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*The Political Theology of Schelling*. Saitya Brata Das. New Perspectives in Ontology. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. Pp. ix, 261.

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In his *History of Political Ideas*, Eric Voegelin credits Schelling with developing “perhaps the profoundest piece of philosophical thought ever elaborated,” and thereby with initiating “a new level of consciousness in Western intellectual history in general and in the history of political thought in particular.”<sup>1</sup> Saitya Brata Das (henceforth SBD) may perhaps agree with Voegelin, though for quite different reasons, regarding Schelling’s import for political thinking. Indeed, in *The Political Theology of Schelling*, SBD lays out a bold thesis showing that “Schelling... radically questions every mythic foundation of the political, that his radical notion of de-cision interrupts any immanence of self-presence and opens up the sense of religion as a radical transcendence that is disjoined from both myth and politics” (33). On this reading, Schelling’s work undermines “the liberal-humanist pathos of modernity that grounds itself on a pantheistic immanent metaphysics of the Subject but also any political theology that would seek to legitimise the sovereign power of the state by an appeal to a ‘divine’ or ‘theological’ foundation” (39).

The “political theology” against which SBD invokes Schelling is that of the conservative German jurist and political thinker Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Following Jacob Taubes and Walter Benjamin’s critical engagements with Schmitt, SBD sees in Schelling’s critique of Hegel something akin to a “negative political theology” (23, 39, 92-93, 110). Against “the attempt of any sovereignty in the worldly order to claim ultimate ‘normative obligation’ from us” (5), the Schellingian political theology he outlines seeks to “constantly [interrogate], through an *eschatological intensification of the difference* between the profane order of the political and the theological, any attempt to legitimise worldly sovereignty” (92, emphasis in original). Thus, in contrast to the Schmittian figure of the “sovereign” who decides on the “state of exception” (30, 92, 204) only in order “to make possible and legitimise a new order of *nomos*” (29), SBD, through Schelling, aims at thinking of a “de-legitimising” or “non-sovereign exception” (30), defined by him as “an exception that does not in turn become a rule” (92), which by insisting on “what exceeds the logic of the law... exposes the domain of the political to the wound of an eschatological justice that keeps the possibility of the future alive” (93).

Motivated by a tangible passion for his subject and with great sympathy for

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1. Cited in Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 8. The citation is from the last completed part of the *History of Political Ideas*, titled “Last Orientation,” which was published posthumously.

Schelling, SBD argues his case forcefully through a lengthy introduction and six chapters (the chapters are titled, in order: “Actuality without Potentiality,” “The Rhythm of History,” “The Beatific Life,” “The Irreducible Remainder,” “The Non-Sovereign Exception,” and “The Tragic Dissonance”). He approaches the Schellingian corpus in a relatively free and comprehensive way, moving between different works with ease. Although the core of his argument is mainly built around themes most prominent in Schelling’s so-called “intermediate philosophy” – particularly the 1809 *Essay on the Essence of Human Freedom* (notably in Ch. 4), the *Ages of the World* of 1811-15 (Ch. 2), the roughly contemporary novella *Clara* (Ch. 3), and the *Stuttgart Private Lectures* in 1810 (Ch. 5) – SBD also engages with earlier and later works. Unfortunately, he only cites works by Schelling that exist in an English translation, altogether neglecting others, including key texts of the “late” period, strictly speaking – from the Munich lectures of 1827 until his death in 1854 – such as the *Philosophy of Mythology*, the *Philosophy of Revelation*, and the *Exposition of the Purely Rational Philosophy* – serious omissions for a study professing to deal with Schelling’s late philosophy.

SBD is mainly interested in the content of ideas, and not so much in historical and critical considerations. He only superficially addresses questions of periodization in Schelling, and keeps his engagement with secondary literature to a bare minimum. In an untiringly emphatic, somewhat lyrical and often metaphorical prose (e.g., “Schelling is the lightning flash that makes visible, momentarily, the eschatological image of the event standing still in the burning landscape of redemption” [58-59]), he argues his case with urgency, reiterating his views at every turn, though at the cost of being repetitive. His philosophical imagination is considerably influenced by the concepts and terminology of French deconstruction. (Derrida has the third largest number of entries in the Bibliography, after Schelling and Heidegger.) All things considered, this is an original, insightful and engaging essay which will be appreciated particularly by people interested in Schelling’s relevance for contemporary debates around ontology and political theology. Scholars of Schelling will find much to admire in this work; however, they may have some reservations, particularly SBD’s tendency to overplay aspects of Schelling’s thought that fit his narrative while downplaying others that do not. Below, I discuss three aspects of this book where that problem can be detected.

