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Ultimate Concern and Finitude: Schelling's Philosophy of Religion and Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of the complete *Systematic Theology*, a massive attempt to present in a rational fashion the core of Christian beliefs, myths, and rites in a manner that speaks to its time—a time of profound unbelief and anxiety. As theologian, Tillich feels no lack of warrant, for theology speaks only of things that are of ultimate concern to humans, things that unavoidably interest us because they are a matter of our very being or nonbeing (ST I, 14, 16). Our experience of being in modern times is one of anxiety, a perceived background of meaninglessness that drives us into collectivism or conformism, or individualism, or despair and deprives us of authentic forms of courage—or the ability to confront our finitude, the wormhole of nonbeing in the ontological apple. “Anxiety is finitude, experienced as one’s own finitude” (CB 35). What is Christian in Tillich’s theology is its tie to historical Christianity and to the normative expression of early Christians that in Jesus God manifested the *Logos* or messiah. But that is not our concern here, except to remark on Tillich’s intellectual honesty: he is an exquisite practitioner of the history of ideas, at once able to encompass whole eras in generalizations that are apt and to epitomize individual thinkers with remarkable brevity. Our concern in this paper is to elucidate how Tillich makes religion a matter of ontology, and how, from the very first, he follows Schelling’s model of ontological questioning—which I will here call the *double-helix*, or the *twisted* structure of being and nonbeing such that reality is unable to be in any other way than dynamic.

In the first section of this paper I shall briefly discuss Tillich early Schelling studies and then turn to Schelling’s own texts to show that Tillich interpretation is correct. The major part of the paper will be devoted to showing how Schelling’s concepts form the structural backbone of *Systematic Theology* as well as the more accessible *Courage to Be* lectures where Tillich argues that the only form of credible religious belief is an absolute one where Christianity criticizes its concrete symbols and embraces a God beyond theism (CB 188-89). While the language of the lectures is more daring, its content is no more disquieting to the professional theologian than the picture presented in the final volume of *Systematic Theology* of the ambiguous presence of the Spirit in a spiritual community that across history may or may not dwell in those ecclesial structures that call themselves Christ’s church. The ‘unambiguous life’ that is sheltered by spiritual community is fragmentary and anticipatory at best, but without specific religious teachings, symbols or acts (ST 3, 157-58). Tillich’s religion, like Schelling’s, is ontological, not ecclesial.

Tillich's knowledge of Schelling is deep and sympathetic from the very first. In his philosophical dissertation of 1910, *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling's Positive Philosophy*, the young Tillich attempts a sweeping interpretation of Schelling's long journey to the philosophical religion of the late writings, but gravitates toward the philosophy of freedom of the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations*. The essence of human consciousness is God-positing, or intellectual intuition of the identity between finite and absolute consciousness (CHR 122), but at the same time it is estranged from its God-positing substantiality. Tillich agrees with Schelling that essence of the religious picture is that "the formulation of a concept of religion must necessarily include a relationship between God and man that presupposes a definite division between them" (*ibid.*, 124). The tension between identity and action in the human spirit that is the driving motive in Schelling's early philosophical development becomes in the 1809 essay a historical process, a path of development in which the rest of intellectual intuition is sundered when the subject becomes agent. Finite consciousness posits itself as fallen from the identity of its original God positing, but not as the natural religion of Enlightenment times might picture it, in independence from a rational world-architect and serenely possessing as its own its limited faculties of reason, imagination, and will. That human consciousness is God-positing and at the same time self-separated from the divine is the core of Tillich's view of human reality (*ibid.*, 125-27). There is a struggle at the core of the religious relationship, which in its most explicit form is the guilt-accepting acceptance of unacceptability, viewed in *The Courage to Be* as Martin Luther's personal or existential experience of Christian grace. In that experience, God is comprehends as the ontological Yes that includes its No, and blessedness is experienced as both bliss and the nameless anxiety it conquers (CB 170-71, 180).

