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**Evaluation of Juan José Rodríguez’s doctoral dissertation, “Die Endlichkeit, das Böse und die menschliche Freiheit als Grund der Unmöglichkeit eines ‚Systems der Freiheit‘ (1804–1811) bei Schelling,” submitted to Charles University Prague and Bergische Universität Wuppertal**

To whom it may concern,

I was asked by Prof. Dr. Karel Novotný (Charles University Prague) in June 2024, if I would be willing to serve as the external examiner (opposition) for Juan José Rodríguez’s dissertation. As the work of F.W.J. Schelling is my area of specialization and the topics covered by this dissertation are of great interest to me, I happily agreed. I met Juan José Rodríguez once at a North American Schelling Society conference, but I do not know him personally. It was a pleasure to read his work.

Juan José Rodríguez surveys an impressive amount of primary and secondary literature on Schelling in his 348-page dissertation (the full document is 394 pages, including the front matter and bibliography). The major strength of the dissertation, in my opinion, is Rodríguez’s precision and breadth of coverage in tracking the sources, genealogy, and development of certain key concepts in Schelling’s thought, e.g., finitude, ground, unprethinkable being (*unvordenkliches Sein*), beginning with his youthful writings and engagement with Fichte. In locating and reconstructing the origins and development of the main theses from the *Freedom Essay* and *Ages of the World* in Schelling’s writings from 1801-1807, Rodríguez’s dissertation will make a genuinely new and constructive contribution to Schelling scholarship.

**Presentation of the aims and thesis of the dissertation**

The dissertation aims to achieve at least four goals, which I will now evaluate. The first goal of the dissertation, as put forth in the abstract, introduction, and conclusion, is an analysis of the “postponement [*Aufschiebung, Aufschub*] of a system of freedom in Schelling from a historical and systematic point of view” (11, 28, 365). The second, related goal of the dissertation is to defend the impossibility of a system of freedom in Schelling. Rodríguez suggests that the development and increasing importance of three main concepts in Schelling’s work, “finitude, evil, and human freedom,” call into question the “very possibility of a system of freedom” (11, 28, 365). One immediately observes a tension: is a “system of freedom” an utter *impossibility*, as per the dissertation title (and pp. 28, 224, 279, 365), or is it indeed *possible in the future*, and therefore only postponed to a different time and set of conditions that would permit its existence?

I will return to this question, and its dependence on the definitions of freedom and system, below.

What Rodríguez means by the impossibility of a system of freedom—which, he claims, stems from the “incompatibility [*Unvereinbarkeit*] of the concepts of system and freedom” (11, 28, 365)—becomes only clear about halfway through the thesis, after he has shown the challenges posed by Schelling’s accounts of finitude and freedom, especially of the “timeless ground of freedom,” to any closed, totalizing, rational system (165f). The point could be presented earlier in the dissertation, in a clearer and more succinct manner than it is: if by “system” we mean a closed, rational, system in which God and nature, or thought and being, are identified, such a system cannot contain freedom, especially the radicality of the freedom to choose for good or for evil. Thus, such a “system of freedom” is impossible. However, as Rodríguez also shows, if one redefines system to be open-ended and subject to revision, a system of freedom becomes possible again, but its articulation will always only be partial and non-definitive. It is in this sense that the completion of a system of freedom is postponed. Despite these shortcomings in presentation, in my view, Rodríguez successfully argues that the middle Schelling’s account of “real becoming” cannot ground itself within a rational, idealist system, and requires a rethinking of the beginning, which Schelling most often associates with unconscious willing and the emergence of ground.

