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The Critique of all Previous Rational Philosophy[4]

A. The History of the Emancipation of Reason

Schelling's search is for that Philosophy (or Philosophical Religion, as defined above) which can truly understand Mythology as something characteristically religious, and render intelligible to us that "necessary theogonic process" which has given rise to the polytheistic religions.

He discerns the first faint glimmerings of such an understanding in Greek philosophy. (For Schelling, "the mythological consciousness reached its end and final crisis in the Greek consciousness")(V:437). In Plato, for example, there seem to be certain "anticipations of Christianity." But in Aristotle, unfortunately, Mythology receives no serious attention.[5] To be sure, Aristotle confesses that even philosophers love myths because of the wonders they contain, but he ignores mythology because he could not recognize therein a source of empirical knowledge. The plain fact is, says Schelling, that the philosophy of antiquity failed to satisfy Paganism's demand for self-understanding; hence the "tragic aspect" which runs through the whole of ancient polytheism (V:438).

Stoics and Epicureans gave merely general explanations of Mythology (allegorical and euhemeristic, respectively; see The First Book, Chapter 1, above)(V:438). With the Neo-Platonists, however, there is an approach to a Philosophical Religion. True, they resorted to

allegorical explanations, and in so doing they interpreted Mythology as thorough-going rationalists. But it is also true that their efforts to oppose Christianity led them to proclaim the traditional theodicy as truth, in two ways. On the one hand, they tried to make their philosophy look like a mythology (as when Plotinus called his highest principles by the name of Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus). On the other hand, they interpreted Mythology as a kind of unconscious, natural philosophy (to this extent showing more insight than Aristotle). But "to this extent Mythology ceased to be religion for them," concludes Schelling, and after Porphyry their philosophy lapsed into theurgy and magic. It may have been this competition with Christianity, plus the ecstatic element in Mythology itself, which led them to the view that Mythology can be understood only in an ecstatic philosophy, one which transcends reason. This point will be taken up later. It is enough here to note that the Neo-Platonists do not belong to pure antiquity but to the age of transition. They have already "fallen under the influence of the spirit of Christianity, however much they try to exclude it." Their case does not count against the thesis that it is Christianity alone which historically mediates free or philosophical religion.

This is Schelling's first conclusion: that Philosophical Religion did not exist in antiquity and was not even possible then. It became possible only when Christianity freed men from the blind, external power of Paganism. But, ironically, this possibility could not be realized for many centuries! The first problem was that the Church itself, in order to overcome Paganism, became for a time a blind, external power - for Paganism was not vanquished "by rational discourse inspired by human wisdom" (V:441). Then later, the victory won, Christianity relaxed its attitude toward Paganism only to find itself *penetrated* by it.

> Previously (Christianity) had been a *principle* of involuntary knowledge. Now it became an *object* of voluntary knowledge by placing itself, *to this extent*, on the same level as Paganism. Signs of this alignment were the suddenly awakened enthusiasm, indeed, the love for classical antiquity in which Christian culture no longer saw anything opposed to itself; the great revolution in the arts; the abandonment of traditional ecclesiastical models in favor of a human, natural representation of Christian subjects which received, to this extent, a pagan or profane appearance; the attitude of the great writers

> of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who saw practically no difference between Paganism and Christianity, since to a certain extent they placed themselves above both - as when cardinals of the Holy Church, speaking in the name of the Pope, did not hesitate to call the latter 'representative *of the immortal gods on earth*', and to refer to the Holy Virgin as a *goddess* (a well-known expression of Cardinal Bembi. See *Lipsii Epist.* 37, Centur II). Such levity merely promoted the still deeper penetration of Paganism into the Church. The formation of a powerful, highly privileged priesthood, continuous sacrifices, expiations, mortifications, exorcisms, divine service based on external and dead forms, the cult of angels, martyrs, and saints - such were the pagan elements against which the founders of the Reformation arose (V:441f).