Tillich's 1912 theological dissertation, *Mysticism and Guilt-consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development*, identifies the core of all of Schelling's thought in the tension between the identity of God and the finite and the 'fall' (self-separation) of the later—or the otherness of existence, signified by the failure of the ontological proof (MG 35). While one might want to calculate the period of Schelling's philosophical development in terms of the influence of other philosophers, so that besides the philosophy of nature there are periods where Plato, Spinoza, Boehme, Baader, Hegel, and finally Aristotle provide inspiration, there is really only one thematic thread at work throughout: the identity principle and its relation to moral categories such as separation, fall, and freedom. Tillich prefers the clarity of the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations* to the detail of the positive philosophy (*ibid.* 22-25). The discussion of Schelling's text that he offers is quite condensed and cryptic. The early Fichtean works, the essays in *Naturphilosophie* and the aesthetics of genius that crown the *System of Transcendental Idealism* are all read as variants of identity theory: ethical mysticism, nature mysticism, aesthetic mysticism (*ibid.*, 45-68). *Philosophy and Religion* marks a turn toward history, and with the teaching of the self-separation or fall of the ideas into finite existence the mysticism of intellectual intuition is put at risk. Tillich's exegesis of the freedom essay is quite dense and free-form: contradiction and self-will are read as 'sin' and 'guilt', and the cosmic

process of separation of good and evil read as triumph of ‘grace’ over ‘death and wrath’ (*ibid.*, 108-112). But in phrases such as “the identity of sin and grace” Tillich thinks in solidarity with Schelling that evil and the self-will that is its origin remains even in the cosmic resolution. Guilt has its ground in ontology, as Tillich major works assert, and is no more a psychological quirk than the background radiation of anxiety that its horizon and cradle.

II.

Tillich’s theology follows Schelling’s philosophy in its insistence that religious questions are ontological ones, that ontology is a dynamic domain—and not an overview of an assemblage of things manufactured or arbitrarily brought together. The logos of being follows from the question, first posed by Leibniz, *Why is there is something and not nothing?* In its first and highest instance, being is self-realizing, that it includes and comprehends the possibility of nonbeing: that it stands out from nonbeing.

Tillich opens *Systematic Theology* with an essay on reason and revelation. In its asking of the first and ultimate questions, reason is driven beyond itself to ‘mystery’, the ground and abyss that precedes reason. It is of ultimate concern for us because it is about the ground of *our* being, and it is ‘ecstatic’ because it reaches beyond the subject-object structure for that which is primal. And it involves, says Tillich, “ontological” or metaphysical shock in that it involves: *Why not nothing?* and with that the realization that I or anybody might not be here to ask the question (ST 1, 110-113). There is something disquieting about the answers such a question can receive, for they are irretrievably symbolic or metaphorical; if one says “the divine life is a dynamic unity of depth and form,” and goes on to explain that by “depth” one means the abysmal character of God, the ineffability and inexhaustibility of being itself, by ‘form’ one means word, logic or structure, and by “dynamic unity” a process of unforeseeable communication or unfolding, it is obvious that these are not logical or personal categories (ST 1, 156, cp. 115). Tillich takes both this ontological starting point and the terms for describing the three-dimensional life of God from Schelling

First, let us look to the theme of Schelling’s concept of ontology. When Schelling publically inaugurated the Positive Philosophy in 1841/42 with the Berlin Lectures on the *Philosophy of Revelation*, insisting that the difference between concept and existence (or possibility and actuality) was unbridgeable, that the finite being of the potencies followed from the unforeseeable existence of the absolute *Prius*, he deepened and refined two earlier veins of ontological exploration (PO 160-64). The first to be explored (in the writings of 1795-1801) was the relatively simple concept of God or the absolute as self-existent. The second (explored in the writings of 1801-1815) was the concept of God or the absolute as free over against being, or having an actuality that somehow dialectically combined being and nonbeing, or envisioned existence as involving a power that asserted being over nonbeing. The first line of thought yields a pure essence, the concept of necessary existence whose ontological status is necessary but

contingent—a necessary existent, if it exists. The *actus purus* of the second line of thought makes the divine being contingently necessary, relative to the possibility for other-being that it established (*ibid.*, 165-171). In a third aspect, the positive philosophy stipulates that God is spirit or freedom over against primordial being and realized possibility, the evolution of that which ought to be (*ibid.*, 172-76). The complicated line of thought developed here fundamentally pits the concept of *necessary existence* against *freedom to be or not to be*.

