

# The Freedom of Organs

## *The Corporatism of Schelling's Freedom Essay*

ARIËN VOOGT

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Ariën Voogt is a PhD student in philosophical theology at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht.

awvoogt@pthu.nl

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It is common to think of the 1809 *Freedom Essay* as an attempt by Friedrich Schelling to radically rethink the freedom of the human being and the contingency of reality.<sup>1</sup> This text is widely viewed as marking a definitive break with Schelling's earlier philosophy of identity, or even with the project of idealism as a whole – the point at which Schelling treads new ground, following a path that leads beyond idealism, a path that will eventually lead to Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger.<sup>2</sup> In Schelling's obscure and esoteric text, Heidegger claims that we can see the 'heat lightning of a new beginning'.<sup>3</sup> The *Freedom Essay* would, in this view, demonstrate the incompatibility of facticity with a rational system – in Heidegger's words, that 'positing the jointure of being as the unity of ground and existence makes a jointure of being as system impossible'.<sup>4</sup> Or, if we follow Habermas, Schelling presents

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<sup>1</sup> Commonly referred to as the *Freedom Essay* or *Freiheitsschrift*, the official title of the text is *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. For Schelling's works I refer in the following by Roman numerals to the relevant volume of K. F. A. Schelling (ed.), *Sämmtliche Werke*, Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61. In citing the *Freedom Essay* I have relied on the following translation, though not without making some changes. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love & Johannes Schmidt, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006. The second page number refers to this translation.

<sup>2</sup> This has most prominently been argued by Horst Fuhrmans in *Schellings Philosophie der Weltalter*, Düsseldorf: Swan, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, 161.

the ‘surrender of the Absolute to history’.<sup>5</sup> The *Freedom Essay* owes its subversive status to an emphasis on the primordial quality of the will, the irrational Ground, the irreducible dimension of facticity and contingency, and the possibility of evil. Schelling’s thinking from the *Freedom Essay* onwards is thus commonly opposed to Hegel’s panlogism. In opposition to the idealist notion that all of reality and history is simply the self-mediation of the absolute Idea, Schelling would point to the inaccessible ground of all existence, which is not found in the principle of sufficient reason but in facticity and blind drives. Human freedom is seen not as rational autonomy, but as the radical capacity for evil alongside the good. In theological terms, the *Freedom Essay* would break with the pantheism of the idealist system, enabling both God’s transcendence and the world’s independence from God.<sup>6</sup>

Yet this dominant interpretation overlooks a crucial dimension of the *Freedom Essay* – its pervasive use of organic and bodily metaphors, which point in a fundamentally different direction. Schelling metaphysically conceives of individual beings as *organs* that serve a corporate whole.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, Schelling explains moral evil through the metaphor of disease, in the sense of organic dysfunction. Like other creatures, human beings are essentially organs that serve their purpose in the whole. Unlike other creatures, however, humans possess a freedom to deliberately put their self-interest before the interest of the whole. In the corporatist framework of the *Freedom Essay*, this capability for evil is seen as the possibility that an individual organ refuses to act in service of the whole and asserts its own life contrary to the general life of the body. Further stretching the metaphor, Schelling writes about a kind of immune response that the body exerts on the ‘sick’ body part. Individuals cannot dysfunction for long, and in this way the good outcome of histo-

5 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus – Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes’, *Theorie und Praxis*, London: Heinemann, 1974, 194.

6 A small sample of interpretations along these lines: Ryôsuke Ohashi, ‘Der Ungrund und das System’, *F.W.J. Schelling: Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, eds. Otfried Höffe & Annemarie Pieper, Berlin: Akademie, 1995, <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783050050430.235>; G. Anthony Bruno, ‘Schelling on the Unconditioned Condition of the World’, *Schellings Freiheitsschrift – Methode, System, Kritik*, eds. Thomas Buchheim, Thomas Frisch & Nora C. Wachsmann, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021; Andrew Bowie, ‘Nature and Freedom in Schelling and Adorno’, *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, ed. Lara Ostaric, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cb09781139093569.011>. Slavoj Žižek describes the interpretation of Schelling’s ‘philosophy of finitude-temporality-contingency’ in opposition to Hegel’s absolute Idealism as a prevailing *doxa* or even cliché. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, London: Verso, 1996, 5–6.