Rodríguez thus claims that showing the “inner impossibility in the [sic] consideration of Schelling’s new system between freedom and rational system” (and presenting some of Schelling’s solutions to the “contradiction” between system and freedom) is the “general aim of this dissertation” (“*Die Erklärung dieser inneren Unmöglichkeit in der Betrachtung von Schellings neuem System zwischen Freiheit und rationalem System ist das allgemeine Ziel dieser Dissertation, ...*” 11, 28, 365). Again, the term “new system,” which is explicitly a ‘non-unified’ system (125), is how Rodríguez refers to the two-part system in Schelling’s late philosophy: negative philosophy (a closed, apriori rational system) and positive philosophy (a systematic approach *per posterius* to finite experience, facticity, history—including the future—and the role freedom plays in all of these). Rodríguez traces the origins of the split between these two compatible, yet separate systematic approaches to being back to Schelling’s existence/ground distinction (125); he accordingly describes “ein neues System ..., das zwei Teile enthält und somit kein einheitliches System mehr ist. Dieser Unterschied zwischen Existenz und Grund wird über die mittlere Metaphysik hinaus auf die Unterscheidung in Schellings Spätphilosophie zwischen negativer und positiver Philosophie projiziert” (125).

Drawing on primary texts, as well as the work of Manfred Frank, Wolfram Högerebe, and Marcus Gabriel, Rodríguez successfully shows that the distinction between ground-existence distinction, and by extension, positive and negative philosophy, has even earlier roots in the “ultimate impossibility of establishing an identity as such” in the *Lehre des Bandes* (doctrine of the bond)

in Schelling's Identity Philosophy (127, 137). He also convincingly demonstrates the importance of the distinction between pronominal and predicative being in the emergence of the "living bond" and identity, which he highlights is, for Schelling, "the expression of an eternal longing [*Ausdruck eines ewigen Verlangens*]" (131) According to Rodríguez, the bond makes the real possible (131), even if Schelling still does not, in these early years, distinguish between time and eternity to give human freedom its due in the course of real change in history (which Rodríguez claims happens in the *Ages of the World* drafts). In an interesting and impressive way, Rodríguez also excavates the prefiguration of this thesis of the "living bond," or the importance of the copula or doctrine of the third, in Schelling's earlier *Bruno* and *Philosophy and Religion* texts.

As per the dissertation title, the emergence of the finite in Schelling's thought and his shifting account of freedom are accompanied by an account of evil that factors into the "impossibility" of a system of freedom on the basis of previous idealist or strictly rationalist approaches. Such approaches tend to reject the real existence of evil, and instead reduce it to a function of the good through, for example, privation (*privatio boni*), or *per accidens* or *per concomitance* (176-188). Rodríguez consequently writes, "Da alle bisherigen Systeme, einschließlich dem des Idealismus, das Böse geleugnet, relativiert oder auf das Gute reduziert haben, hat es ein System der Freiheit, wie Schelling es vorschlägt, nicht gegeben solange das Böse nicht angemessen gedacht wird" (278-279). The analysis of the character and importance of evil in Schelling's concept of freedom in the *Freedom Essay* is well done overall, and Rodríguez follows it up with a very interesting account of Schelling's "humanism and anthropocentrism," in which he argues that "die zentrale Rolle des Menschen in der Welt nicht eine privilegierte Stellung und ein Recht auf Herrschaft mit sich bringt, sondern im Gegenteil eine höchste moralische und metaphysische Verantwortung gegenüber allen geschaffenen Wesen" (190). This paves the way for Schelling's moral and political considerations in the *Stuttgart Seminars*. Moreover, Rodríguez reconstructs a fascinating argument in Schelling's middle period, namely, insofar as the human being is a natural, embodied being (193), it has self-will by necessity. But this self-will on its own is not the cause of evil. Rather, choosing evil has more to do with spirit and rationality—i.e., it is a *choice* to invert the relationship of self-will and the universal—than materiality and sensibility (201-203). Rodríguez thus argues that the body itself is innocent or neutral in relation to the human's choice to do evil (189).