Schelling had always demonstrated a fondness for the ontological proof, though he was as skeptical as Kant about whether it ‘worked’. In 1795, he argued that in the realm of proof, we are always dealing with conditions; the divine being, however, ought to be a matter of rational analysis. And when we ascribe being to the absolute, we ought not confuse *being* with contingent existence or actuality (*SW I*, 308, 308n). In 1802, Schelling uses the analog of the ontological proof to explain the certainty of intellectual intuition; from the very idea of an absolute cognition that one has, one can infer the reality of an absolute wherein form and being are the same. What is deficient in the so-called proof is its picturing its object as somehow subsisting outside of its cognizing and being-cognized (*SW 4*, 363-68). In 1804 Schelling repeats and amplifies this argument, moving from the self-intuition of reason in intellectual intuition to the conclusion that what is realized in reason is the idea of God. The idea of God is self-realizing in reason—the form of cognition that is self-identical and beyond the difference of discursive knowing (*SW 6*, 150-54). The idea of God, which is self-enjoyed in intellectual intuition, illuminates the ‘why’ of God’s being, i.e., it is modally necessary, not factual, and so forever beyond the reach of nonbeing. Nothing or utter nonbeing is impossible. Says Schelling:

The absolute light: the idea of God, strikes reason like a flash of lightning, so to speak, and its luminosity endures in reason as an eternal affirmation of knowledge. By virtue of this affirmation, which is the essence of our soul, we recognize the *eternal impossibility of nonbeing* that can never be known or comprehended; and that ultimate question posed by the vertiginous intellect hovering at the abyss of the infinite: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, this question will be swept aside forever by the necessity of being, that is, by the absolute affirmation of being in knowledge (*ibid.*, 155).

For Tillich’s purposes, though not ultimately for Schelling, this dynamic being that incorporates and excludes nonbeing suffices to get the project of systematic theology underway. God is the affirmation of being, and if being is, as Spinoza realized, as *power* or the self-expression of what is essential, the human finds her essential being expressed in the religious relationship. Another way to say this is to say that because the divine-human relationship is at the core of the human being, her fundamental problem (finitude) and her awareness of it (anxiety) all pertain to that relationship to too (CB 24-28). If modern man experiences life as precarious and his self-awareness is anxiety, anxiety is a religious experience.

Tillich chooses to follow Schelling in calling the primordial or ontological aspect of God “the Abyss.” It is the ground of reality, human and natural; it is ineffable or inconceivable, self-enclosed and manifests itself only as power of resisting nonbeing. The only thing literal or nonsymbolic that one can say of God is that it is being itself, neither *a* being nor the *totality* of being. Various theologies have tried to apply categories of relation to the God-human relationship, but it is symbolic or non-literal speech if we speak of God as the creator or immanent cause, or find that things inhere in God (ST1, 236-38). All ontological speech is symbolic or analogous—except to say that something is and cannot not be. Ever careful with his words, Tillich notes that “it is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as to deny it. God is being itself, not *a* being” (*ibid.*, 237). About symbolic speech, he thinks a symbol speaks ‘truly’ if it reveals something or speaks to somebody. But the history of religions is filled with dead symbols, or ways of speaking of the finite-infinite relation that fail to reflect light in both directions.

Tillich adopts a mode of trinitarian thinking from Schelling that is ontological, prior to any discussion of Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Human intuition has always distinguished the element of power in the divine from the element of meaning, the *logos* or word, and then gone on to distinguish a third principle of communication or expression whereby the finite and the infinite are united, spirit (ST 1, 250-251). Schelling displays this trinitarian way of thinking as early as the *Bruno*, where the three potencies of identity theory are rescued from the dry Spinozism of *Presentation of My System* and put into Neoplatonic and mythic guise, wherein the finite individuals in their apostasy from their organic life in the Ideas are seen to be products of self-will or self-temporization (SW 4: 283-84). The identity of all or the eternal potency is compared to the Father, the infinite or ideal potencies to the Spirit which unifies, while the finite is by its own will made subject to time and suffering (*ibid.*, 252). Trinitarian thinking is found in the *Philosophical Investigations* as well, with one of the triadic structures (nature, man, and a personal God) used to secure the philosophical account of the possibility of evil (PI 62-63) and another (*Ungrund*, nature and spirit) used to explain the dynamics of development (*ibid.*, 69-70).

III.

Let us turn to a closer look at Tillich’s theology. Generally we will look to the text of *Systematic Theology* for discussions of theological and philosophical method. The contemporary look back at the interface of religious and other cultural institutions cannot help but be historical---and critical. For insight into Tillich’s thought about the current state of Christian theology and the possibility of its relevance to the human situation in the age of anxiety, when much of Christian writings, rites and morality are seen to be worn out and lacking in the power to guide, we look to the more homiletic *Courage to Be* lectures.

Systematic theology operates by what Tillich calls the “the method of correlation.” Questions that are philosophical, or really anthropological, receive theological answers, for religion functions as one of the chief repositories of answers about existence that the question-posing animal requires. “Man is the question he asks about himself, before any question has been formulated” (ST I, 62). The method of correlation explains the content of the Christian faith through the interdependence of existential questions and theological answers (*ibid.*, 60-61). A coherentist epistemology is at work here. No inherently true human experiences, miraculous sightings or inerrant writings can be found to validate or invalidate a religious worldview—something that is essentially philosophical (or undecidable)! “Revelation does not destroy reason, but reason raises the question of revelation” (*ibid.*, 81).