7 I use ‘corporatism’ and ‘corporatist’ throughout this paper in their etymological sense, derived from *corpus* (body), to designate Schelling’s framework in which individuals are conceived as organs serving a bodily whole. While ‘corporatism’ is more commonly used in a political sense, I have found it the most apt term to describe Schelling’s metaphysics; ‘organicism’ is too generic.

ry and the vanquishing of evil is guaranteed. In Schelling's eschatological vision, all shall have become incorporated in a single, harmonious whole – becoming the embodiment of God.

In this paper, I argue that this bodily imagery should be taken seriously. Far from being mere illustrative devices, these metaphors reveal an underlying corporatist outlook – a framework that fundamentally challenges the common interpretation of the *Freedom Essay*. It calls into question the extent to which Schelling's thought allows for genuine contingency and freedom. It makes evil's actualization impossible by design, thus setting clear limits to the world's independence from God. The aim of my analysis is to demonstrate that when Schelling invokes imagery such as organs and disease, he is articulating a vision of human personhood, one that paradoxically sees its fulfilment in becoming impersonal.

To analyse this corporatist logic, I examine two key domains. In §1, I first briefly consider the realm of (non-human) nature as tied to Schelling's concept of the Ground. Whereas the primal will of the Ground seems to show a radical contingency at the heart of being, Schelling in truth presents natural life as teleologically organized into a unified whole. In §2, I turn to Schelling's conception of human freedom and personhood. A close consideration of the *Freedom Essay* and related works reveals that the radical capacity for good and evil turns out to be a decision either to function or dysfunction as an organ in the whole. This outlook implies that personal freedom and individuality are significantly curtailed or even subverted. In the conclusion (§3), I revisit the corporatist perspective of the *Freedom Essay*, considering the extent to which it subverts freedom and personhood. Despite Schelling's apparent aim to establish the possibility of radical freedom, his corporatist framework ultimately leaves no path to exercise freedom without losing it.

## 1. Ground and the Organization of Nature

A principle aim of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* is to overcome a one-sided idealism, which reduces reality to a logical system, flattening out life's spontaneous activity by an abstract conceptual schema. The encompassing 'system' of the *Freedom Essay* is not based on logic but rather on *life*.<sup>8</sup> Schelling aims to show how 'everything actual (nature, the world of things) has activity, life, and freedom as its ground'. (VII, 351/22) The central features of being are conceived in vitalistic terms as striving, will, drive. 'Will is primal being [*Wollen ist Ursein*].' (VII, 350/21) All beings are fundamentally defined by their striving and therein enjoy their freedom and self-dependence.

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<sup>8</sup> See Diogo Ferrer, *The Transformation of Reason: Studies on System, Myth, and History in German Idealism*, Leiden: Brill, 2024, 155–169, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004697836>.

At the basis of reality lies what Schelling calls the dark Ground. The ‘self-will’ (*Eigenwille*) of individual beings stems from the blind will of the Ground itself. The blind, primal will of the Ground gives nature its dynamism, vitality, and independent life. At the same time, it is a force of contingency, opacity, and irregularity. It provides for the ‘incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in the Intellect but rather remains eternally in the Ground’. (VII, 360/29) Schelling thus opposes the sterile rationalism of idealist philosophy by insisting upon the chaotic, contingent, and opaque core of reality – instead of consigning it in advance to the grip of a rational order and rendering it fully transparent. Schelling argues that the autonomy of creation requires that the world must possess ‘in relation to God a relatively independent principle’. (VII, 363/32) This principle is the Ground – a principle *in* God that is nonetheless distinct from Godself.<sup>9</sup> The Ground is conceived as the ‘yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself’. (VII, 359/28–9) Hence, the blind striving of the Ground does not just stir the spontaneous self-will of creatures and the vitality of nature. To situate the world in the Ground, and not in the Idea or in God, also means firmly establishing the autonomy of the finite world and the contingency of nature.

This is only part of the story, however. In the *Freedom Essay*, nature is not just defined by unregulated self-will, but also by the regulating force of what Schelling calls the Intellect (*Verstand*), which advances the ‘universal will’ (*Universalwille*).<sup>10</sup> Considered as individuals, all creatures strive for self-preservation. Yet in this self-directed activity, they realize their natural purpose, thus contributing to the development of the whole. The self-will, though not pursuing anything other than its own self-interest, is instrumental to the project of the universal will. ‘The Intellect as universal will stands against this self-will of creatures, using and subordinating the latter to itself as a mere instrument.’ (VII, 363/31–2) The Intellect employs what Hegel

