

The Beginning of All Reality

Schelling on Contraction and Creation

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Regardless of the wide-ranging themes of Friedrich Schelling's (1775–1854) work, a common thread runs through all his thinking: a profound longing for life, one that resists mechanistic interpretations and embraces risk, struggle, and creation. In his *Freedom Essay* (1809), Schelling declares that 'where there is no struggle, there is no life.'¹ Creation cannot unfold without tension. Light cannot exist without darkness. Only through the finite can the infinite reveal.

A key concept in Schelling's quest for life is the concept of contraction (*Contraction*).² The concept has been interpreted in terms of *zimzum*, an idea rooted in Lurianic Kabbalah, grounded in the Jewish mysticism of Isaac Luria (1534–1572).³ *Zimzum* describes a divine contraction or withdrawal preceding creation, through which the divine makes space for a world other than itself to emerge. During the 20th century, the concept became a resource for engaging with the experience of God-forsakenness, suffering, and theodicy. Thus, for example, the German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1926–2024) linked *zimzum* to *kenosis* – God's self-emptying on the cross, as depicted in the Christ hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love & Johannes Schmidt, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006, 63. Hereafter cited as *Freedom Essay*.

² In Thomas Pfau's English translation of the *Stuttgart Seminars*, which I cite below, the term '*Contraction*' is rendered as 'concentration.' I use 'contraction' to align with the terminology more commonly employed in the secondary literature on Schelling's philosophy.

³ Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: God and the Origin of the World*, trans. Corey Twitchell, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023, 226.

Hence, he linked the act of creation to God's self-giving love rather than to divine power.⁴ Similarly, the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) turned to *zimzum* in his reflections on the crisis of divine omnipotence, further underlining the divine self-divestment and renunciation of power before creation.⁵

While both Moltmann and Jonas invoked *zimzum* to illustrate a divine restriction of power (although Jonas did so in a more radical way than Moltmann), Schelling, in contrast, sustains divine power through it. Thereby, he shows affinities with a Lutheran understanding of *theologia crucis*, where God reveals his power through opposites – in humiliation and weakness – underlining the experiential rather than the logical dimension of divine revelation. While the theological roots in the Lutheran theology of the cross are evident, Schelling still challenges the traditional conception of God by emphasizing God as life in constant becoming.⁶ God is the life that evolves in nature and human freedom – appearing in the tension between the ground of existence and existence itself, between contraction and expansion.⁷ By understanding God's becoming as a process within creation, a sharp distinction between ontology and self-revelation is no longer maintained. For Schelling, both being and revelation depend on the dynamic of opposition and struggle. Without opposition, neither God's existence nor his revelation in creation would be possible.⁸

4 Moltmann states: 'there was already a cross in the heart of God before the world was created and before Christ was crucified on Golgotha.' Jürgen Moltmann, 'God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World', *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis, Grand Rapids*, ed. John Polkinghorne, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001, 137–151, esp. 147.

5 Ian Alexander Moore interprets Jonas' understanding of *zimzum* in kenotic terms, arguing that: 'unlike in the Kabbalah, Jonas adds that God's divestment of self (which sounds more like Christian *kenōsis* or self-emptying) must be total.' Ian Alexander Moore, 'The Divine Stakes of Human Freedom: Jonas in Dialogue with Schelling', *Kabiri* 4 (2024), 113–129, 121.

6 Christoph Schulte writes: 'Both Oetinger and Schelling, who knew that the assumption of a self-movement of God in *zimzum*, like any assumption of a change of God, represented a break with the Aristotelian conception of God as an eternal, unchanging, and absolute unmoved mover.' Schulte, *Zimzum*, 114.

7 Schelling writes 'Either we conceive of the primordial Being as something complete and immutably present, which is the ordinary concept of God [maintained] by the so-called rational religion and by abstract systems, generally speaking. The more we elaborate this concept of God, however, the less life God appears to have for us, and the less it is possible to conceive of Him as an actual, personal, and properly living being, in the sense in which we consider ourselves living beings.' F. W. J. Schelling, 'Stuttgart Seminars (1810)', *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, ed. Thomas Pfau, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, 195–243, esp. 206.

