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Dennis Vanden Auweele. **Exceeding Reason: Freedom and Religion in Schelling and Nietzsche.** De Gruyter Press, 319 pp, 2020, ISBN 978-3-11-061775-7

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Dennis Vanden Auweele's book has the rare merit of reconciling a rigorous and focused reading of classical philosophers with a genuine philosophical proposal. As a historian of philosophy, he tries to recover the meaning of his source's thoughts in their context. And as a philosopher himself, he absorbs them as predecessors while trying to respond to a legitimate contemporary concern.

Searching for a system of thought that conciliates the need for rational completion and the necessary encounter with becoming and the extra-rational, the author reflects on the conditions for what he calls an "organic metaphysics". A philosophical project deeply rooted in the tradition of German Idealism, "[t]his metaphysics has a knowledge of the absolute that is not absolute knowing" (*Exceeding Reason*, p. 5).

To establish the grounding of the project, the author makes a proposal he recognizes as "scandalous": the comparative study of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and Friedrich Nietzsche, focusing on their similar proposals of revitalizing Western thought beyond its modern tendency of excessive rational determination and dialectical absolutism. He discards the direct influence upon the latter by the former, and even points to the fact that Nietzsche "is quite happy simply to mock Schelling as just one more Tübingen theologian" (p. 14). Nevertheless, it is precisely through the combination of historical commentary and philosophical inquiry that Vanden Auweele aims to show the "bond of consanguinity" (*Ibid.*) between the two.

This not an easy task, and in a way requires either a predisposition to accept this "scandalous" itinerary or at least some good will to dialectically engage in the matter. Very generously, the author gives in the first chapter an overview on the academic discussion about both philosophers. This exposition has the merit of situating the book's project while also presenting scholars from both "sides" to one another. It serves as an antidote against caricatures of Schelling as a steppingstone towards Hegel or of Nietzsche's view as incompatible with a religious thought more favorable to revelation and faith. These caricatures are balanced by a reading "interested in how and why they abandoned Romanticism" (p. 11), in other words, how they managed to overcome the difficulties of

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advocating a revitalization of European thought whilst not resorting to a stark opposition between reason and faith.

Vanden Auweele's own project of an organic metaphysics is a motive that returns at strategic points throughout the book. His reading takes a more holistic approach to Nietzsche's work, a most welcome movement in a field that still insists on compartmentalizing such a rich thinker in periods which don't always capture the nuances and continuities of his thought. In Schelling's case, the author begins by focusing on the *Freiheitschrift* and gradually incorporates his later works in a critical but comprehensive manner. The author aims "to show how Nietzsche's philosophy is tied to the general concerns of 19th-century German thought, with an emphasis on issues that bear similarity to Schelling's *Spätphilosophie*" (p. 18).

From the second chapter on, the book is divided in three parts. The first one ("Dualism, Rationalism and Cultural Fatigue") compares the philosophical analysis of Nietzsche and Schelling, emphasizing the similarities between their critique of a certain conception of rationality that ignores or suppresses the fundamental excess lying beyond rational determination. The second part ("Organicism, Freedom and Self-Formation") takes a more individualized approach to each philosopher, showing the consequences of their radical rethinking of the relation between freedom and nature, which implies a rearrangement of the notions of culture, life, and spirit. If in this part the distinctions between Schelling and Nietzsche become clearer, the third and last part of the book ("Mythology, Revelation and Religion") is where they really part ways. There, Vanden Auweele points out still another possibility of reconciliation between the two thinkers through the role of religion and mythology in their "mature" periods. In Schelling, the development of his concept of revelation will lead, among other things, to his later positive philosophy, and in Nietzsche, different conceptual choices and needs will lead to the overhuman and the link between religion and laughter. Vanden Auweele's original hypothesis of similar points of departure in each philosopher is then resumed jointly under the auspices of his own motive of an organic metaphysics, for which the two historical precedents are a strong, though unexpected, grounding.

I will give an overview of each part, focusing on the vital points and signaling to the questions that arose from them. I intend to show the fertility of some of the book's ideas for the study of both philosophers, as well as for contemporary philosophical discussion.