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<sup>9</sup> On this ‘internal dualism’ in God, see Friedrich Hermanni, *Die letzte Entlastung: Vollendung und Scheitern des abendländischen Theodizeeprojektes in Schellings Philosophie*, Vienna: Passagen, 1994; Thomas Buchheim, ‘Einleitung’, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, ed. Thomas Buchheim, Hamburg: Meiner, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of the universal will in the *Freedom Essay* develops notions such as the world-soul and universal organism from Schelling’s earlier philosophy of nature. See Paul Franks, ‘From World-Soul to Universal Organism: Maimon’s Hypothesis and Schelling’s Physicalization of a Platonic-Kabbalistic Concept’, *Schelling’s Philosophy: Freedom, Nature, and Systematicity*, ed. G. Anthony Bruno, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198812814.003.0005>.

would call the ‘cunning of reason’, letting the self-interest of individuals ‘work behind their backs’ in the interest of the whole.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the appearance of contingency and the chaotic interplay of egotistic drives, natural life as a whole is teleologically determined. It is true that nature draws its life-force and concrete existence from the Ground. On the other hand, nature would disintegrate, would never even emerge without being organized by the Intellect. The drive of the Ground, Schelling writes, can therefore not truly be an ‘independent and complete will, since the Intellect is actually the *will in the will*’. (VII, 359/28, emphasis altered). It is ‘only the Intellect that develops what is hidden in this Ground and what is contained merely potentially, and raises it to actuality’. (VII, 413-4/75) It shows that the Ground is not actually independent. It is ontologically ‘hampered’ or ‘non-accomplished’, as Slavoj Žižek puts it; it has a ‘pre-ontological’ status.<sup>12</sup> The will of the Ground cannot be conceived as a fully actual, self-directing will. As we saw, it is God’s longing to give birth to Godself. The Ground is simply the divine Intellect in becoming. Only when it has ascended to the level of the Intellect does it reach full independence and actuality. Not in nature proper, only in a being that transcends nature can this be achieved.

Since selfhood is spirit, however, it is at the same time raised from the creaturely into what is above the creaturely; it is will that beholds itself in complete freedom, no longer being an instrument of the universal will working in nature, but rather above and outside of all nature. (VII, 364/33)

As *organised* by the Intellect, the self-will of creatures serves as an unwitting *organ* (instrument) of the universal will, precisely for the reason that they are fully bound to their natural drives.<sup>13</sup> (VII 372/40) The human being, however, a ‘supernatural’ being that is no longer in thrall to compulsive drives, achieves independence from the universal will.<sup>14</sup> It is hence the human being that becomes the focal point of the *Freedom Essay*.

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<sup>11</sup> For the comparison with Hegel’s cunning of reason, see Hermanni, *Die letzte Entlastung*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Schelling uses ‘instrument’ (*Werkzeug*) and ‘organ’ (*Organ*) interchangeably – ‘*organon*’ in Greek indeed carries both meanings.

<sup>14</sup> On freedom in nature vis-à-vis human freedom, see Naomi Fisher, ‘Freedom as Productivity in Schelling’s Philosophy of Nature’, *Schelling’s Philosophy: Freedom, Nature, and Systematicity*, ed. G. Anthony Bruno, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198812814.003.0004>; Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant*,

## 2. The Incorporation of Personal Freedom

The dominant reading of the *Freedom Essay* is that it stands out by virtue of its defence of a radical form of human freedom. Human persons can actively choose *not* to pursue their natural end, but to defy the rational order. The human being is a fundamentally undecided being. In humans, the hierarchical relation between the self-will and the universal will is no longer naturally fixed. It is freely established by themselves. '[T]he bond of principles in him is not a necessary but rather a free one. He stands on the threshold – whatever he chooses will be his act.' (VII, 374/41) 'In the original creation, the human being is an undecided being [...] only he can decide for himself.' (VII 385/50–1) Unlike other natural beings, humans can choose *evil*. As Schelling famously writes, the proper concept of human freedom is that it is a 'capacity for good and evil'. (VII, 352/23) Evil represents the fall from the divine order, by which humans corrupt themselves and corrupt all of creation.<sup>15</sup> Inverting the hierarchy of cosmic principles, humanity becomes the '*inverted God* [*umgekehrte Gott*]' (VII, 390/54) Humans seemingly possess unbounded freedom and godlike independence, which establishes the human as a (potentially) rival god.

