates concerning choice and freedom; it is not a reference to the thesis that intellectual intuition is the source of our knowledge of the absolute. For a discussion of this other debate, see, for example, Bruno (2023).

[7] This is the option taken by Jörg Noller, for example, who argues that Schelling defends a kind of "critical voluntarism" which Noller compares with Frankfurt's volitional necessity: "Volitional necessity is fully compatible with freedom, since it is the result of a deliberate process, a process of reflecting and balancing reasons for an action, and of integrating different volitional tendencies into a unified will" (Noller (2020, p. 199)). Thomas Buccheim is also opposed to the indifferentist approach, but whether he adopts intellectualism as the alternative is less clear, as he has the concern that it would leave only one option open to the free being: see Buchheim (2012), pp. 203–4).

[8] Cf. "All improvements, however, which one has sought to make to determinism, for example, the Leibnizian ones that motivating causes only incline but do not determine the will, are of no help at all in the main issue" (FS, p. 49); and cf. also FS, p. 61. For Leibniz's view, cf. "[t]here is always a prevailing reason which prompts the will to its choice, and for the maintenance of freedom for the will it suffices that this reason should incline without necessitating" (Leibniz (1985, §45)). For further discussion of Leibniz and the *Freiheitsschrift*, see Buchheim (2009).

[9] It might be objected that Schelling is presenting the Kabbalistic view as precisely denying this, when Schelling says in the Stuttgart seminar passage I have cited that on this account, God can "create the space for a revelation" because this involves a "break with the absolute identity of His essence." But in response: by saying this, I do not take Schelling to mean that God can break with his essence or here goes beyond his essence, but that God's essence consists in the capacity to go beyond absolute identity. Thus, Schelling goes on to claim, in so far as we take this to involve a form of freedom, we must also find a necessity in it, as otherwise it would be a kind of arbitrary choice. Hence the passage ends by returning to the claim that "all genuine, that is, absolute, freedom is an absolute necessity," which is a claim that I am not sure can be explained otherwise. I thank one of my anonymous referees for pressing me on this issue.

[10] These lines are quoted from Goethe's 1800 sonnet "Natur und Kunst" (von Goethe (1998), vol 1, p. 245)). Schelling does not cite the final line of the sonnet which follows those which he quotes: "And only the law can give us freedom."

[11] In this way, Schelling's position can be related to Hume's famous distinction between liberty of indifference and liberty of spontaneity, where Hume also rejects the former in favour of the latter, and makes lack of coercion key to the former—although of course Schelling would also reject the causal determinism that Hume takes to be compatible with this view, and which was famously rejected by Kant as the "freedom of the turnspit." Schelling's more essentialist version of liberty of spontaneity is designed to address this Kantian worry, which he thinks idealism was right to raise (see FS, p. 49). But Hume's distinction is still worth bearing in mind, 'betwixt the liberty of spontaneity, as it is call'd in the schools, and the liberty of indifference; betwixt that which is oppos'd to violence, and that which means a negation of necessity and causes' (Hume (1975, Bk III, Part II, §II, pp. 407–8)), for as we shall see, Schelling seems to agree with Hume that the key feature of freedom is that it is "oppos'd to violence" and hence involved no coercion, but not that it involves a choice which renders the action random rather than necessary.

[12] One referee has suggested that Schelling is making a different point in claiming in this passage that "necessity and freedom are in one another as one being," namely that "choice can be seen as implicit in every empirical action, even though,

from another angle, actions can be seen as flowing from our essence, from who we determinately are." On this account, therefore, Schelling still thinks action involves choice qua freedom, even though these actions also follow from our essence necessarily and so are determined. However, the passage we are discussing makes no reference to freedom as choice vs. necessity as determinism, so I think he is making the different claim outlined above, which also does not commit Schelling to this kind of dualistic combination of freedom and necessity that is proposed by the referee.