1. SBD does a good job at highlighting the contemporary relevance of Schellingian themes. However, in the process, he applies to Schelling a kind of retroactive hermeneutics that gives special attention to aspects of his work that can be construed as foreshadowing the views of later thinkers – especially Marx, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Rosenzweig, Bloch, Benjamin, Taubes, Derrida, and Schürmann – without sufficiently attending to their respective differences. This

is apparent, for example, in SBD's insistence, following Gérard Bensussan (who contributes the Preface), on reading Schelling as pointing to "the exit *of* and *from* philosophy as metaphysics" (8). SBD takes a sweeping view of Western metaphysics – "from Plotinus to Hegel" (194) – as founded on a concept of "being as potentiality," or "Being...understood in its infinite capacity *to be*" (1, 3). On that basis, he argues, following Heidegger (5, 8, 12, 25), that Schelling's attempt to think of "an actuality before any memory and before any memorial," or an "*actuality without potentiality*" (always emphasised in the text), places him at the "limit" or "epochal closure" of metaphysics (1), announcing a "new beginning *outside* of metaphysics" (25), one that "opens indefinitely to an excess that can't be included within the fold of metaphysics" (5, cf. 155 n. 1).

While some aspects of Schellingian philosophy may well be taken as having a "decisive importance for post-metaphysical thinking" (78), SBD fails to appreciate the fact that, for Schelling, particularly in his late philosophical period – a period which Heidegger does not appear to have paid close attention to – there was never any question of abandoning metaphysics, and perhaps least of all in his criticism of Hegel. On the contrary, he made it precisely one of his main tasks to develop, in his words, "a true dogmatic philosophy, that is, what metaphysics should be" (*Sämtliche Werke* II/3, 82).<sup>2</sup> Apparently ignoring Schelling's aims, SBD reads the "late Schellingian caesura between positive and negative philosophy...[as an] eschatological deconstruction of metaphysics" (34). Even as he acknowledges that Schelling was "still speaking the language of metaphysics" (11, 25, 43, 78), there is an underlying assumption that Schelling was trying to say what later, "post-metaphysical" (78, 158) thinkers expressed better. In the same vein, SBD alludes to "philosophy opening to non-philosophy" via Schelling (e.g., 43, 47, 58), failing to perceive the worrying similarity, viz., with Carl August Eschenmayer's controversial *Philosophy in its Transition to Non-philosophy* (1803).<sup>3</sup> While SBD's attempt at bridging Schelling and later thinkers sometimes yields surprising insights – the connection to Schürmann, notably, is illuminating – his tendency to interpret Schelling's thought through an alien conceptual scheme is potentially misleading.

2. SBD does a very good job outlining what is effectively a kind of Schellingian religiosity (15), at the heart of which he places the notion of

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2. Cf. Bruce Matthew, introduction to *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, by F.W.J. Schelling (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007), 81-82; Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1989), 34-35.

3. On the controversy between Schelling and Eschenmayer, see Alexandra Roux's illuminating introduction in C.A. Eschenmayer, *La philosophie dans son passage à la non-philosophie*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Roux (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 19-149.

“abandonment” (*Gelassenheit*) expressed by the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart and the later Heidegger (e.g., 26, 34). Indeed, according to SBD, Schelling offers us a “new sense of religion...[as] ‘eschatological’... Religion, in this new sense, is the non-originary, non-autarchic and non-sovereign opening to the infinite; it is the incessant and exuberant opening to an *excess* beyond all enclosures of the mythic immanence, and beyond the self-sufficiency of the laws of the earth” (189). SDB further insists that, “if Schelling still retains the name ‘religion’ or ‘religious’ – and he does so till the last days of his philosophical career – it is in this messianic or eschatological sense” (138, cf. 6).