To this "paganized Christianity" of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Reformers opposed a rediscovered primitive Christianity. But still Reason was not "free", for no sooner had the reformation cast off the external authority of the Church than it succumbed to the external authority of the written Word.

The next step was inevitable. The written documents of Revelation were subjected to a critique which first attacked "the truth of what was given in Revelation" and ended by "calling into question the very possibility of a Revelation" (V:442). Man sought a completely free, critical knowledge, imagining that somehow he would be content with this contentless (i.e., purely abstract) freedom. But there was a final disillusionment, for after freeing itself from the authorities represented by Church, Scripture and Revelation, Reason now found itself to be in bondage to *its own presuppositions*. "Consciousness simply became subject to another necessity, another law and other presuppositions, to wit, those of *its own cognitive power* (its uncomprehended power of mental comprehension), the extent of which was unknown even to itself" (V:442).

To indicate what is meant by "reason in bondage to its own presuppositions", Schelling takes us back to the *Natural* or *Rational Theology* of Scholastic Metaphysics. Here was a rational science which the all-powerful Church not only tolerated but encouraged, "so long as it did not claim to possess the content of revealed religion as something it could comprehend," i.e., so long as it did not claim to be a Philosophical Religion.[6] Scholasticism recognized or presupposed three distinct sources of natural knowledge, all independent of

Revelation. These three "authorities" were "Universal experience" (the testimony of the senses), "necessary general principles" (κοιναι εννοιαι, e.g., the Law of Causality) and "deductive reason" (the power of logical demonstration) (V:443f).[7]

In the service of religion, it was believed that this rationalistic metaphysic could demonstrate the immateriality of the soul and the *existence* of God. (God's *nature* was given by Revelation). The argument for God's existence moved from this "world of contingent existences" to "a final cause endowed with intelligence and freewill."

Commenting on this argument, Schelling grants that such a final cause "cannot exist fortuitously or have a cause of its existence outside *itself*, whence it follows that *if it exists at all*, it exists necessarily. But *that* it exists, by no means follows from *this* argument; instead, the argument always presupposes it (V:444). The problem, says Schelling, is that Reason is here thinking of God as if he were an object of possible experience whose "existence" could be proved just as we might try to prove the existence of any other particular object not yet given in experience, e.g., a planet which has not yet been seen. But God cannot be a particular existent alongside other existents, as we shall see. As for the alternative argument developed by Anselm - the ostensibly apodictic "ontological argument" which derived God's existence (*that* He is) from His essence (*what* He is) - Schelling makes this comment:

> Even the great reputation of such a celebrated teacher of the Church as Anselm could not secure for (this argument) the right of entry into the dominant metaphysics. The great Scholastics, like Thomas Aquinas, did not accept it and it remained among those demonstrations in which experience is an element, demonstrations regarded by the successors of the great Scholastics (e.g., Gabriel Biel and even Occam) as yielding only probability, not apodictic certainty (V:444f).[8]

Now the word "Reason" had two uses in Scholasticism. On the one hand, as opposed to "Revelation" it was made to signify "the whole of the natural knowledge of man, including knowledge furnished by experience." Hence the syllogistic science of medieval metaphysics could be called "rational" or "natural" knowledge. On the other hand, "Reason" referred to the mind's specific "power of deduction or demonstration." As such, it lacked autonomy in either metaphysics or theology.

> As a special source of knowledge, reason had a purely formal or instrumental significance even in metaphysics. Hence, merely as the power of deduction or demonstration, reason could hope for no greater significance in theology. Since theology rested on the authority of Revelation, reason could aspire to no other role in theology than that of *servant* (V:445).

The transition to the modern period, Schelling declares, may best be understood as a process in which reason is liberated from the three authorities or presuppositions of "natural knowledge." The testimony of the senses, the power of general principles and the force of syllogistic reasoning continue, of course, to exercise a natural power over us, but now they were no longer to be taken for granted. Their legitimacy as sources of knowledge came under attack. Bacon, for example, recognised only sense-experience. He found the syllogism useless in the investigation of principles and causes, and was unwilling to place confidence in the objective validity of universal truths. For him, only those generalizations were valid which were reached through induction adequately based on empirical evidence. But then came Descartes who threw doubt even on the trustworthiness of our sense experiences!