[13] "Man is placed on that summit where he has in himself the source of self-movement toward good or evil in equal portions: the bond of principles in him is not a necessary but rather a free one. Man stands on the threshold [Scheidepunkt]; whatever he chooses, it will be his act: but he cannot remain undecided because God must necessarily reveal himself and because nothing at all can remain ambiguous in creation" (FS, p. 41). This is presumably the passage Schelling has in mind when he notes in the passage we are discussing that it has been shown that "Man is in the initial creation…an undecided being," who is such as to stand between good and evil. Cf. also GO, p. 260, where Schelling comments that "the power of choice…belongs to the necessary bounds of our nature, which we strive to go beyond ad infinitum yet are never able to fully transcend," while remarking in a note that when "the entire history of our species" ends with "the kingdom of reason," the result will be that "every power of choice disappears from the earth." This again seems to make freedom of choice fundamental to our current nature, while denying that such choice is itself necessary for freedom as such.

[14] CF. FS p. 32: "In man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light. In him there is the deepest abyss and the loftiest sky or both *centra*."

[15] Cf. also Smith (2021, p. 740), who is speaking about Schelling's earlier "General Overview": "Without an alternative that is attractive for reasons that go beyond 'animal' inclination or self-interest, there would be nothing that could counter the moral law at the appropriate level, and we would find ourselves compelled by it in line with Schmid's 'intelligible fatalism'." My suggestion here is that Smith is right to characterise what it is like for us to engage with morality as part of our nature, which is what makes such choices constitutive of freedom for us—but the ability to make such choices is not necessary for freedom as such.

[16] Cf. O'Connor (2013, p. 13): "But why would she, he or it choose this determination [of evil over good]? The determinacy required for choosing cannot pre-exist a primal act of self-positing (otherwise it would not be primal and radically free). Yet without determinacy we return to the problem of arbitrary choice."

[17] Cf. FS, pp. 51–2: "This sort of free act, which becomes necessary, admittedly cannot appear in consciousness to the degree the latter is merely self-awareness and only ideal, since it precedes consciousness just as it precedes essence, indeed, first *produces* it…" Noller suggests that Schelling has a more optimistic view, claiming that "In contrast to Kant, who considered the reason of immoral actions as 'inscrutable', Schelling attempts to explore 'how in each individual the decision for good or evil might now proceed' [FS, p. 48]" (Noller (2020, p. 197)). But Noller does not really offer an explanation himself, and Schelling may simply be referring to the way in which he shows how this choice is a kind of radical choice that occurs outside time, rather than giving it some further grounding.

[18] Cf. Strawson (1994, p. 6): "to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking… But to be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must have brought it about that one is the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects. And it is not merely that one must have caused oneself to be the way one is, mentally speaking. One must have consciously and explicitly chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, and one must have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way." For a fuller engagement with Strawson from the perspective of Schelling see Buchheim et al. (2021).

[19] See in particular McDowell, "Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?," "Virtue and reason," and "The role of eudaimonia in Aristotle's ethics," in McDowell (1998, pp. 77–94, 50–76 and 3–22).

[20] Smith (2021, p. 732). Where I think Smith and I may differ is that he seems to suggest (as noted above) that for Schelling, without finding ourselves in the situation of being tempted by both good and evil, we would then lack a choice between them, and thus be rendered unfree because such a choice is necessary for freedom on Schelling's account—which of course I have suggested is not the whole story.

[21] Cf. Schelling's reference to Luther in a note, where Schelling is discussing Judas, who in the light of his original choice to be evil "became a betrayer of Christ," in a way that "neither he nor any other creature could change, and nevertheless he betrayed Christ not under compulsion but willingly and with complete freedom." The note reads: "This is what Luther maintains, correctly, in his treatise *de servo arbitrio*," to which Schelling adds the comment, "even though he did not grasp the unification of such unwavering necessity with freedom of action in the correct manner" (FS, p. 51). I take it that Schelling refers to Luther here because he had argued that this lack of compulsion was sufficient for freedom, against Erasmus's claim that it also requires free choice, a claim which Luther had rejected on anti-indifferentist grounds as well as theological ones. See Luther (1972, Part III).

[22] Cf. FS, p. 51, where Schelling argues that it is because the evil individual (such as Judas) "does not feel in the least compelled" that he must accept that he "performs his actions in accordance with and not against his will," even while accepting that he could not do otherwise.

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