But the question regarding the possibility of a system of freedom remains unresolved. In chapters 12 and 13, Rodríguez seems to first further complicate a potential answer to this question before he begins to finally clarify the sense in which a system of freedom could be "postponed" until the end of time. He opens the chapter by referring to two more systems in the first draft of the *Ages of the World*—the formation of a "time system" ("*die Bildung eines Zeitsystems*") and a "world system," which is "necessarily unfinished" and in development (227, 234). Ultimately, different philosophical systems that attempt to capture the becoming of the real can be seen as historical, partial expressions of the "world system" (224). As long as the world is in-becoming,

a full systematic articulation of the world can never be complete (234). Every system is only a partial, historically falsifiable approach to the whole. I take this to mean that the notion of a complete, adequate system would only be possible at the end of the world and historical time, which is the sense in which a fully realized system of freedom could be postponed. Furthermore, since the “world system” or “system of the world,” it turns out, must be discovered, in opposition to another concept of system, a “system of thought” (one-sided idealism) (248), it would seem that attempts to construct system(s) of freedom (that would contain the notion of an irretrievable, unconscious ground and attest to the reality of evil) within the world system would be possible. But Rodríguez is unclear about this, and it seems this lack of clarity is due to the fact that whenever freedom is pitted against system, it is a *rational* system of thought that is being referred to, rather than a creative, constructive, *per posterius*, positive system in the context of the world system. Instead of concluding with what such a system of freedom might look like, or an evaluation of Schelling’s positive philosophy as an attempt to create such a system, Rodríguez opts to declare that the system of freedom has failed but a “radikalen Neuanfang des Philosophierens” has opened (352). Could this new beginning be linked with the world system, as the metaphysical condition possibility for new, Schellingian attempts at the discovery and construction of an open, non-totalizing system (of freedom)? (354)

The proliferation of systems presented in the dissertation is unclear and confusing, as is the possible scope of redefinition for the system of freedom (cf. 281, 352). In my view, the author should adopt more systematic approach to the definition and typology of systems in this work (he begins a partial attempt at defining system only on pp. 260-262 and 277). Similarly, in the introduction, we should know how many different concepts of freedom are being discussed in this dissertation. Rodríguez does not inform the reader early enough that he will be working with multiple concepts of freedom in Schelling and Kant (146-153); the distinction between “transcendental freedom,” or spontaneity, and practical freedom in Kant and their importance for the evolution of Schelling’s concept of freedom would have been helpful to include in the introduction. The different uses of the terms system and freedom throughout makes it hard to, in fact, track the evolving relationship between the two terms throughout the dissertation, which is key for Rodríguez’s thesis statement. In fact, the genealogical accounts of the supporting terms for the overall thesis, such as the bond, finitude, ground, existence, evil, and love are done to a higher standard than the accounts of system and freedom.

The third aim of the dissertation runs parallel to the other two. Rodríguez seeks to show that extending from 1804 through to Schelling’s middle period, the concept of ground is the basis of the development of “real” becoming, in the manner discussed above. In this way, becoming, and particularly the beginning of any system, evades any ideal system or ideal starting point (11, 28, 365, cf. 165ff, 278ff). Rodríguez proposes that this metaphysical doctrine be called “transcendent immanence” (*transzendente Immanenz*) (365). Given that Schelling espouses a very strong

notion of a transcendent, personal God in this period, I would have liked to see a more sustained development and defense of this term from Rodríguez.