The first part synthesizes the similarities between Schelling and Nietzsche regarding their critiques of some traits of the Western philosophical tradition. It begins with a summary of the *Pantbeismusstreit*, a very happy decision since the profound consequences of this dispute are vital for Schelling's rethinking of the relation between system and freedom as well as for setting the horizon for philosophical discussion in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. Vanden Auweele does a great job showing how the polemic of Spinozism expressed the chasm between transcendental idealism, materialism, and fideism regarding the opposition between determined being and undetermined will.

The challenge posed by Jacobi and latent throughout German Idealism is to retain a strong sense of rationality and rational determination, without giving up on a strong sense of free subjectivity through so doing. The author summarizes Schelling's position in the quarrel stating that he "believed that without the overriding influence of idealism, empirical



reflection will remain ‘blind’ to freedom – like merely idealistic philosophy remains ‘empty’ of being.” (p. 30). Too much emphasis on the objective causal determination of the world dissolves subjective freedom, and too much emphasis on the subject’s internal activity of posing the world to itself produces only a negative image of reality. The challenge is to sustain the possibility of free human actions without losing sight of the phenomenal world.

The connection with Nietzsche is through his critique of Socratic optimism, “one which believes that rational dialectics is capable, by itself, not only to understand reality but also to provide shelter against its excesses” (p. 34). The critiques of historical saturation and the excessive drive towards knowledge are a common motive of Nietzsche’s thought, one that is continuously reprised throughout his life and a point of legitimate parallel with Schelling’s critique of overdetermination by Reason. Even more, taking a holistic approach to Nietzsche’s work and focusing on his “desire to rethink in more vital and organic terms such concepts as freedom, nature and religion” (p. 17), the book shows an overarching Nietzschean preoccupation with the problem of culture. This problem encompasses many others, including the question of how to direct, select and (trans)valuate the many drives that are present in nature.

However, I would argue that Vanden Auweele’s description of Spinoza’s philosophy takes for granted the German reception of his work, whereas a direct reading would show important nuances, mainly in his own notion of freedom not as linked with contingency, but with necessity. This German association of Spinoza and fatalism leads to the following interpretation, linked with Schelling: “Fatalism denies freedom, both human and divine. Spinozism is the philosophical view that there is one substance (God) [...] which, in turn, is considered the sum total of all existing things as God (*Deus sive natura*)” (p. 25). This interpretation, which I would argue is different from the one in the *Freedom Essay*, lacks the proper distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, as Vanden Auweele recognizes and signals as a difference between Schelling’s phases of thought. But I believe a more detailed presentation of Spinoza’s own work would be a great addition both to the author’s own metaphysical project and to the parallel between the German philosophers.

I would even take the liberty to say that with the notion of the Copula, Schelling could be re-interpreting the “*sive*” from the “*Deus sive natura*”. I suspect Schelling’s position towards Spinoza oscillates more than towards most of his influences. It would be really interesting to see Vanden Auweele’s take on this matter, since it would do justice to Spinoza’s role in the critique of the Stoic/Christian view of freedom as associated with free will.<sup>2</sup> This would also enrich the parallel with Nietzsche, considering not only his remarks on Spinoza as a “precursor”<sup>3</sup> but also the notion of *amor fati*, which I would argue could also be more deeply explored by the author as a Nietzschean experiment regarding the givenness of being. I’m aware this goes beyond the author’s proposal, and only point out what seems to be a fruitful path that can be sought in later opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> On this, cf. Marilena Chaui’s work *Servitude e Liberdade* [Servitude and Freedom]: “Delving into the false problem of Necessity (because Spinoza solved it before his critics invented it), [the fatalist reading] tends to forget that the real problem is on the opposite side, that is, Contingency [My translation, PNS]” (in: *Desejo, Paixão e Ação na Ética de Spinoza* [Desire, Passion and Action in Spinoza’s Ethics] – São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011. p. 197ss).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Overbeck, July 30<sup>th</sup> 1881. cKGWB/BVN-1881,13.

The two other central points of the first part are the critique of the traditional concept of Evil as merely negative (chapter 3) and the moral and cultural stagnation of modern Europe (chapter 4).