The Schelling of the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations* shares with both his major 20th century disciples, Heidegger and Tillich, the conviction that questions about God and world occur in humankind because man is the site of both questioning and self-awareness. Whether or not such questions are answerable, or resolvable through analysis or action, questioning is the human activity par excellence. Tillich remains optimistic about the availability of answers: “Man is able to answer the ontological question himself because he experiences directly and immediate the structure of being and its elements” (ST I, 169). As embodied finite reason, the human experiences *being* as limited power, *existence* as self-contradictory, and the *life* process itself as ambiguous (*ibid.*, 81). But as subject or self-aware, the human directly experiences being, existence and life and so has a pre-reflective experience of those dimensions of the divine that Christian revelation speaks of as the ground of being, the possibility of new existence, and the life of Spirit. When the abysmal ground manifests the *logos*, existence is seen to be not essentially guilt but ‘new being’, and the social and historical dimension of life, with all of its promise and frailty, is seen to bear the seeds of ‘unambiguous life’ (See ST II, 176-77; III, 401-402, 420-422).

In its first appearance, says Tillich, the ontological question considers the one who poses the question: self and world are presumed, tied together in subject-object structure. Secondly, the question concern the “elements” that make up the structure of being, thirdly the difference between essential being and existence, and fourth, the categories of being and knowing (ST I, 164). It is the second category that offers the richest field for comment, the vaguely named ontological *elements*, which come in three pairs:

Individuality – Universality

Dynamics – Form

Freedom – Destiny

All three concern human agency and its environment. The first pair considers the individual or person as the unit of human reality. Though singular in number, by possessing mind, the singular human is connected to others physically and temporally remote. ‘Communion’ or

community is participation in one or more similarly individuated and self-centered selves, and is essential to the life of the individual (*ibid.*, 176). Quantification across this dimension yields an important measure of how persons experience themselves and their world, individualism vis-à-vis collectivism. *Courage to Be* uses this measure to distinguish not only political styles of existence, e.g., liberalism vis-à-vis totalitarianism, but to contrast styles of Christian conscience, e.g., Protestant individualism and Catholic or medieval quasi-collectivism (CB 101-117). Tillich avoids the stereotypical contrast between Protestantism's freedom of conscience and Catholic authoritarianism, for factors other than religion and individual choice lessen the contrast between individualism and collectivism. Participating in economic production, for example, enforces a quotidian conformism in 'free' societies which makes daily life similar to that in centrally planned economies. The second pair is somewhat oddly named, for 'dynamics' indicates that which is unformed, but endowed with potential, or something relatively irrational in contrast to precise rationality. The tension between dynamics and form indicates a creative way of simultaneously conserving and transcending oneself, or of preserving oneself while transforming self and enviroing conditions—like the equilibrium of a physical system or the homeostasis of an organism (ST I, 174-76). Finally, the tension between freedom and destiny indicate the nature of a situated act by a free agent, one that necessarily takes place in a physical context and in a definite matrix of possibilities. "Freedom is experienced as deliberation, decision, and responsibility" (*ibid.*, 184). That my act is situated means that destiny informs my freedom; that I *have to* weigh values and choose among competing alternatives means that my freedom participates in shaping my destiny.

These three vaguely named structures of being together state the parameters of human existence that an individual person enacts—social, biological and mental conditions of finite human freedom. While they give Tillich the tools for much of the critical or destructive work of *Systematic Theology*-- which is an encyclopedic review of the major epistemological, scientific, philosophical, political, psychological, social and religious ideas of our civilization-- they also give him the categories for positively elaborating the Christian ethic that is found in the *Courage to Be* lectures.

The ontological situation for the post-modern human is continuous anxiety, accompanied by a pervasive guilt. Anxiety is object-less fear, fear that persists when fear is the only thing to fear. Guilt is the appropriate response. In earlier times, Western man required pictures and stories of places of punishment and torture by fantastic beasts and malevolent beings. Now the most ordinary human beings in the most secure places imagine themselves objects of surveillance; everyman is Kafka's Joseph K.—or Edward Snowden. The human response is courage, *ontological* rather than soldierly courage, and the various styles of human existence—individualism, conformism, and collectivism—determine corresponding styles of courage to be.