8 It is crucial to remember that Schelling is doing philosophy and not Christian theology. However, this does not mean that his thought is devoid of theological influences or lacks relevance for theology. On the contrary, Schelling's thinking is deeply shaped by the biblical tradition. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, his philosophy has had a significant

In this article, I explore Schelling's understanding of divine contraction, or zimzum, in relation to the idea of life as struggle. I begin by introducing the notion of life as struggle in Schelling's thinking, situating it within his engagement with speculative pietism influenced by Kabbalah. I then turn to the relation between zimzum and reality, highlighting how zimzum can be seen as a movement either toward or away from a point. Building on this, I conclude by reflecting on the connection between zimzum and kenosis, suggesting that they should be understood as part of the same movement in Schelling's thinking, through his understanding of life as struggle.

Life as Struggle

Schelling's *Freedom Essay* is often considered the starting point for Schelling's turn toward existence – beginning in the experience of human freedom, understood in terms of standing at the threshold of conflicting forces.⁹ The work can be viewed either as a break or a turning point within Schelling's philosophical trajectory. Regardless of the perspective, it undoubtedly marks a pivotal moment in his thought, laying the foundation for his later thinking where he seeks reality beyond or prior to the conceptual – both as a critique against the idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and the immanentism of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677).

The question that occupies Schelling in his late thinking is one that has been posed many times before, most famously by Leibniz: 'Why is there anything at all? Why is there not nothing?'¹⁰ The question is explicitly formulated in Schelling's *Berlin Lectures* (1842). However, the question is deeply intertwined with the shift in Schelling's thinking around 1809, which is grounded in his recognition that idealist philosophy cannot provide a logical answer to the ultimate why-question. The beginning of existence is not a rational move, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) would claim; Rather, it 'is an act of will that prefers the unknown and unknowable over the merely conceptual'.¹¹

Schelling's critique of the mechanistic or merely conceptual understanding of life and nature is rooted in several intellectual influences of his time.

impact on a wide range of theologians, from Sergei Bulgakov and Johann Sebastian Drey to Paul Tillich and Walter Kasper.

9 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 41. The relation between the personalization of the divine and human freedom is central to the understanding of the risk taken in creation. God can not reveal in something that is not like him in terms of freedom – hence his revelation, as well as his self-realization is dependent on human freedom.

10 F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, 94.

11 Sean McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the late Schelling: The Turn to the Positive*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021, 142.

However, I will focus on speculative pietism, especially the thinking of the Christian kabbalist Friedrich Cristoph Oetinger (1702–1782), which played a significant role during Schelling’s formative years.

During the period in which Schelling wrote the *Freedom Essay*, his thought increasingly incorporated esotericism and mysticism, influenced by thinkers such as Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and Jacob Boehme (1575–1624). This led to a rich synthesis of idealistic thinking, esotericism, Jewish mysticism and Christian metaphysics. However, already as a young boy, Schelling had been exposed to the works of Oetinger, who was a central figure of Württemberg Pietism, the religious milieu in which Schelling’s father served as a pastor.¹² This early exposure seems to have made a lasting impression on Schelling, which can be seen in his understanding of life and creation, which mirrors Oetinger’s emphasis on life as a dynamic, evolving force rather than a static, mechanistic one.¹³ The Schelling-scholar Sean McGrath describes Oetinger’s concept of life:

Oetinger’s speculative pietism is a peculiar blend of modern philosophy, Kabbalah, alchemy, and Christian theology. The eclectic blend of sources is held together by Oetinger’s one great thought, the notion of *life*. In Oetinger’s view, life is the essence of the Biblical Revelation. The common enemy of theology and philosophy is mechanism, which elevates the lifeless causal interaction of discrete particles – ostensibly a useful if not necessary abstraction for modern physics – into a universal ontological paradigm. Modern natural scientific discoveries, Oetinger argues, need to be interpreted in a bio-theological context that understands the divine, not as a first cause or highest being, but as a self-developing life. [...] Life is struggle, a dialectic of conflict and resolution, and only possible through the antagonism and resolution of polarities.¹⁴

¹² Sean McGrath, ‘Retrieving the Schellingian Tradition: Friedrich Christoph Oetinger’s Speculative Pietism’, *Kabiri* 1 (2018), 175–192, esp. 175–176.

