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Schelling versus Hegel. From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics

By John Laughland

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This book deals with one of the most interesting as well as controversial junctures in the more recent history of ideas, Schelling's late philosophical development and his radical critique of Hegelian idealism, especially in his Berlin lectures between 1841 and 1845 on *The Philosophy of Revelation*. Written off by many as the belated revenge of a man who for decades had stood in the shadow of his sometime friend and roommate at the Tübingen Stift, hailed by others as the ultimate culmination of German Idealism, these texts, due not least to their notorious obscurity, have hitherto not often found the attention they deserve.

Laughland's book offers a narrative leading up to these late products of Schelling's thought. According to the author, they show the philosopher at the end point of an intellectual journey from idealism to orthodox Catholicism. The author's sympathies in this narrative are never concealed: he perceives Schelling as the champion of the cause of conservatism, philosophical and religious as well as political, who therefore offers the armour of defence against the philosophical, religious and political onslaught of modernity, of Protestantism, and of liberalism.

The first two chapters seek to contextualise Schelling's development within long-term strands of intellectual history. Laughland starts by sketching out what he believes to be a fundamental dichotomy of 'Judeo-Christian theories of the Creation' and 'competing cosmogonies' (p. 1). The former are based on the assumption of a transcendent God, who created the world through his sovereign will out of his goodness and love. Such theories therefore lead to an understanding of the world as good with human beings in possession of free will and evil existing as a consequence of the latter. Opposed to such theories Laughland sees a tradition originating in Oriental religion and introduced to the West through philosophical and religious movements such as Orphism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism. Their theory is characterised, according to Laughland, by a tendency to identify God and world, which consequently it tends to sacralise or even divinise (p. 2). Interestingly, however, it also and at the same time, denies the existence of the cosmos and holds that only 'the undivided One is real' (ibid.)—indeed, the supposed anti-realism of this tradition is the major topic of Laughland's second chapter. This school of thought is also, Laughland states, fatalistic, anti-individualistic, and lacks the Christian belief that 'human life is

sacred' (ibid.). It has found expression over the centuries in the works of thinkers as diverse as Plato, Plotinus, Luther, Böhme, Bruno, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, whereas 'Christian metaphysics' has consistently opposed it. It is the main thesis of this book that Schelling's intellectual development saw him move away from Platonic-Gnostic, Protestant-Idealist anti-realism towards a proper Christian understanding of God and the world, metaphysically realist, affirming free will, and rooted in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

Against this backdrop Laughland offers, in subsequent chapters, a developmental account of Schelling's own thought starting from his earliest writings down to his latest texts, which the philosopher himself never published. Given the breadth, difficulty, and utter variety of these pieces and their ever-changing philosophical viewpoints, this must be seen as a remarkable achievement. Laughland devotes a full chapter to Schelling's essay *On Human Freedom*, which he sees as an important stage in Schelling's movement away from his own idealistic, Platonic, mystic roots and towards a more orthodox Christian philosophy. The culminating point, however, is Schelling's last philosophy, contained in his lectures on the *Philosophy of Revelation*, which Laughland, surprisingly, cites after the unauthorised edition produced by Schelling's former mentor and later fierce critic, H.E.G. Paulus, in 1843 (since Schelling's works – another surprise – are not listed in the bibliography, it is not clear why Laughland uses this particular edition which Schelling himself found so infuriating that he sued its editor for plagiarism). This late philosophy, Laughland asserts, shows Schelling at his most theological drawing extensively on the scholastics and especially on Thomas Aquinas to arrive at a philosophy that consciously leaves behind the various blind alleys of Protestantism and modernism and reasserts the Catholic truth of Christian metaphysics.

It seems scarcely an exaggeration to say that most of the larger historical claims Laughland makes in his book are indefensible. The trajectory he constructs from Oriental religion via Plato, Plotinus, the Reformation, Rationalism to German Idealism works only by evoking historical lineage of such vagueness that very nearly any claim could have been supported by it. Of course, all these thinkers and movements are somehow related, but it is far from clear that they form any such thing as a 'school of thought' as Laughland seems to suggest. Equally absurd, from a historical point of view, is his postulate of a Judeo-Christian alternative; after all, the majority of the thinkers he assigns to the Platonic-Idealist tradition are Jewish or Christian themselves. (It is, incidentally, noteworthy that Laughland moves, without apology, from the notion of a 'Judeo-Christian' tradition to that of 'Christian metaphysics' and nowhere explains what happened to the Jewish half of that 'tradition'.)

Does Laughland's argument, then, make sense as a systematic construction? Do the two 'traditions' represent helpful types of philosophy or theology illuminating fundamental alternatives in the history of ideas or, at least, during Schelling's own lifetime? Clearly, Laughland had Schelling's own development in mind when describing his trajectories, and there can be but little doubt that Schelling saw himself confronted, during certain parts of his life, with challenges he would have understood along the lines suggested by Laughland here. The

mere fact, however, that Schelling rejected a variety of ideas at some point during his career does not make them a unified philosophy. Laughland nowhere explains why and how the hotchpotch of views he sees as characteristic of the anti-Christian trajectory could have coexisted in any meaningful way. Why is the identification of God and world the same as a theory of emanation? While one could argue that the former makes the assumption of free will difficult (as is the case in the Stoics or Spinoza), such a claim seems much less plausible for the Platonic tradition. How is the divinisation of the world connected to, or even compatible with, an anti-realist denial of its existence? Questions such as these are never even addressed in this study, and, consequently, the confusion created by this lack of analytical distinction is substantial. At times Laughland himself seems to lose his bearing in his maze of theories held together by virtue of association and argues, for example, against 'monism' (Spinoza, Hegel) and 'dualism' (Gnosticism) at one and the same time (pp. 49–50).

While Laughland's account of the anti-Christian trajectory is thus questionable, his notion of the alternative tradition is equally problematic. Given the importance he attaches to the claims of what he terms traditional Christian metaphysics, it is noteworthy just how vague, unspecific, and sometimes contradictory his references to theological theories are. Thus he states that 'the Church obviously assumed that man was dependent on God.' (p. 22) This indeed is 'obvious'; in fact it is doubtful whether any of the authors Laughland assigns to his anti-Christian tradition would have disagreed. Much less obvious is what precisely follows from such a view, and while some may share Laughland's position that it is incompatible with modern ideas of freedom, others (Schelling most certainly included) would assert that there was a more positive relation between the two. This is an important and ongoing debate, and Laughland's blanket references to 'traditional', 'Catholic', or 'biblical' views fall short of its complexity by a wide margin.

Laughland's book is a product of ideology, not scholarship. It is based on a set of clearly defined articles of faith, and the author sides with those who share them (or seem to) and battles those who do not. He does not, apparently, believe in argument. Schelling, while no stranger to controversy and even polemic, clearly did. He is therefore inevitably misunderstood and misrepresented if pressed into such a hermeneutical straightjacket.

Laughland seems quite aware that his perception of, and interest in, the late Schelling is not so different from that of Prussian King Frederick William IV who invited the philosopher to Berlin to 'combat the dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism', as Laughland approvingly cites him (p. 124). The king's plan failed to achieve its purpose, but succeeded in tainting Schelling's philosophical and political reputation for quite some while. It is to be hoped that the current book will not succeed in resuscitating debates over Schelling's thought that have, in the past, obscured his perception as one of the truly great representatives of modern European philosophy.