This notion lies at the heart of the traditional view of the *Freedom Essay*. While we saw that non-human nature is still organised by the Intellect, in this view the radical freedom of the human person is the lever by which Schelling unhinges the incessant progress of the divine Idea towards self-realization. The possibility of evil is ineradicably bound up with the ontological structure of reality. Whether evil rises up, or whether the good ultimately wins out, appears not to be guaranteed in advance; it would depend on the choices we make. Habermas concludes that the panorama sketched by Schelling is of 'a world that has slipped out of God's hand', a world whose fate has been handed over to humanity.<sup>16</sup> Human freedom means that God 'puts his own destiny on the line'.<sup>17</sup>

Many interpretations of the *Freedom Essay* have therefore focused on human freedom, evil, and moral responsibility. As scholars have pointed out, Schelling here breaks with the concept of freedom established by Kant, and thus escapes from the Kantian conundrum that merely a rational will that obeys the moral law would be free. Only if we are also free to *defy* the moral law, Schelling argues, can we be free at all.<sup>18</sup> Much of the critical discussion

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*Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 66–104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199289115.001.0001>.

15 On Schelling's account of the Fall, see Hermanni, *Die letzte Entlastung*.

16 Habermas, 'Dialektischer Idealismus', 193.

17 Habermas, 'Dialektischer Idealismus', 189.

18 See Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 87–104; Daniel

around the *Freedom Essay* has revolved around the problems introduced by Schelling's elucidation of this concept of freedom. For instance, some have questioned whether Schelling's concept of the 'intelligible deed' – the atemporal act by which we determine our moral character – constitutes a satisfactory theory of moral freedom.<sup>19</sup>

Yet I want to pursue a different line of questioning. My concern does not lie with the issue of free will, imputation, or the formal aspects of moral choice, but with the substantive options that it presupposes as alternative courses of action. Is the choice for evil really a feasible one? Can we actually, not just in principle, defy God? Turning our attention now to bodily imagery in the *Freedom Essay*, we come to understand its underlying corporatist framework and the limits it imposes upon personal existence and freedom.

## 2.2. *Evil as Disease*

To explain the capacity for evil, Schelling portrays the human being as suspended between two poles: God and the Ground, the universal and the particular will, reason and inclination. (VII, 364/33, cf. VII, 458) Human persons are spiritual beings, and for this reason, they are not bound to their compulsive drives – even though as individuals they have a self-will that does not coincide with the universal will of reason. It means they are capable of abusing their freedom, and utilizing their capacity of conscious reasoning for selfish ends. This is what constitutes the possibility of evil. 'The general possibility of evil consists, as shown, in the fact that the human being, instead of making his selfhood into the basis, into an organ, can instead strive to elevate it into the dominant and total will, conversely striving to make the spiritual within himself into a means.' (VII, 389/54) Morality comes down to this basic choice: Does one become an instrument of evil, by subordinating the power of reason to one's self-interest, or does one become a functioning organ of the Intellect?

One of the main objectives of the *Freedom Essay* is to disprove the privation theory of evil that is common to much of the Western intellectual tradition. In line with this negative understanding, evil would only consist in a *lack* – a lack of consciousness or reality. Evil would result from passivity,

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J. Smith, 'An Ethics of Temptation: Schelling's Contribution to the Freedom Controversy', *European Journal of Philosophy* vol. 29, no. 4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12601>.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Robert Stern, 'Schelling on Freedom, Evil and Imputation: A Puzzle', *European Journal of Philosophy* vol. 31, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12889>; Christian Iber, 'Prinzipien von Personalität in Schelling's "Freiheitsschrift"', *Alle Persönlichkeit ruht auf einem dunkeln Grunde: Schellings Philosophie der Personalität*, eds. Thomas Buchheim & Friedrich Hermanni, Berlin: Akademie, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783050083735.119>; Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 93–98.

from a failure to exercise power. The problem with this view, Schelling argues, is that it cannot explain the actual existence of evil; it only explains it away. In the essay, he sets out to establish an alternative, *positive* conception of evil. Evil is a real opposition to the good; a ‘positive perversion or inversion’; it is ‘disharmony, ataxia of forces’, a ‘false unity’. (VII, 366/35;370-1/38) In Schelling’s view, the ontological character of evil corresponds to a perversion, which Schelling explains by comparing it to *disease*.

The most fitting comparison here is offered by disease, which, as the disorder having arisen in nature through the misuse of freedom, is the true counterpart of evil or sin [...] Every particular disease emerges only because that which has its freedom or life only so that it may remain in the whole strives to be for itself. (VII 366/34-5, cf. 346/18)

Fitting as the comparison may be to Schelling, the image of disease may give us reason to doubt the positive ontology of evil that Schelling aims for. If, according to Schelling’s (rather odd) understanding of disease, it is the result of an individual organ ‘striving to be for itself’, when it only has freedom and life in the body as a whole, it is obvious that this particular organ has no long life expectancy. Not only does the organ still depend on the body for its sustenance, severely limiting its capacity for independence; but the body, according to Schelling, also has its way of dealing with rogue organs. Disease provokes an immune response, where the body feverishly turns against the sick body part. In the same way, Schelling writes, the life of the whole turns against the defiant individual and becomes a ‘consuming fire’.