Regarding the latter, the role of mythology and religion in Schelling and Nietzsche's thought is probably the first aspect that would come to one's mind when thinking of possible parallels. But the book doesn't take an easy path, going so far as to touch the sensitive matter of Nietzsche's relation to *Volk* and not giving way to the usual dismissal of the question due to fear of association with Nazi readings of Nietzsche's work. A brave and necessary point to be made, since Vanden Auweele is right in saying that Nietzsche "never abandoned his philosophical preoccupation with developing something highly akin to a religion to assist the elevation of the species" (p. 73). In Schelling's case the same religious function of the "lifeblood of a people's thinking, acting and aspiring" (p. 72) is conceived in terms of a hyper-rational revelation passing through and above the history of religion and mythology. The author rightly underlines the role of community in both perspectives, a claim that shouldn't be scandalous for Nietzsche's readers, since surpassing the caricature of the "radical individualist with nothing to do with his surroundings" is well overdue.

The fourth chapter also revisits the problems of historical saturation and excessive rational determination, invoking the Nietzschean theme of the self-deconstruction of Christianity through its own excess of historicity – in short, the death of God. The basic idea of such self-deconstruction is that Christianity made itself "incredible" (p. 88) by the demystification of religion through an excessive demand of "truthfulness" engendered in its core beliefs, a demand that includes the historical nature of the Christian God. The overlap between rationality and historicity could be more extensively developed, being such a core element of the author's point. I believe a more detailed look towards Nietzsche's early remarks on the notion of untimeliness could reinforce the author's claims of an authentic Nietzschean attitude towards reason and freedom.<sup>4</sup> The very nature of untimeliness could be read as a consequence of this Nietzschean departure from modern over-rationalizing of history. But this absence does not harm the author's main argument of the profound link between historical saturation and rational determination.

The Nietzschean concept of genealogy, on the other hand, is well established in the third chapter. The author states that "Nietzsche's genealogy serves not only to represent how history has evolved, but also to show a mythological or proto-historical moral past, where a more natural and organic perspective reigns, and which was upset by an artificial, human intervention" (p. 53). This reading is not only correct but strategically phrased since the author's claim for an organic metaphysics goes along with Nietzsche's more naturalistic readings. Even though the role of nature in his thought may arguably vary, the idea of a natural grounding for culture and morality is a very stable aspect of Nietzsche's critique of modernity. Besides the Genealogy, Vanden Auweele himself recalls the cultural philistine, the main focus of attacks in *UM I* as "responsible for disrupting the natural evolution of culture" (p. 89). Again, this flexibility between the periods is a merit of the author's holistic reading of Nietzsche.

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<sup>4</sup> A short but fruitful essay on the matter is Giorgio Agamben's *What is Contemporary? In: What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella – Stanford University Press, 2009.



While the focus of the third chapter is the question of the traditional conception of Evil as a merely negative concept, the disruption of the natural order by a misleading moral grounding is also present in Schelling's attack on the "Eleatic tradition". The latter is motivated by its conceptualizing of Evil in terms of "absence, privation or opposition" (p. 52). Both Schelling and Nietzsche try to think of Evil as a reality *per se*, related to goodness not as a complementary, negative, or illusory Absolute Other, but again in an "organic interrelationship rather than in dogmatic superimposition" (p. 71).

Vanden Auweele's project of a turn towards an organic comprehension of reality is an undercurrent through the whole book, and the first three chapters lay the ground for its consequences in metaphysics, morality, and culture. What is true for a philosophical system also works for individuals, cultures, religions, and peoples: the irreducible presence of a reality exceeding our rationality demands the capability of adaptation and renewal of the standards we use to perceive, judge, and alter such reality. This can be described both in Vanden Auweele's terms and in his relation to Schelling and Nietzsche:

[They] have given arguments against the process wherein a religion, mythology or identity becomes rationalized or historicized because this turns its identity stagnant and incapable of evolution and transformation. When such a stagnant identity is faced with adversity and opposition, one is forced to relinquish it altogether as it has become incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. (p. 103)

The second part of the book (chapters 5 and 6) concentrates on the matter of freedom, deepening the discussion in search of a more "organic" approach. Each chapter shows the complex net of concepts and images constructed by the two philosophers so that a new idea of freedom can be posed against and beyond traditional views. Even though this more focused approach of each thinker (chapter 5 on Schelling, chapter 6 on Nietzsche) inevitably moves away from the similarities and parallels shown in the first part, it does so without losing its grip on their common themes. Right at the beginning, Vanden Auweele states: "What is germane to both Schelling's and Nietzsche's points of view is that freedom is not in radical opposition to the givenness of nature but works with and through what is given" (p. 107).