> Therewith the whole artificial fabric of metaphysics found itself in pieces. The break-up simply completed the rupture which the Reformation had made in the system of knowledge previously in force. The Reformation itself had been generated more by a profound religious and moral inspiration than by a scientific spirit, and had allowed the old metaphysics to stand intact. But for this very reason the Reformation remained incomplete ... To Descartes, one who remained independent of the Reformation itself, fell the task of giving the first impulse to the movement of total liberation which continues to our own time (V:446).

Now reason is free! or rather, it is emerging into freedom. Its age-long struggles - first against the blind authority of mythological religion, then against the external authority of Church and Revealed Word, and now against the uncomprehended assumptions of natural knowledge - all this is past.

But what is to be done with this freedom. Should Reason now

"remain idly in enjoyment of its purity, simplicity and natural knowledge"? For Schelling, clearly not! Reason's true work is about to begin. Reason must produce a *Science*, a science free of all presuppositions, one which begins right at the beginning. This will not be a particular science: "The product of *Reason itself* can only be *Science itself*, science in Plato's sense," i.e., *Sophia*. To find the *beginning*, the *first principle* of such Science, will be the first task of pure Reason.

The first thinker to seek such a "first principle" (in the modern period) was Descartes. His search may be described as the beginning of "the first stage after metaphysics," and it made possible a real advance toward the realization of *free* or *Philosophical* Religion. We must now consider Schelling's account of the work of Descartes and of his successors (V:449-451).[9]

B. Rational Philosophy from Descartes through Kant

Descartes sought an indubitable truth, a beginning which has its certainty in itself, a starting point or principle out of which rational science could be developed with certainty. He found it, as everyone knows, in his *Cogito, ergo sum*, and the way he followed was that of methodological doubt.

Schelling offers two criticisms of Descartes. The first bears upon Descartes' method. "All doubt presupposes precisely that which is doubted," Schelling maintains, whence it follows that doubt can never lead us to what is beyond all presupposition. Descartes might as logically have argued that "if I doubt of the existence of things outside myself, then *they are*." Furthermore, the *cogito* implies "only that I am in the act of thinking; it does not imply that I have an independent existence outside of thinking." It implies "not *sum* in an unqualified way, but *sum res cogitans*." Hence, concludes Schelling, "doubt at the beginning of philosophy says either too much or too little, depending on how one takes it." Descartes should have begun by setting aside everything that is *doubtful in itself* (not merely what is doubtful *for me*). This would mean rejecting or considering as non-existing "anything and everything that is not posited and established by *reason itself*," i.e., everything that simply *is* without having at the same time the *power to be* (V:450-452).

Schelling's second criticism focusses on Descartes' use of the "ontological" argument. In the end, that which is certain for Descartes is really *God*, "since in thinking God we think the absolutely perfect

essence, and he would not be this if he did not exist." Then the divine veracity is invoked by Descartes to guarantee that his clear and distinct ideas of external world, self and even eternal truths are not deceptions. It is clear, says Schelling, that Descartes considers the existence of God to be given in pure thought, "but he failed to derive it therefrom inasmuch as he slipped in a middle term" (viz. that "existence" is one of the perfections of the most perfect being). He is interested in this comprehensive concept of the absolutely perfect being only, it seems, to derive existence from it. He seems to forget that God "includes within himself all that there is of reality and perfection in other things," and he fails to show how our experiential world of limitations and negations could come forth from such a being (V:452-3).