¹³ The connection between Schelling and kabbalah was first mentioned by Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) in a letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg (1884–1969) in 1917 and further highlighted by Ernst Benz (1907–1978) amongst others. However, it is important to remember that Schelling never read Jewish Kabbalistic texts himself; he only encountered their influence through Christian thinkers influenced by Kabbalah. Hence, when Schelling encountered Kabbalistic teachings, they had already been mixed with Christian thought. All he knew about Kabbalah was second-hand, through Christian thinkers, most notably Oetinger, whose philosophy blended influences from alchemy, Christian theology, modern philosophy, and Kabbalah. Schulte, *Zimzum*, 223–224.

¹⁴ McGrath, ‘Retrieving the Schellingian Tradition’, 177.

In this description, God is understood as life rather than as an unchanging, unmoved mover. Oetinger's critique of mechanistic science follows from this view and reinforces the idea of life as struggle. This idea is at the core of Schelling's conception both of life and (perhaps even more striking) of the divine.

The idea of struggle as a presupposition for life leads Schelling in a direction where he introduces an idea of a non-divine aspect of the divine. Without a ground for its existence, neither God nor the world could appear. Since nothing can exist outside of God, the ground for God's existence must lie within God. However, this ground is not God himself – it is 'the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself.'¹⁵ This yearning is will, though not a 'conscious but a divining will [*ahnender Wille*].'¹⁶ The 'divining will' is to be understood as an intuitive, pre-conscious will that anticipates understanding.¹⁷ Schelling argues for the necessity of the dark principle, or the ground in God, in terms of opposition. For something to become manifest, it must have an opposite. Schelling writes: '[e]verything, if it is to become manifest, requires something that *it itself* is not *sensu stricto*'.¹⁸ What distinguishes creation, and more specifically what distinguishes human beings from God, is dependency. For God, the ground of his existence – that which is not God – is found within God, because God is an actual Being: 'free of anything before or outside itself'.¹⁹ However, for God to become manifest, God is dependent on this ground through which God can become. Thus, 'alongside the eternal Being there prevails in him an eternal becoming'.²⁰ The becoming of God in that which is not God connects the concept of self-revelation to God's very ontology. Self-revelation, or manifestation, is central to God's existence; without revelation, God would lack both life and existence. This understanding is rooted in the experience of life as struggle.

In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling describes the ultimate origin as non-ground or *Ungrund* – a being that existed 'before the ground and before that which exists (as separate) but not yet as *love*'.²¹ The *Ungrund* should not be confused with Absolute identity but understood in terms of indifference. Schelling argues that a separation occurs, through which the individuated can emerge. He contends that the emergence of consciousness

15 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 28.

16 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 29.

17 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 29.

18 Schelling, 'Stuttgart Seminars', 208.

19 Schelling, 'Stuttgart Seminars', 206.

20 Schelling, 'Stuttgart Seminars', 206.

21 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 68.

from the indifference of the Absolute arises from an original separation in being. Through this separation, the Absolute differentiates itself from that which it is not itself, thereby creating the ground for existence. In his later philosophy, Schelling describes this as a tear in being – existence rests on a pre-conscious decision: a decision (*Entscheidung*) leading to a separation (*Scheidung*) that makes existence possible. Thus, existence always carries a dimension of separation or differentiation. The original movement or separation is developed in Schelling’s *Stuttgart Seminars*, written the year after the publication of the *Freedom Essay*, where it is related to the primordial force of contraction.²²