In relation to Rodríguez's position that this system of "transcendent immanence" runs explicitly from 1804 to 1809 (368), and beyond, it should be acknowledged that Rodríguez's makes a positive contribution to the longstanding consistency debate in Schelling-studies. Rodríguez claims that there is some continuity in Schelling between firstly, 1804-1811, and secondly, between the middle and late periods more generally. Rodríguez sees 1804-1811 as a specific period of Schelling's development for thinking of the factual and the individual, but also observes a continuity between middle and late Schelling regarding "the definition of the factual in general" beyond reason/a priori construction (126). He also shows the long-lasting importance and persistence within Schelling's own corpus of the latter's *very* youthful insights, especially his critique of Fichte's approach to being, knowledge and the Absolute. He demonstrates this in relation to Schelling's reversal of "ratio cognoscendi" and "ratio essendi," and accordingly, Schelling's early adoption of Hölderlin's thesis on the "transreflective character of Being (*Sein*)" (137). In this sophisticated discussion, Rodríguez also explains that the *Lehre des Bandes*, as discussed above, puts the notion of a unified system of the total identity of thought and being into question, thus marking a shift in Schelling's early thought (137).

The fourth and final aim of the dissertation concerns political philosophy, love, and the future. Rodríguez aims to show that systems that identify God and nature in such a way that all "Selbständigkeit des Endlichen aufhebt" can have totalizing, even oppressive, political consequences (11, 29, 365). The openness of a philosophy that aims to do justice to finite existence, evil, love, and the uncertainty of the future, such as the middle Schelling's, demands a different approach to politics, namely one that is critical of the state.

Schelling's critique of the state leads Rodríguez, in chapters 16 and 17, to describe Schelling's philosophy as "libertarian anarchism," primarily due to the persistence and ineradicability of the particular will of the human being, and Schelling's critique of the state (293). At this point, Rodríguez should both clearly define the sense in which he is using the terms "libertarian" and "anarchism" and address Schelling's positive remarks about the necessity of a state in the human being's fallen condition. Rodríguez goes so far as to say Schelling adopts a "vollwertigen anarchistischen Sicht der menschlichen Angelegenheiten, die sich auf den Begriff der inneren Einheit stützen muss, wie sie in der Liebe und der Religion und niemals durch den Staat, sei er mechanisch oder organisch, ausgeübt wird" (320). This is quite strong, especially in consideration of the fact that Schelling never calls for humans to directly and intentionally abolish the state, even if Rodríguez is correct that he describes the state in the *Stuttgart Seminars* as a "consequence of the curse that has been placed on humanity" (321; SW VII, 461/207 in the English translation) and assesses it as natural in its coercive power. Should we call this position anarchistic just because the state will not bring about the higher, ideal unity that Schelling



envisions for the future? Is Schelling not envisioning a more progressive, natural, passing away of the state, as we need it increasingly less as we bring about inner, loving relations on our own?

Rodríguez seems to gesture at this possibility, when he correctly claims that the state has “einen Kreislauf von Geburt, Entwicklung und Tod, sodass er wie die Natur keine absolute Einheit erreichen kann. Daher rührt die Instabilität und die ständige Veränderung und Bewegung” (322). Rodríguez also rightly notes that this leads Schelling to be critical in 1810 of the perfect, ideal, Platonic state (322; SW VII, 462). But I have yet to find evidence in Schelling that it is up to us to actively bring about the death of the state. We need its enforcement of laws and protection of the sphere of negative freedom of all in our contemporary, precarious, fallen state of affairs, and as we bring about genuinely loving relations, we will need its ‘false,’ external unity less. It would be interesting to hear, in light of Rodríguez’s claim that there can be “no personal freedom [*keine persönliche Freiheit*]” state, how indeed he conceptualizes Schelling’s view of individuals’ exercise of freedom as the capacity for good or for evil, and the development of our personalities, from within our lives entrenched in the state today. The state does not need to mediate this exercise of freedom and personal development to engender its minimal conditions in a given historical moment. But, as Rodríguez accurately highlights in chapter 18, the highest unity that can be achieved by human beings, in total respect of their own independence and individual freedom, is love (340-341).

### **Engagement with primary and secondary sources**

Rodríguez deals with an impressive amount of primary literature in his dissertation, and effectively demonstrates the evolution of key concepts from Schelling's early to middle periods, revealing unexpected origins (e.g., *Bruno*, the *Antifichteschrift*) that are rarely highlighted in analyses of Schelling’s philosophy of freedom. There is no shortage of coverage of Schelling’s writings from the period in which Rodríguez is working.