For because God cannot be disturbed in his existence, much less abolished, so – in accordance with the necessary correspondence that occurs between God and his basis – precisely that radiant glimpse of life in the depths of darkness in every individual flares up in the sinner into a consuming fire, just as in a living organism a particular part or system, as soon as it has strayed from the whole, perceives the unity and cooperative effort, to which it is opposed, as fire (=fever) and ignites from an inner heat. (VII, 391/55-6)

The image of fire has a central importance in Schelling’s work.<sup>20</sup> Schelling explains in the 1810 *Stuttgart Lectures* that fire stands for the divine impulse

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<sup>20</sup> See Kirill Chepurin, ‘Indifference and the World: Schelling’s Pantheism of Bliss’, *Sophia* vol. 58, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-018-0700-7>.

of life; the ‘soft, subdued life-flame which burns in every being’. However, when the individual is no longer subordinate to the whole, and instead of remaining a ‘non-being’ wants to actualize itself as ‘being’, the flame turns into a ‘consuming fire’. Hence the ‘element of fire is hostile towards the *egoity* or *selfhood* of things’. (VII, 448) Schelling also speaks of fire as God’s wrath, not as a judgment external to the sin, but the sinful will itself, conceived under the aspect of its self-destruction.<sup>21</sup> In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling significantly links fire to *fever* – signalling a kind of autoimmune response to malignant organs that hamper the vitality of the body as a whole.

The image of disease and fever provokes the question to what extent evil can exist as a positive force, when in truth it has a sickly and parasitical existence. As Schelling affirms, disease has no being of its own and is ‘really only an illusory semblance of life and merely a meteoric appearance thereof – an oscillation between being and non-being’. ‘Evil is, however, not a being, but rather a non-being that has reality only in opposition and not in itself.’ (VII, 366/35;409/71) An even more fundamental question is to what extent human persons are truly free and independent, when the choice for evil provokes a cosmic immune response. As soon as individuals start to affirm their selfhood, instead of behaving as organs that only exist to serve the whole, a fever consumes them.

Scholars have recognized the peculiar incongruity of Schelling’s image of disease to explain moral evil. Michelle Kosch notes that it may lead to a naturalistic understanding of evil, but she highlights the fact that it is indeed a naturalistic *metaphor* – to indicate a moral phenomenon of defiance. ‘In fact what he is trying to get across in both of these metaphors [of disease and disharmony, AV] is the idea of a positive opposition of an individual, which belongs to an overarching order (the body, the piece of music) where it has a proper part to play, instead rebelling against that order in a way that distorts both itself and the whole.’<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that distortion and defiance of an encompassing order is what Schelling primarily intends with the metaphor of disease. Philosophical metaphors are never *mere* metaphors, however; they tend to lead a life of their own. As Slavoj Žižek points out, the philosophical ‘content’ or ‘truth’ in Schelling’s text is so deeply intertwined with theosophical, anthropomorphic, and other ‘unscientific’ imagery, that it is impossible to separate the one from the other. To discard the symbolical, mythical, or metaphorical from Schelling’s account means

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<sup>21</sup> See Paul Tillich, ‘Mystik und Schuldbewußtsein in Schellings philosophischer Entwicklung’, *Hauptwerke Vol. I: Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Gunther Wenz, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 100.

to discard his philosophy as such – ‘there is no way of throwing out the dirty bath water without losing the baby’.<sup>23</sup>

I believe this is particularly true for the metaphor of disease. Disease and organic dysfunction do not just illustrate the nature of evil, they provide its ontological schema. The organic imagery is essential to how Schelling concretely conceives of evil’s corruption, the sinful individual, and the response to evil. The implication is that evil has a parasitical existence; and the sinful person, perverted by evil, falls prey to annihilation by something like cosmic inflammation. This is not exactly the same as understanding evil as *privatio boni* – corrupted life or sickness is not the absence of life (viz. death), even though it is undeniably a preliminary stage thereof. Yet it does restrict the level of independence the human person is capable of. A free decision for evil means a freedom misused. It also means a freedom lost. The human being is ‘capable of freedom precisely through his being-in-God’; hence, once ‘fascinated’ by evil, the human spirit ‘soon loses its initial freedom’. (VII, 411/72;391/56)