Contraction Away from or to the Point

In the Swabian theological landscape, the concept of contraction, or *zimzum*, became central through the works of Oetinger, who writes: ‘Neither a manifestation nor a creation can take place without attraction, what the Hebrews call *zimzum*.’²³ For life to emerge, a space must exist where the spontaneous and unforeseen can happen, a space where God can reveal Himself. The idea formulated by Oetinger is echoed in the *Stuttgart Seminars*, where Schelling asserts that: ‘Concentration [*Contraktion*] [...] marks the beginning of all reality.’²⁴ Schelling argues that the beginning of creation is God’s descent or lowering. However, the contraction is a manifestation of divine strength, not weakness. Quoting Goethe, Schelling proclaims that: ‘Whoever will greatness must concentrate himself; Only in self-restriction is the artist revealed.’²⁵ Before the differentiation, or self-restriction of God, nothing can exist – not even God himself. Without contraction, God can not reveal as the Lord of Being.

Agata Bielek-Robson highlights two distinct interpretations of the Lurianic *zimzum*: either it can be understood as ‘God’s withdrawal “away

22 The *Stuttgart Seminars* were held the year after the publication of the *Freedom Essay*. The lectures have been described as the link between the *Freedom Essay* and *The Ages of the World*, and introduce Schelling’s work to a ‘largely nonexpert, though well-educated audience’. (Thomas Pfau, ‘A Note on the Text’, *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, ed. Thomas Pfau, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, 195–196, here 196.) In the lectures Schelling describes the transition from essence to existence in relation to the notion of opposite: ‘However, everything can become manifest only through its opposite, i.e., identity through nonidentity, difference, and distinguishable principles. *How* this might apply to God we shall leave open for the time being, and we merely wish to point out *that* a separation, a difference must be posited if we ever wish to make the transition from essence to existence.’ Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 200.

23 Christoph Oetinger, *Theologia ex Idea Vitae Deducta*, 1765, cited in Schulte, *Zimzum*, 140.

24 Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 203.

25 Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 203.

from the point”, as we see in the interpretation of Gershom Scholem, or as ‘God’s *contraction-in-anger* and “to the point”, which especially is found in Christian Kabbalah, influenced by the thought of Boehme.²⁶

Bielek-Robson contends that the understanding of withdrawal from a point can be framed in terms of divine *kenosis*.²⁷ She argues that this interpretation contrasts Schelling’s concept of contraction, as it rather enhances the moment when the divine contracts into ground. In contrast to the kenotic interpretation of *zimzum* as withdrawal, Bielek-Robson highlights a problematic risk of dualism in Schelling’s thinking.²⁸ While Hegel follows Scholem in portraying God’s withdrawal – in a way closely related to the notion of *kenosis* – Schelling understands the initial contraction as a movement toward the ground of being. Bielek-Robson reads Schelling’s view as leaning toward a Marcionite understanding of the divine, creating a dichotomy between a wrathful creator God and a loving, salvific God revealed in Christ, drawing primarily on the theogony of Schelling’s *The Ages of the World*. In this context, the contraction, associated with the creator God, stands in contrast to the expansive, loving nature of the God revealed in Christ. Bielek-Robson writes:

In the end, therefore, *tsimtsum* as ‘compression’ lends itself to two very different imaginary understandings: either hardening or diminution. Putting all kabbalistic technicalities aside, and their often contradictory interplay between concentration and retreat, what really matters is the ultimate *meaning* of this gesture: either ‘kenotic love’ or ‘wrathful jealousy’, which may also be regarded as the most fundamental difference between Hegel and Schelling.²⁹

Bielek-Robson highlights the potential risks inherent in Schelling’s conception of darkness and chaos in relation to creation, as well as the potential danger of a Marcionite motif within Schelling’s philosophy, especially related to the similarities between Schelling’s philosophy and the Lutheran

26 Agata Bielek-Robson & Daniel H. Weiss, ‘Preface’, *Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, eds. Agata Bielek-Robson & Daniel H. Weiss, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, VII–XXIII, esp. XIII.