Rodríguez should equally be commended for his deep dive into the secondary literature, especially regarding the periodization of Schelling’s thought. He has done an extensive amount of work to go through the works of Beiser, Bowie, Buchheim, Frank, Fuhrmans, Gabriel, Hoegrebe, Janke, Kosch, Maesschalck, McGrath, Melahmed, Oser, Schnell, Schnell, Schulz, Snow, Theunissen, Vetö, among others. The author’s rich bibliography is a testimony to his deep engagement with existing research in German, English, French, and Spanish, and he situates his arguments in the ongoing Schelling debates in a scholarly and balanced manner. He knows which prominent Schelling scholars espouse which theses, which helps him enter into conversation with other academics. In his dissertation, Rodríguez also addresses the debates in which Schelling was embroiled (in relation to Kant, Fichte, Hegel, even the Romantics and Reinhold) and the 20<sup>th</sup> century reception of Schelling, primarily by Heidegger, Habermas, and Lukács.

## **Final Assessment**

While the division of the dissertation into three parts ([1] *Endlichkeit* [chapters 1-6]; [2] *Freedom* [chapters 7-12] and [3] *System* [chapters 13-19]) and the distribution of the content covered in the chapters are appropriate and measured, the author seems to struggle with merging his work in the history of ideas with conceptual clarity in the context of the development of a thesis. The concepts of freedom and system come up in premature and fragmented ways in the first third of the thesis in a manner which can be quite confusing.

Nevertheless, Rodríguez does a good job emphasizing the foundational status of freedom for Schelling's philosophy and discussing the challenges posed by its shifting form, particularly in relation to the emergence of finitude and a real concept of evil and to idealist and rationalist systems. He also does excellent work highlighting the orientation of Schelling's philosophy of freedom towards the future and radical openness. However, the reader has to work to extract a single, coherent line from Rodríguez's work and, moreover, has to grapple with contradictions in the way he presents the concept of system in particular. Indeed, after reading Rodríguez's dissertation, I have the impression that he has written his way into some of these topics, first making crucial conceptual distinctions between, for example, transcendental and practical freedom, and ideal and world systems, in chapter 7 and later. Before the dissertation is published, additional interpretive work and early organization and presentation of the core concepts and ideas of the dissertation should be undertaken.

In the revision of the dissertation for publication, I would therefore recommend that Rodríguez refine the thesis of his dissertation, and reconsider the manner in which key concepts are introduced and presented. If the first goal of the dissertation is to explain how a "system of freedom" is postponed (or impossible) in Schelling, then we need much more information earlier on in the dissertation on *what a system of freedom is*.

The dissertation also needs to be edited for repetition and formatting. There are some passages reproduced verbatim in the introduction and conclusion as well as in footnotes (see the footnote on Fuhrmans on pages 282 and 345, for example). Three full paragraphs of text are repeated word-for-word in a row on pages 148 and 149.

The consistency of the formatting of references in the bibliography also needs to be fixed (for example, sometimes full first names are written out, and sometimes not, even in cases of the same author, e.g., entries for "Frank, M." and "Frank, Manfred," "Garbiel, M." and "Gabriel Markus").

## **Evaluation**

This dissertation is ready to move to the defense stage. I look forward to discussing Juan José Rodríguez's work with him in the near future!

I would suggest that the dissertation be awarded the magna cum laude grade. It should not be awarded a lower grade, due to the potentially rich contribution it will make Schelling scholarship, especially in its presentation of the history of the development of concepts from Schelling's early to middle period. But taking into account the aforementioned issues with the lack of clarity in the dissertation's thesis, particularly with regards to the concepts of system and freedom, as well as the repetition of passages, it also should not be awarded the summa cum laude grade.

Sincerely,



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