Accomplished evil, which would consist in a successful rebellion of human selfhood and the actualization of the inverted God, is therefore never a real possibility. Schelling describes the inverted God as that being, ‘which can never reach the actual from out of the potential, which never is, though ever wants to be’. (VII, 390/54) Thus, even if in the corrupt human being evil attains an apparent reality, it is never real in itself. A life corrupted by evil is only a ‘false life’. (VII, 366/34). Evil has a parasitical existence. Like a virus, it tends to destroy its own host. Evil thus contains an inner contradiction: as soon as it is actualized, it falls into nothingness. (VII, 391/55)

### 2.3. *Personhood and the Self-effacing Organ*

The fact that evil can only have a parasitical existence has significant implications for how human selfhood is conceived in the *Freedom Essay*. Egoic individuality that emerges from the Ground is, as such, a natural, not an evil principle. However, the role of individual selfhood is to serve as an organ of the universal will. It must be subdued; its self-will rendered a passive instrument. ‘Only selfhood that has been overcome, thus brought back from activity to potentiality, is the good.’ (VII, 400/63) The individual person remains ontologically dependent on the whole. The human self can never bring the condition of its existence under its control, which is why

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<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 7. A similar point with respect to the image of disease in particular is made by Jochem Hennigfeld, ‘Der Mensch im Absoluten System. Anthropologische Ansätze in der Philosophie Schellings’, *Schellings philosophische Anthropologie*, eds. Jörg Jantzen & Peter L. Austria, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002.

‘his personhood and selfhood can never bring itself to full actuality’. (VII, 399/62) As soon as it ceases to serve and strives to dominate, selfhood loses its coherence. Citing Franz Baader, Schelling writes:

Thus in general, selfhood, individuality is now admittedly the basis, foundation or natural center of any creature’s life; but as soon as it ceases to be the serving center and enters as dominating into the periphery, it burns as the rage of Tantalus of selfishness and egoism (of ignited selfhood) in it. (VII, 367/35)

Individual selfhood can hence only continue to exist as long as it does not exist for itself, but carries out its function in the given order. As soon as it tries to be for itself, the self is doomed. The only viable option for the human person is to give up the self – even if at the same time this provokes the temptation to preserve the self and to fall into evil, as the following passage attests:

The anxiety of life itself drives man out of the center into which he was created: for this center, as the purest essence of all willing, is for each particular will a consuming fire; in order to be able to live within it, the human must die unto all particularity, which is why the attempt to step out of this center into the periphery is almost necessary in order to seek there some calm for his selfhood. (VII, 381/47-8)

The freedom of the human person is, effectively, a freedom to give up the particularity of the self and become a submissive organ of the whole – or to try to actualize the independence of the self, to fall from the centre, and to be consumed in the process. Either way, the house always wins.

What does this mean for the human person? At first sight, the *Freedom Essay* indeed bestows great value on personhood. ‘Only in personhood is there life’, Schelling writes, not in reason alone. (VII, 413/75) God should be conceived as a person, too. All that happens, happens by virtue of God’s personhood and in order to perfectly realize God’s personhood. (VII, 396/59; 403–4/65–6) Yet this positive appreciation of personhood seems hard to square with Schelling’s corporatism. Is the person an organ (instrument) or an end in itself?

It is difficult to derive from the *Freedom Essay* alone how Schelling evaluates human personhood and individuality. By taking recourse to some related works can we better understand the role of personhood in Schelling’s

thought of this period.<sup>24</sup> Christian Danz has argued that the understanding of personhood in the *Freedom Essay* is largely continuous with Schelling's understanding of individuality in works associated with his philosophy of identity. In Danz's interpretation of these earlier works, the individual serves as a particular embodiment or image of the Absolute, and in this sense constitutes a unique 'individual totality'.<sup>25</sup> Individuality is, ontologically speaking, not mere nothingness. The condition, however, is that the individual does not exist *for itself*, but acts exclusively as an embodiment of the universal will. 'The human being is representation of the Absolute', Danz writes, 'and thus image of the absolute identity, by virtue of the fact that his particularity is not something for itself, but is basis or foundation of the universal'.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, this implies that each person has their own individual role or identity in the larger order. Schelling does not propose a sweeping homogenization of the diversity of individuals into a mass of identical automata. On the other hand, we see here the functionalist understanding of personhood that is implicit in the *Freedom Essay*. The person must each in their own way serve the whole, and thereby become the local embodiment of the universal will – or as the *Freedom Essay* puts it, act as its organ.