27 Agata Bielek-Robson, ‘The God of Luria, Hegel and Schelling: The Divine Contraction and the Modern Metaphysics of Finitude’, *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God*, eds. David Lewin, Simon D. Podmore, & Duane Williams, New York: Routledge, 2017, 32–50, esp. 46.

28 Bielek-Robson’s analysis draws primarily on *The Ages of the World*. Focusing on the *Freedom Essay* and the *Stuttgart Seminars* may contribute to a difference in emphasis, not least with regard to trinitarian aspects.

29 Bielek-Robson, ‘The God of Luria, Hegel and Schelling’, 41.

idea of *Deus Absconditus*. By drawing attention to the dividing of God into one wrathful (contracting) aspect and another, loving (expanding) one, she points out a significant risk in Schelling's thinking. The risk arises when the contracting movement in God is associated with the God we encounter in the Old Testament, while the expanding movement is linked to the God revealed in Christ. Nonetheless, I suggest that Schelling's conception of the dark ground – and even the madness of God in creation – fundamentally differs from a Marcionite understanding of the divine, particularly due to its emphasis on life as struggle and dynamic unfolding.

Schelling seeks to avoid both a gnostic view that associates nature with evil, and an interpretation of creation as merely an emanation of the divine. For him, the created world is neither evil nor accidental, but rather a manifestation of life enfolding. Bielek-Robson argues that Schelling overlooks the distinction between 'God vomiting himself into nature', and 'God releasing nature [from himself]'.³⁰ However, as I argue, for Schelling, this is not merely a technicality but a fundamental aspect of his ontology. His understanding of contraction and expansion, as outlined in the *Stuttgart Seminars*, does not simply reflect a failure to recognize this distinction, but rather encapsulates the core of his understanding of the relationship between duality and unity – particularly in relation to his view of the dynamic struggle of life. There is a tragic dimension to all life that is central to Schelling's thought. However, this does not imply that creation is inherently bad or evil. Schelling sees the tragic dimension of creation as an essential component of the life unfolding – through which joy, beauty, and love can reveal.

The Primacy of Being over Thinking

Both the understanding of opposites as unified in *one act* and the tragic condition of existence are deeply intertwined with Schelling's philosophical view of the primacy of being over thinking. Schelling argues that existence precedes reason. This primacy serves as the necessary presupposition for reason to emerge. The longing that leads Schelling to the un-prethinkable ground of being is formulated as a critique against modern philosophy. In the introduction to the novel *Clara: Or on Nature's Connection to the Spirit World* (1810),³¹ Schelling states: 'Ever since the peaceful harmony broke up

³⁰ Bielek-Robson, 'The God of Luria, Hegel and Schelling', 41.

³¹ The novel is an unfinished fragment, never published during Schelling's lifetime, and its origin remains unclear. The introduction cited is likewise a posthumous addition. There are several reasons to believe that the novel was written around 1810, mainly based on similarities in the phrasing of letters and lectures from this period. A nuanced view is offered by Fiona Steinkamp, who sees the 1810 date as a compromise. She proposes that Schelling likely revisited the manuscript throughout his life, leading to a text that reflects different stages of his thinking. See further Fiona Steinkamp, 'General Introduction', pp. vii–xl in F. W. J.

in which the sciences lived not so long ago, philosophy can be characterized as an intense striving toward the spiritual that decidedly lacks a corresponding capacity to rise to it.³² Without a ground in a reality prior to reason, reason gets stuck in the conceptual.³³ The spiritual without the corporeal, or the ideal without the real does not ‘satisfy our hearts’;³⁴ it does not speak to our ‘ardent [heiße] longing’.³⁵

In *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (1833–1834), Schelling writes: ‘becoming cannot be there before something becomes, existence not before something exists’.³⁶ God desires to be, not an indifferent, static being, but a living, existing one. God (not yet as God) longs for the finite, through which he can come to know himself. Thus, the contraction serves only as the ground for life’s expansion, Schelling writes:

God posits himself (in part) as the first power, *as* something unconscious; however, He cannot concentrate His self into the Real without expanding as the Ideal, that is, [He] cannot posit Himself as the Real, as an *object*, without positing Himself *simultaneously* as a *subject* (that is, without freeing the Ideal); and both of these [moments] constitute *one Act* of Absolute simultaneity; with His actual concentration into the Real, God also posits His expansion as the Ideal.³⁷

God exists as a living God only in the tension between God as existence, and God as existing: ‘For the Real in God is *Being* or existence, whereas the Ideal [in God] is the *existing*, that wherein the Real and Ideal are one, that is, the actually existing, living God.’³⁸ Only in the transition through the finite can the infinite reveal – not as a thing, but through something. While the notion of contraction highlights a tragic dimension of all life – its narrow-

Schelling, *Clara: Or on Nature’s Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

³² Schelling, *Clara*, 3.

³³ In *Clara*, Schelling writes: ‘Corporeality is not imperfection, but when the body is suffused by the soul, then it is perfection in its plenitude. The merely spiritual life doesn’t satisfy our heart. There is something in us that desires a more essential reality; our thoughts come to rest only at the final unity; united life must follow separated life; [Only] in perfected externality does the soul find its final peace. And as the artist does not find peace in thinking about his work, but only when he has represented it physically, and as anyone fired by an ideal wants to find or reveal it in a physical-visible form, the goal of all longing is likewise the very perfection of corporeality as a reflection and mirror of perfect spirituality.’ Schelling, *Clara*, 80.

³⁴ Schelling, *Clara*, 80.

³⁵ Schelling, *Clara*, 13.

³⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, ‘Munich Lectures (ca 1833–1834)’, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 145.

³⁷ Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 207.

³⁸ Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 204.

ness and anguish – it should not be reduced to a moment of evil. Instead, it should be understood as a foundation for all existence – its eternal beginning.³⁹ Darkness will not disappear but will always remain a potential in the ground of all life. Yet in God, this darkness – like the sadness within Him – ‘serves only the eternal joy of overcoming’⁴⁰ – thus manifesting divine power. The initial separation in being is not an eternal exclusion; rather, it marks the beginning of creation, through which that which is in darkness is raised into actuality and light. Schelling writes: ‘Yet in seeking to exclude it from Himself, on the one hand, He also strives to integrate it with Himself, on the other hand; He seeks to raise it to form, to transfigure it – although subordinate – into His superior essence and to evoke consciousness *from* this unconscious matter.’⁴¹

God separates that which is not Himself from Himself, not to erase it, but so that the non-being of being may be transformed. In this transformation, human freedom plays a pivotal role. Human freedom is the vehicle for divine revelation, through which the unfolding of divine life is made manifest. What drives the movement toward separation is not the expulsion of non-being, but the longing for reality – a desire rooted in love not yet realized as love. This love, which underpins both contraction and expansion, prevents the resistance of letting go of that which is hidden or sealed in the dark ground of the eternal beginning.⁴²

39 This is described by McGrath, who writes: ‘The dark ground of spirit, that in God which is not God, is let loose and something comes into being, which in a strict sense ought not to be (something that is logically unnecessary): a being outside of God. This renders nature formally equivalent to evil, but formal equivalence is not sameness. It is by its fruit that the moral significance of a contingent being is known: the ground is let loose by God, not in order to produce evil, but for the sake of love. Nature is intended by God to become a free partner to God, another to God, which can be united with God in love, that is, which can be contingently, freely and knowingly united with its divine origin. This union of love, in which God becomes known, can only occur if God runs the risk of evil.’ McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the late Schelling*, 205.

40 Schelling, *Freedom Essay*, 62.

41 Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 208.

42 In his later lectures on revelation, Schelling describes this through the metaphor of art: ‘The mystery of true art is to be *simultaneously* mad and level-headed [*wahnsinnig und besonnen*], not in distinctive moments, but rather *uno eodemque actu* [altogether in a single act.] This is what distinguishes the Apollonian inspiration from the Dionysian. The highest task of art, which gleams before us like a miracle, is to present in the most conditioned and finite form an infinite content, which, so to speak, contests all form. God is in no way the mere antithesis of finitude; God is in no way that which can only be pleased in the infinite, but rather God appears precisely as the most artificial of beings [*Wesen*], seeking finitude and not resting until He has brought everything into the most finite form.’ F. W. J. Schelling, *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1992, 422. Translation retrieved from Jason M. Wirth, ‘Schelling and Luther’, *Theological Research. A Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2017), 93–105, esp. 96.