Nevertheless, Descartes had the right idea in wanting to begin with the Being posited in pure thought, for, according to Schelling, "certainty" belongs to that which exists in pure thought, "thought which does not go out from itself but which relates itself to itself alone, according to the universal principle known as the principle of contradiction (V:452). But Descartes went wrong in attempting to *prove the existence* of this Being (as if he were just another particular entity, albeit the most perfect), and in doing so by resorting to a proof characterized by mediation. Clearly, "this is not the object of which Plato spoke when he said that *reason itself* touches upon it" (V:452f, 456). Descartes had failed to find the indubitable starting point, the principle, of rational science.

It was Malebranche who made possible the next great step forward, by declaring not that "God exists," but that "God is Being" (*das Seiende*).[10] Of course, adds Schelling, Malebranche was "unaware of the importance" of his statement, and his thought was confused. Occasionally he used "being" in the generic sense - God is "generality," "being in general," "universal being" - revealing the influence of the *genus generalissimum* and the *ens omnimodo indeterminatum* of the Scholastics. But he also says that God is *omne ens* or *omnia entia*, i.e., all that exists (*alles* Seiende), and not merely a particular being (*Wesen*). This is an important insight:

> If one holds that God is the Existent, one gives up the notion of God as a *mere* particular entity (*Einzelwesen*) with which the demonstrations of earlier metaphysics were content. God *cannot* be a mere individual existent, and the God who is not *the* Existent could not be God. There

> can be no science of a mere particular entity ... God is related to things only because he is the *general* essence (*allgemeine Wesen*). This does not mean, of course, that he is the Existent in an abstract, non-determined way, but in the most fully determinate sense. He is the Existent which lacks nothing of what belongs to Being (*Sein*), the perfect and complete Existent, *το παντελῶς ον*, as Plato called it (cf. Plato, De Rep. V, 477A) (V:455).

Clearly, then, the proposition "God is Being" (i.e., God is the Existent) is not an existential proposition. It is *not* equivalent to saying "God exists." It is a purely attributive proposition and refers to "the being posited in pure thought", "the being of pure reason", or "the being enclosed in the Idea." Hence it implies a distinction between God and the Existent, if not in reality at least in Idea. "They must be as distinct as subject and object." "Already in his being-the-Existent, God must be conceived as one who is able-to-be-for himself, the separated one" (a *χωριστον* in the Aristotelian sense) (V:455, 456).

This distinction does not exist in Descartes, says Schelling, but it does struggle to find expression in Malebranche. The latter speaks, for example, of "the divine substance taken absolutely", and the divine substance "as it relates itself to the creatures who participate in it" (a distinction borrowed, in Schelling's view, from St. Thomas) (V:456n). Translated into Schelling's language, this could mean "that things participate in the Existent but not in *that which is* the Existent", the latter being "absolutely imparticipable." But Malebranche's distinction is of no use to him in understanding the world. If "God is all being", wonders Malebranche, how can we speak of "the absolute simplicity of the divine essence"? He is forced to conclude that "no finite spirit can comprehend this," and that the proposition "God is all things" must mean "we see all things only in God," whence it would follow that they do not exist outside him (V:457).

In this historical retrospect, Schelling is making the point that when we think of God as "the Existent" (i.e., when we think of him as identical with his world) we can call him *a* Being alright, but *not* in the sense of one of the perfections which are united in God; rather, he is a Being which is its own perfection, for to be the Existent (*das-Seiende-sein*) is "to be the perfect, the complete, the finished." But pure rational science must move from God-as-the-Existent to God-as-He-is-in-Himself, *a Deo implicito ad Deum explicitum*, from the One who is wrapped up in the Existent to the One who has emerged out of the

Existent and of whom we can say that he is *that which* the Existent *is* (V:455f).

In other words, God is to be conceived in such a way that Being (the Existent) can be *predicated* of him. "In order to derive the Existent from him, in order for him to be a *terminus a quo* (so to speak), God must be something other than the Existent (V:461). But this point was missed by Descartes, vaguely glimpsed by Malebranche, and totally denied by Spinoza.