The fact that personhood, for Schelling, does not constitute an end in itself, but serves to actualize something higher, something *impersonal*, is made explicit in the *Stuttgart Lectures*. Here, Schelling makes a distinction between the human *spirit* and the *soul*. The human spirit is 'what is actually personal in the human' (VII, 466); it represents the egoic consciousness and will. Because the personal spirit is still characterized by self-will and therefore susceptible to evil, it does not represent the highest in the human being: 'thus the human spirit should, in turn, be a relative non-being in relation to something higher'. (VII, 467) This is to be found in the soul. The soul transcends the realm of the individual and personal. The personal spirit must, therefore, give way to the impersonal soul. 'The soul is what is actually divine in the human, hence the *impersonal*, the actual being, *to which the personal should be subjugated* as relative non-being.' (VII, 468, emphasis altered) In art and science, but also in morality and love, the personal indi-

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24 See also Christian Danz, 'Subjekt – Individuum – Persönlichkeit. Zur werkgeschichtlichen Entwicklung von Schellings Verständnis der Person zwischen 1800 und 1810', *Schellings Freiheitsschrift – Methode, System, Kritik*, eds. Thomas Buchheim, Thomas Frisch & Nora C. Wachsmann, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021; Michelle Kosch, 'Schelling's Moral Psychology in the Freiheitsschrift and Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen', *Schellings Freiheitsschrift – Methode, System, Kritik*, eds. Thomas Buchheim, Thomas Frisch, & Nora C. Wachsmann, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021.

25 Danz, 'Subjekt – Individuum – Persönlichkeit', 164.

26 Danz, 'Subjekt – Individuum – Persönlichkeit', 167.

vidual is effaced and only the impersonal soul acts. ‘Allow the soul in you to act [...] “Act in accordance with your soul” means so much as: act not as a personal being, but rather entirely impersonally; do not disturb [the soul’s] influence in yourself through your personhood.’ (VII, 473, cf. VII, 312) The *telos* of personal existence is hence *self-effacement*. Humans must abandon their personal selfhood and become a vessel for the impersonal soul.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of these other works, we see more clearly how the corporatism in the *Freedom Essay* relates to Schelling’s vision of personhood. The human person is portrayed as a functioning organ of the whole. The goal is to act as a selfless instrument of God’s self-disclosure in history until ‘God may be all in all.’ (VII, 404/66, citing 1 Corinthians 15:28) This is realized when all self-will is subdued, when all act unanimously as organs of the universal will: ‘those born out of darkness into the light join themselves to the ideal principle as the limbs to its body.’ (VII, 405/67) After the willing self-effacement of all human persons, there is in effect only *one* personal being left: in this all-encompassing body of God, ‘the ideal principle is fully realized and now a wholly personal being.’ (VII, 405/67–8)

The *Freedom Essay* presents this eschatological vision as a bond of love. The ‘secret of love’, Schelling writes, is ‘that it links such things of which each could exist for itself yet does not, and cannot exist without the other’. (VII, 408/70) This passage is commonly taken as demonstration of Schelling’s commitment to the autonomy of individuals and the world in relation to God. Love presupposes autonomy: that each member could also have decided to exist for itself. Yet seen against the background of the *Freedom Essay* as a whole, I believe we should be careful not to read too much into this statement. Not only does it assert that love requires giving up independence; as we have seen, the possibility to refuse love and to remain independent is effectively blocked as well.<sup>28</sup>

Michelle Kosch has rightly pointed out that the vindication of the good is not metaphysically guaranteed for each individual. Persons are individually responsible for their decision for good or for evil.<sup>29</sup> However, in line with Schelling’s corporatism, personal self-effacement in service of the good is ultimately the only viable option. It is not just that the choice for evil is a self-defeating one, provoking a kind of cosmic autoimmune response. In a more fundamental way, even to assert oneself, to affirm one’s independence

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27 For a similar reading, see Birgit Sandkaulen, ‘Dieser und kein anderer? Zur Individualität der Person in Schelling’s “Freiheitsschrift”’, *Alle Persönlichkeit ruht auf einem dunkeln Grunde: Schellings Philosophie der Personalität*, eds. Thomas Buchheim & Friedrich Hermanni, Berlin: Akademie, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783050083735.35>.