Schelling's understanding of the primacy of being over thinking is fundamental to his dynamic ontology, where the relation between contraction and expansion cannot be captured in traditional terms of dialectics. The relation between contraction and expansion emerges throughout Schelling's work in several images – for instance, in terms of gravity and light, rhythm and melody. In *Clara*, the pulsating life is illustrated through the image of the river.

Creation and Incarnation

Clara is written as a dialogue between Clara, a doctor and a priest. At the beginning of the novel, we follow the priest and the doctor to a cloister, where they meet a 'young, well-educated clergyman',⁴³ a character inspired by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who shows them the library and the rarities of his care. However, the doctor says:

... we were more drawn to the magnificent view from the windows, which looked out onto the distant plain and up to the hill where we had been earlier, than to these dead treasures. The plain was covered with towns and villages and the powerful river wound through it, becoming visible in places as if it were only a thin, silver ribbon [*Band*].⁴⁴

The longing for life, stands in contrast to concepts without reality, depicted as dead treasures. Central in the landscape is the river. The image of the river reappears in *Clara*, as a picture of real life. At the end of the novel, at the beginning of spring Clara and her friends are in the chapel at the top of a hill. Here, the doctor says: 'The river is more a picture of real life [*des wirklichen Lebens*]: it draws our imagination along with it into unrestricted bounds, as into a distant future.'⁴⁵

The river is described as a ribbon, or as a tie [*Band*]. This is not purely figurative. The tie relates to Schelling's ontology and his understanding of duality. The notion of the tie is central to Schelling's philosophy and relates to his understanding of the copula – which in German is translated to *Band*, a key concept in his *Freedom Essay*, as well as in *The Ages of the World*. The copula is that which binds together through separation – it is the living principle between opposites, or as depicted in *Clara* it is the 'living word' of all things.⁴⁶ In understanding the relationship between the infinite and finite, one could say, from Schelling's perspective, that the infinite is the

43 Schelling, *Clara*, 10.

44 Schelling, *Clara*, 10.

45 Schelling, *Clara*, 67.

46 Schelling, *Clara*, 73.

finite – in parallel to Schelling’s understanding that freedom is necessity. However, this should not be understood through logical dialectic, nor as an immanent pantheism, but through the understanding of becoming. This relates to the copula – the linking, operating, and ordering verb ‘is’ in the phrase: the infinite is the finite. The infinite, the essence of life, exists only in its opposite, through which it searches the ultimate form. The understanding of the river as a ribbon is a picture not only of life unfolding but of creation itself. The river winds through the landscape, embodying the act of creation – a movement never complete. It connects everything with a power that both binds and liberates.

I began this article by highlighting the relation between *zimzum* and *kenosis*, tracing a shift from an understanding of *kenosis* as solely connected to the incarnation in Christ to one related to the act of creation. As shown, Schelling’s contraction can be read in contrast to a kenotic understanding. When, however, the relation between contraction and expansion is understood as the pulsating life of existence, a different interpretive possibility comes into view. The contraction should not be understood as creation itself, but rather as a prerequisite for creation, which emerges through the simultaneous expansion of the intellect or Logos.