For Spinoza, God is the "universal, infinite substance," and nothing else. Hence Spinoza's retention of the word "God" was really superfluous, "for God *is* only inasmuch as he is infinite substance; he has no being distinct from his being-substance, for this is the meaning of the proposition that 'in God, essence and existence are one' " (V:457f). "Enclosed in eternal Being, God is related to the world and to things purely and simply as the *essential*, not the real, cause. And this purely logical consequence is merely asserted, not demonstrated." Thus Schelling sees Spinozism as a complete break in the purely rational development. It turned the great definition of God as "universal Being" into "an all-devouring dogma which swallowed up both science and religion" (V:458).[11]

With Spinoza, reason came to a road-block. The movement which issued from Descartes never got beyond its starting point and therefore failed to arrive at rational science. And Spinoza's proclamation of the immobility of the principle dictated "an absolute scientific quietism." But reason, by its very nature, could not resign itself to such self-renunciation. So, while philosophers in England and France turned from metaphysics to a subjectively oriented empiricism, philosophers in Germany returned once more to metaphysics (V:459f).[12]

The new metaphysics was broader and more eclectic. It took account of the contributions of English and French empiricism. The concepts of Substance and Cause, for example, could no longer function as simple presuppositions after their analyses by Locke and Hume respectively. The new metaphysics also took account of new elements introduced by Descartes (especially his use of the Ontological argument), by Leibniz (in his Theodicy) and by Spinoza. But as far as the search for a new beginning, an indubitable principle on which to build pure rational science, was concerned, Schelling concludes that after Descartes' efforts "there was everywhere stagnation rather than progress" - until the appearance of *Kant*.

> Descartes had but momentarily shaken the old metaphysics that had been constructed by means of the natural reason. Since God, for Descartes, guaranteed the real existence of the sensible world and the validity of general principles, metaphysics could, on the ground thus assured, begin its ancient business all over again, its standpoint remaining basically intact. The task of totally abandoning this standpoint, of leading reason out of the self-estrangement imposed on it by purely natural (i.e., non-free) knowledge, and of bringing it back to *itself* - this task was reserved for a Critique which penetrated to the heart of things and investigated, from the ground up, the whole system of natural knowledge and its sources (V:463f).

The importance of Kant, for Schelling's present purpose, lies in two directions. First, in his strictures against "reason" (*Vernunft*) as a knowledge-producing faculty, and his claim that "pure" reason produces Ideas which exercise an important regulative function.

> Look over Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and you will find at once the three authorities of the old metaphysics (arranged in the same ascending order that we adopted when discussing them in Lecture 11): Experience (*Sinnlichkeit* in Kant), Understanding and Reason. The last is, for Kant, no longer the mere formal capacity to construe syllogisms (*schliessen*), but a faculty which he calls 'productive', an idea-producing capacity. But just as Reason, in its role as power of deduction, had its premises partly in experience and partly in the understanding, so now, as faculty for the production of ideas, it presupposes both sensibility and understanding as its necessary conditions. Hence it is a long way from being *pure* reason (as Kant calls it) (V:464).

Secondly, Kant is to be praised for "the courage and candor with which he declared that God is to be desired as a *particular* object" and his claim that God "is not the pure Idea but the *Ideal* of Reason", by which he meant the notion of the sum total of all possible and actual existences.

> The most perfect being must contain at the same time the *stuff*, the *matter* of all possible and actual being (*Sein*) ... Descartes knew of no other way of formulating the concept of the most perfect being than by

> saying: *We all possess the idea* of a supremely intelligent, absolutely perfect being, and this notion necessarily entails that he exists. But the necessity of his existence which derives therefrom could not eliminate the original arbitrariness of this notion.
>
> Kant shows, on the contrary, that the idea in question derives from the nature of reason itself, and is indispensable for every determination of things based on the understanding. Reason advances spontaneously toward the concept of such a being (*Wesen*), whence follows, of course, not the existence of this being, but at least the conclusion that it is a necessary and natural product of reason (V:466).