However, SBD fails to take into account the non-eschatological concept of religion developed in the *Philosophy of Mythology* and the *Philosophy of Revelation*. In these works, Schelling proposes a *sui generis* concept of religion as the innate and non-reflective God-positing character of human consciousness (*SW* II/3, 191). This theo-anthropological principle enables the emergence of different forms of “actual religion” (*wirkliche Religion*), from the unfree mythological religion which serves as the foundation for the free or revealed religion (Christianity), to the not-yet-existing “philosophical religion,” the properly eschatological religion whose aim is not to cancel preceding religions but rather, through its content, to comprehend them (*SW* II/3, 190-194). Writes Schelling, “actual religion cannot be different from actual religion. If, now, both natural [i.e., mythological] and revealed religions are actual religion, then according to the last content there can be no difference between them both. Both must [therefore] contain the same elements [i.e., the potencies], [and] only their *meaning* in the one will be different from that in the other” (*SW* II/1, 248-249).<sup>4</sup> In short, not all religion is eschatological, and the three types of religion identified by Schelling, namely, the mythological and revealed religions, as well as the future religion of the spirit or “philosophical religion,” are equally “actual religion.”

Contrastingly, SBD – seemingly influenced by Bloch (the so-called “Marxist Schelling”) and Benjamin (23, cf. 28, 31, 54-5, 60, 87, 124, 134, 139, 141, 146) – introduces a dichotomy alien to Schelling’s thought. On the one hand, he associates “myth” and “mythology” with “the immanence of self-presence” (44) and the “law of the eternal return of the same” (55); on the other hand, he conflates “religion,” “revelation” and “philosophical religion” as expressing the “*eschatological suspension of the mythic foundation of the law of origin*” (82, cf. 17, 33, 39-40, 82, 83, 100).<sup>5</sup> In fact, this dualistic conception, which SBD reads as reflecting what

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4. Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007), 172-173.

5. A more focused and nuanced reading of what Schelling calls “philosophical religion” is giv-

he sympathetically (if a bit hastily) calls “Schelling’s Gnosticism” (54, cf. 60, 102, 109, 114, 196), renders religion indistinguishable from “the ethical” (cf. 191), and, thereby, ironically recalls the Kantian moralisation of religion rejected by Schelling, and nowhere more strongly than in his late philosophy (cf. 17).

3. SBD’s exploration of the “political-theological import of the Schellingian eschatology” (205), although illuminating in many ways, is also flawed. He states that the renewal of Schellingian thought carries the lesson that “the task of philosophy and religion – or more appropriately, of ‘philosophical religion’ – is to conceive of a deconstructive strategy for the delegitimation of the sovereignty of all worldly powers, whether those of the state or the Church, in such a manner that, through an intensification of difference, the promise of a future will be kept open, a future always *to come*” (207, cf. 191). SBD is not entirely wrong in stating that the eschatological religion for Schelling is potentially “revolutionary” (194). Indeed, as an example, in his *Philosophy of Revelation*, Schelling justifies the secret character of the Mystery cults on account of the perceived threat to established order and public religion represented by their belief in a superior spiritual religion yet to come (*SW* II/3, 501-510).

However, far from justifying any kind of revolutionary political action, the inherently *secret* character of the eschatological religion – which SBD recognises (e.g., 198) – means that it should remain esoteric precisely to avoid “[passing] over into the visibility of public mortality [sic], into the visibility of the visible church, or of the legal-profane order of conditioned politics” (198). Therefore, one may sympathise with SBD’s construal of Schellingian eschatology as enabling a critique of “historical Reason...[in its] sophisticated and complex totalisation in the ‘democratic’ neo-liberal societies of the contemporary world-historical order” (207); however, one should be cautious about associating Schelling too closely with the Marxist thought of, e.g., Benjamin, who, SBD claims, was “following Schelling (without, perhaps, reading him)” by promoting a messianic antinomianism capable of “expressing the irremissible past suffering of the oppressed and the downtrodden and thereby redeeming them from the violence of history” (94, cf. 32, 37, 61, 93, 96, 205). Such language, in fact, is foreign to Schelling.