Quoting Hartmut Rosenau, Sean McGrath underscores that, in the *Stuttgart Seminars*, Schelling’s question is no longer ‘How do we raise the finite to the infinite?’ but rather ‘How does the infinite become finite?’⁴⁷ The answer to this question is located in the concept of contraction, or *Entäusserung*, which is the German term for *kenosis*. In one version of the *Stuttgart Seminars*, Schelling makes a correction that emphasizes the relation between the descent of God and the notion of self-emptying (*Entäusserung*).⁴⁸ The ‘beginning of creation’ he argues, ‘is an effect of the divine self-emptying [*eine Wirkung der göttlichen Entäusserung*], the becoming man [*Menschwerdung*], the first incarnation of God’.⁴⁹ McGrath observes that: ‘The end result of this incarnation could not simply be a return to the eternal: what begins as unconscious ends as conscious; what begins as impersonal (the absolute) ends as personal (the Christ)’.⁵⁰

47 Sean McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious*, Hove: Routledge, 2012, 158.

48 It should be noted that although Schelling explicitly employs the concept of *Entäusserung* in the *Stuttgart Seminars* to describe the divine contraction as a form of self-emptying, the kenotic motif is not yet systematically developed at this stage. Rather, it functions as a seed of the kenotic motif, which will later be deepened and conceptually elaborated in Schelling’s late philosophy of revelation.

49 Schelling cited in McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, 158. See also F. W. J. Schelling, *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2016, 84.

50 McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, 158.

From a theological perspective, Schelling can be read as standing within a tradition in which creation and incarnation are intertwined. Schelling writes:

Concentration, then, marks the beginning of all reality. For this reason, it is the concentrating rather than the expanding nature that possesses a primordial and grounding force. Thus the beginning of creation amounts indeed to a *descent* [*Herablassung*] of God; He properly descends into the Real, contracts Himself entirely into the Real. Yet such an act does not imply anything unworthy of God but, in fact, it is this descent that marks the greatest act for God and, indeed, for Christianity as well. By contrast, a metaphorically elevated [*hinaufgeschraubter*] God will benefit neither our minds nor our hearts.⁵¹

The descent does not mark a shift from absolute power to lesser power; rather, it unfolds in the opposite direction – only through descent can the fully divine power manifest.

Creation is an incarnation – without finitude, the infinite cannot exist as infinite. While there is a distinction between the divine presence in nature and the revelation of the Logos in Christ, Schelling argues that the Son is the essence of nature – hidden in creation, revealed in Christ.⁵² Revelation is not finished but takes place as a divine *kenosis* in nature and history – as the living bond that flows through everything, not staying in anything. Both creation and incarnation emerge from the movement between contraction and expansion, the life of the in-between. The divine is ‘slumbering’ in creation, divining and shaping it, yet becoming through it, manifesting divine sovereignty through the emergence of transformative pulsating life. Like a river, it draws creation toward a future unknown. ▲

⁵¹ Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 203–204.

⁵² ‘However, if we look at the bond between the two, this [bond] is not merely divine but it is God Himself; yet it is not God in an unconditional sense but rather the God who has been created in nonbeing and whose creator we find precisely in the unconditional or being God. The bond that inheres in $A = B$ (if we take it for nature in its entirety) is thus indeed God, yet it is God as a product of Himself or God as the Son, of whom, because He is the essence of nature, the Scripture rightly claims that everything is made through Him and nothing without Him.’ Schelling, ‘Stuttgart Seminars’, 213.

SUMMARY

This article examines Friedrich Schelling's understanding of the beginning of reality through the concept of contraction and its relation to his view of life as struggle. Drawing on his rejection of mechanistic accounts of life, the article shows how Schelling envisions all life – divine as well as finite – as arising through tension, polarity, and dynamic becoming. God is not a static principle but life unfolding, shaped by the interplay between darkness and light, ground and existence. The analysis highlights Schelling's indebtedness to speculative pietism, particularly Oetinger's understanding of life as structured through opposing forces. Within this theological-philosophical context, contraction appears as the primordial movement that grounds the possibility of both creation and revelation; without it, neither God nor the world could manifest. Contraction and expansion emerge as inseparable aspects of a single living rhythm that underlies all being. Building on this, the article argues that Schelling's account of the beginning already carries an incarnational structure. Creation becomes the condition for divine self-revelation, since the infinite becomes actual only through the finite. In this way, the article shows how Schelling's conception of creation and incarnation belong to the same movement through which divine life becomes manifest in the finite.