Anxiety is an ontological malady, the awareness of our own finitude or of the fact that we carry nonbeing in our very ontic self-expression. There is anxiety in every fear, and vice versa. The fear of death lurks behind the fear in every anxiety, but close inspection reveals that the human is anxious about being itself. “The basic anxiety, the anxiety of a finite being about the threat of nonbeing, cannot be eliminated. It belongs to being itself” (CB 39). Tillich elaborates three styles or potencies of anxiety: 1) the anxiety of unpredictability (fate) and death, 2) the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, and 3) and the anxiety of despair. Uncertainty and lack of control prefigure death, the poverty of the outcome of one’s work portends meaninglessness, but the upshot of all our acts, from their moral foundations to their spiritual satisfaction, seems to crumble into dust and leave only a vague residue of guilt. Everything in human life points to despair, except for the multitude of petty distractions and evasions which for the most part keep us comfortably numb (*ibid.*, 40-56).

In response to this map of the labyrinth of despair, Tillich offers a slim thread twisted from the various of courageous response. The basic alternatives are to rely upon oneself or to take refuge in the collective: self-reliance undergirds the romantic, naturalistic, and demonic forms of individualism seen in recent cultural history, and paves the way for the lonely encounter of the resolute person in absolute anxiety (*ibid.*, 148-49). The other, collectivistic, alternative chooses the path of participation and becomes mysticism. The mystic is willing to turn ontology inside out and so finds rest in that doubt is turned against finite being and negates it, since everything that appears is deceptive and illusory. “Nonbeing is no threat because finite being is, in the last analysis, nonbeing. . . . The anxiety of meaninglessness is conquered where the ultimate meaning is not something definite but the abyss of every definite meaning” (*ibid.*, 158-59). Tillich has limited confidence in the mystic solution, although every individualistic kind of ontological courage involves an element of trusting in the abyss, or the power of being to overcome nonbeing.

Since religion gives answers to questions that philosophy poses, it must be the elemental character of the human situation in which the definitive answer to anxiety can be found. So Tillich looks again to the *individual-or-participant* structure of the person’s selfhood and finds that in the middle between mystic absorption into the ground and personal encounter with a so-called ‘divine person’ one finds *faith* (CB 156-57). Absolute faith—perhaps *naked faith* might be the better term—does not deny or transcend meaninglessness as mysticism does, but embraces it, at least within a skeptical moment of its action. The skeptical element cuts against the subject-object structure of personal encounter, so that, it seems that the modern existentialist hero encounters nothing but meaninglessness in its purest or grittiest form (*ibid.*, 177-78). It almost goes without saying that the skeptical element, so exercised, will also sweep away almost all the forms, formulas, and rituals of prior versions of Christianity. Though Tillich speaks more reticently (or professionally) in *Systematic Theology*, there is little asserted in its third volume about the Spirit, the community and the ‘kingdom of God’ in history that is edifying or

consoling. The presence of the Spirit in a spiritual community that may or may not have much to do with the churches and their muddled histories is everywhere ambiguous, even if Spirit is defined as ‘unambiguous life’ (ST 3, 183 ff). As representing the kingdom of God and embodying the spiritual community, the churches both reveal and hide (*ibid.*, 375).

Absolute faith is empty faith, or to say the same thing, ontological faith—trusting in the power of being--which always has to be glossed as the expansion or assertion of being over the contraction of nonbeing. Nonbeing is the element in being which forces, which by enclosing its power within limits, forces it to be beyond itself and to open itself as power and love. Speaking in almost as oracular as fashion as Schelling does in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Tillich states:

Nonbeing (that in God which makes his self-affirmation dynamic) opens up the divine self-seclusion and reveals him as power and love. Nonbeing makes God a living God. Without the No he has to overcome in himself and in his creatures, the divine Yes to himself would be lifeless. There would be no revelation of the ground of being, there would be no life (CB 180).

What of the ‘believer’ (or absolute skeptic, rather) in the situation of absolute faith? The horizon of meaningless is not expunged, guilt is not assuaged, and there is no Kantian court of reason to indict or to acquit. One finds, like the anguished Luther, that one is accepted *trotz* one’s unacceptability. At the boundary between being and nonbeing, and far beyond all forms of theism which ever and again forget the ontological difference and that figure the divine as a being, absolute faith fears no judgment and asks no forgiveness (*ibid.*, 189-90). This is the paradox of Christianity, says Tillich: not irrational, not absurd, and nor reflectively or dialectically rational. The ‘paradox’ is a new reality and not a logical riddle (ST II, 91).

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