Further, it is not clear how the “eschatological deconstruction of the world-historical politics embodied in the state” (23, cf. 28, 30, 68, 74) manifests in the world, that is, what its actual political consequences are. On the one hand, SBD’s

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en in Thomas Buchheim, “Was heißt, ‘philosophische Religion’? Acht Thesen zur Zielsetzung von Schellings unvollendetem System,” in *Religion und Religionen im Deutschen Idealismus: Schleiermacher – Hegel – Schelling*, eds. Friedrich Hermanni, Burkhard Nonnenmacher und Friedrike Schick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015): 425-445.

deployment of a Schellingian messianic-eschatologism à la Bloch and Benjamin directed against the “powerful regimes of world-historical politics” (21, 27, 93) suggests a revolutionary aim “within history” (87), but on the other, it is difficult to imagine what that “*inoperation* of political sovereignty” (191) would actually look like given that eschatological religion is by definition “incommensurate to all world-historical politics” (32), and therefore seems to effectively imply a sort of political quietism (which yet SBD rejects, e.g., on p. 198). Lacking an explanation of what the actual political outcomes of his eschatological-messianic deconstruction would be, his political theology offers little more than vague and poetical pronouncements about the need to oppose “worldly hegemonic regimes” (46) with receptive openness to “the radical futurity of the undecidable” (180).<sup>6</sup> However, when SBD reads Schelling as calling for the “abandonment” and “mortification” of “Might and Violence, not just the violence and power which belong to the mortal but even that which belongs to God’s own nature... in order to participate in [the] gentle game of love” [108, cf. 34], this suggests an ethics of non-violence which would have merited further development.

In truth, SBD’s political theology misrepresents the actual political thinking of the later Schelling. Focusing almost exclusively on the criticism of the legal mechanism of the State in the *Stuttgart Private Lectures*, he fails to pay any attention to other works where Schelling, opposing utopianisms, defends the transcendent rationality of the State, as well as its naturalness and necessity as justified by the fallen condition of humanity.<sup>7</sup> This is clearly expressed in one of Schelling’s last works, the *Exposition of the Purely Rational Philosophy*, where he simultaneously insists on the importance, indeed necessity of having a stable State, on the one hand, and on the responsibility of the individual to internally overcome State coercion, on the other (SW II/1, 548). In fact, he sees it as the duty of the State to ensure the necessary preconditions for the individual to attain “the greatest possible freedom (autarchy) – the freedom which rises above and, as it were, beyond the State, but not that which has a reverse effect on or within the State (*rückwärts auf den Staat wirkende oder im Staat*)” (SW II/1, 550). Addressing a German audience, Schelling asserts: “Let yourselves be called an ‘apolitical’ people as long as the majority among you prefers *being governed* rather than governing...and that you value the leisure (*σχολή*) which leaves the spirit and soul free for other things” (SW II/1, 549). Thus, if, on the one hand, his view of the State is fundamentally a traditional conservative one,

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6. To paraphrase Catherine Zuckert’s criticism of Derrida and the later Heidegger in “The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction,” *Polity* 23, No. 3 (Spring, 1991): 335-356, esp. at 355. Much of Zuckert’s criticism could also be applied to SBD.

7. See the balanced presentation in Alexandra Roux, “Schelling et l’État : quel « ciel sur la terre » ?” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 101, No. 3 (2003): 456-478.

on the other hand, his simultaneous affirmation of apoliticism and spiritual autarchy arguably prefigures the ideal of the Anarch in Ernst Jünger's novel *Eumeswil*.<sup>8</sup>

These reservations should not, however, detract from SBD's unique achievement. Despite his apparent predilection for Marxist thought and deconstruction – these being foreign to the later Schelling's essentially conservative sensibility – this is far from being a partisan work. Quite the contrary, it is a sincere and stimulating study which sheds fresh light on important ontological, theological and political themes in Schelling. Hopefully, it will inspire much-needed research into Schelling's late political thought and philosophy of religion.

Finally, there are some places where better proofreading was needed to avoid, for example, two inaccurate references to Schelling on p. 83, and several typographical errors (e.g., on p. 109: “yeaning” should be “yearning”; p. 103: “as it conscious as itself” should be “it is conscious as itself”; p. 232: “life of mortal” should be “mortal life”).

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8. Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977).