28 See also Iber, ‘Prinzipien von Personalität in Schelling’s “Freiheitsschrift”’, 135–6.

29 Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 97.

from the universal whole, is to become immediately identified as a malignant organ. It would seem the point of freedom and personhood is only to willingly undo itself. Schelling is clear, moreover, that the goal of universal incorporation will inevitably succeed. Evil will eventually be ‘cast out’ like an antigen is removed from the body. (VII, 405/67)

### 3. Conclusion

The corporatism of the *Freedom Essay* deeply marks how Schelling conceives of the ‘relative independence’ of the world and human beings in relation to God. The will of the Ground is ultimately nothing but the divine Intellect in becoming. The self-will of creatures is always already organized by the universal will. Finally, the freedom of human beings is, in effect, merely the freedom to fulfil one’s organic function in the whole.

The incorporation (*hineinnehmen*) of human freedom in divine life serves as Werner Marx’s interpretation of the *Freedom Essay*’s conclusion. The finite freedom of human beings becomes, in his view, an ‘active player in the game of the realization of divine love’.<sup>30</sup> Yet we see that in truth, the game is rigged. The outcome is already decided. As players, we have the freedom to make a ‘wrong move’, but then we lose and are out of the game – or we each time play the right move. But what kind of game would that be? Are we still to call that play? It seems rather like the play to which Schelling compares history in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). In the play that we call history, we are all ‘co-composers of the whole’, though we are governed by ‘one Spirit, who composes in all’. (III, 602) We seem to play our role ‘quite freely and as we wish’, but ‘if the absolute synthesis were ever fully developed, we would see that everything that in the course of history has happened through freedom, as a whole followed laws, and that all actions, although they seemed to be free, were nevertheless necessary precisely to bring about this whole’. (III, 601–2) The main element that distinguishes the *Freedom Essay* from Schelling’s earlier deterministic views is that we seem to be free to step out of the play, by virtue of our capacity to defy the dictates of our role. Defiance, however, would only result in our removal from the stage.

In the *Freedom Essay*, the person appears as a liminal figure. Persons remain persons only so long as they remain undecided, suspended between good and evil, standing at the threshold of transgression or obedience. For either choice would lead to personal oblivion. To assert oneself and thus to transgress is to be consumed by fire; to submit is to be assimilated by the

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<sup>30</sup> Werner Marx, ‘Die Aufgabe der Freiheitsschrift Schellings’, *Schelling: Geschichte, System, Freiheit*, Freiburg/München: Alben, 1977, 143.

body of the whole. That which, for Schelling, characterizes the uniqueness of the human person – radical freedom, the capacity for good and evil – is only true so long as it remains a potential that is not actualized. In a deeply paradoxical way, to exercise one's freedom is to lose it. Yet the option to remain at this liminal point, to remain person, is not allowed. 'Man stands on the threshold [...] but he cannot remain undecided.' God's progressive self-revelation requires that 'in creation nothing ambiguous remains'. (VII, 374/41; cf. VII, 404/66–67) Every person is hence forced out of this undecidedness by a temptation to evil. (VII, 374/41) In the corporatist logic of the *Freedom Essay*, personhood is radically subverted to the point where personal existence is only virtually possible, but never actually. To exercise one's freedom is to forfeit personhood. Yet to preserve it by remaining undecided is not possible, because the process of total incorporation presses onwards. To be an organ or not to be at all, that is in the final instance the choice the *Freedom Essay* leaves us.<sup>31</sup> ▲

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## SUMMARY

This paper argues that a corporatist framework underlies Schelling's metaphysical account in the *Freedom Essay* (1809). Through an analysis of Schelling's pervasive use of bodily imagery – organs, disease, fever – I examine how this framework shapes his conception of individuality, freedom, and evil. The standard interpretation sees the *Freedom Essay* as marking Schelling's break with systematic idealism through its emphasis on contingency, worldly autonomy, and radical human freedom. Arguing against this reading, I contend that the corporatist framework points in a different direction. The world appears in Schelling's account as a corporate whole, where all individuals serve their instrumental role as organs. The paper first examines Schelling's concept of the Ground and nature, showing how what appears as contingent, blind striving is actually teleologically organized in service of a rational order. Subsequently analysing human freedom, Schelling's portrayal of evil as disease reveals how the corporatist logic eliminates the possibility of genuine autonomy from the divine order. It makes evil's actualization impossible by design and guarantees the final incorporation of all beings into a unified body. Through the guiding metaphor of the bodily organ, Schelling presents a vision of human personhood that sees its fulfilment in personal self-effacement. The paper argues that his corporatist logic brings the person into an impossible position: it must either efface itself willingly or be forcibly eliminated as a sick organ.