Schelling shows how Kant arrives at the notion of God as the transcendental Ideal of pure Reason. Kant asks how the existence of any thing is possible. His answer is, first, "that its concept be in general possible, implying no logical contradiction." But, second, "the material possibility of a thing rests on its definiteness in every particular, i.e., that it affirm this definite and precise character with respect to all *possible* predicates, since of all these mutually opposed and contradictory predicates only one necessarily belongs to it" (V:466).

Now this idea of the sum total of all possible predicates, containing *a priori* the data for all particular possibilities, becomes the idea of the aggregate or sum total of all possible *perfections*, for Reason, seeking the unconditioned unity of all possible predicates, cannot find this in the aggregate of empirical, conditioned perfections. After elimination of all *derived* predicates, "the idea contains in itself only what is reality, pure perfection, pure and simple position. Hence it comprehends neither more nor less than *everything which belongs to being*" (V:467). Reason thus objectifies this Ideal of pure Reason by regarding it as the most perfect Being (*Ens perfectissimum*). This is then hypostatized as the most real Being (*Ens realissimum*), an individual Being, "in accordance with the definition of an individual as *res omnimodo determinata*" (V:467). And finally it is personified as the Supreme Intelligence, the God of theism, "since an actual unity of phenomena can be conceived only in the understanding" (V:468).

Now although it is natural for us to want to represent this Supreme Being as existing, the fact is that the process just outlined has nothing objective corresponding to it, and "leaves us in complete ignorance

about whether or not such a being, endowed with such exceptional qualities, really exists" (V:468), which Kant himself well knew.

> If a possibility is to *exist*, there must be something of which it can be affirmed, and this something cannot be, in its turn, a mere possibility, but must be by its nature a reality, and therefore a particular being. But Kant by no means assumed that the sum of all possibilities *exists*. The original intention of Reason he says, was purely and simply to be able to *represent* the necessary, general definition of things. To this end, however, the *concept* of all reality was sufficient. We were not entitled to demand that all this reality be given objectively, and that it be itself a thing (V:467).

Nevertheless, let us assume, with Kant, that such a being *does* exist. How is it related to the manifold of the sensible world? According to Kant, says Schelling, there is this affinity:

> Original being (*das Urwesen*) (clearly: the primal being as such), lies at the base of things, yet not, strictly speaking, as the sum total, i.e., not in the material sense of the word. The diversity of things must rather be considered as the perfect *consequence* of the original being in which consequence must be included the whole sensible world which cannot be an integral part of the idea of the supreme being. Nevertheless, if the stuff of all possible predicates is to be concentrated in the idea of a single thing, then the identity of the ground of the complete determination [the fact that the determinations they obey issue from a common source], will be proof of an affinity between all possibles and all reals (V:469).

This would mean that God is related to the world as Antecedent to Consequent. The *idea* of God is the idea of an individual, necessarily existing, all-perfect Being, who is not the aggregate of finite realities but their unconditioned condition and cause. "For Kant", concludes Schelling, "there is no real difference between the sum of all reality (the matter of limitation) and God. It is just that the former has been reduced for the sake of our representation, to a completely determined thing, an Individual."[13]

Now, the "sum total of all possibilities" is too broad a concept to serve as a fruitful starting point. We must impose limits on this indeterminate Kantian notion. Should we take actually existing things as the correlates of these possibilities, and declare their possibility to

be constituted by the different modes of being they express? Should we be content with saying: "the organic has one mode of being, the inorganic another, and within the sphere of the organic the plant has not the same mode of being as the animal?"

> But who does not recognize that these modes of being cannot possibly be original being? It must rather be conceded that these modes of being which experience affords, by passing through intermediate phases (with which we do not need to concern ourselves here), are finally derived from original differences, i.e., differences which are not arbitrary but which belong to the nature of being (*Seiende*) itself (V:470).

Here we leave the historical development. Schelling has arrived at the notion of God as all-Being, and possesses in pure, autonomous Reason his analytic tool. He can now begin the speculative development: an analysis of the noetic structure of Being, a discrimination of those "original differences which belong to the nature of the Existent itself."