In chapter 5, the theme of the *Pantheismusstreit* returns and is now shown in the particular context of Schelling's *Freedom Essay* and *Ages of the World*. Again, my critique of the author's reading of Spinoza is to the lack of a more direct reading, considering his own words. Even though this chapter displays nuance, Vanden Auweele's picture of a more or less pantheistic Spinoza is still too Germanized: "In this frame of thought, there is no distinction whatsoever between God and the world or between, to use Spinoza's terms, *natura naturans* (nature naturing) and *natura naturata* (nature natured) – *Deus sive natura*" (p. 115).

Going forward, one of the main arguments in chapter 6 is that both forms of a problematic culture in Nietzsche's critiques,

*... either as lack of culture or a bad culture, are neither in opposition nor in contradiction. In fact, Nietzsche seems to suggest [...] that the lack of culture results from a protracted bad culture, which then goes on to constitute a bad culture of its own – the lack of culture becomes a culture of itself. (p. 147).*

In other terms, there would be an interdependence between the typically barbaric absence of style and the decadent simile of culture that comes from it. This is important in developing Vanden Auweele's notion of organicity, and he does a great job in deriving Nietzsche's proposal of a life-affirming culture from the same problem of the relation between given nature and freedom. To do that, he identifies the image of the "herd" as an incapacity of "acclaiming freedom from blind being", while "resentment" would be a refusal to accept one's given nature (p. 146). This characterization, more akin to the parallel with Schelling and with the author's project, is nevertheless pretty accurate in underlining Nietzsche's unique understanding of the relation between nature and culture, where the latter acts like a translucent veil over the former, showing no more than the necessary to recognize the will to power underneath.

The chapter ends with an interpretation of the renowned and difficult "Other Dance Song" of Zarathustra. It develops Nietzsche's primary aim of an affirmation of life that does not flinch before the task of the overhuman. In terms of the cultural problem, it means to achieve life affirmation "through culturing a human being by means of a life-affirmative ideal" (p. 178). One could argue that Vanden Auweele's Nietzsche gives a tautological argument: "why are life-affirming ideals affirmative? because they affirm life!". But that would ignore the insistence of the distance between being and freedom that has underpinned the whole analysis. The tension between Life, Zarathustra, and his wisdom is the main symbol of this distance, and the closing of Part II.

This symbolical high point makes a smooth passage to the third and last part, to which I'll make only two observations regarding, again, themes that can be explored in the future. This last part aims to show how Nietzsche and Schelling's views on religion are a direct consequence of their radicalized conceptions of freedom. To "experience this freedom to the highest possible extent" (p. 195) is also to make way for a complex and nuanced conception of the role of mythology and religion to mankind.

Chapter 7 lays the ground with the discussion of the evolution of Schelling's relation to negative and positive philosophy, being that:

*Negative philosophy is the science of systematic reason that details the necessary, causal, and conceptual connections between thought-objects; positive philosophy is the science or practice of philosophy that deals with real, historical, and free being (p. 197)*

The need for a philosophy that could incorporate the positive fact of revelation and thus enrich itself by its relation to religion is well developed throughout the chapter, and the book deals very smoothly with some of the most difficult concepts of Schelling. The author's description of the relation between mythology and language in chapter 8, is one of the most interesting points of contact between Schelling and Nietzsche. It regards the symbolical language, treated by Schelling through the concept of the Tautegorical. Vanden Auweele's description of the concept reads as follows:



*Tautegorical means that something expresses the same thing with different words. Therefore, different mythologies express the same thing – the system and history of the gods – with different words and names. This is what Schelling also calls a religious meaning in mythology, namely that there is something fundamentally similar at work in all mythologies. (p. 236)*

I would differ from the author's point of view in that his interpretation of the Tautegorical seems to miss the deeper link between the expression and the expressed in the symbol – being that symbolical language is the medium *par excellence* of the gods' expression. To “say the same thing in other words” is still an allegorical approach to language, which is possible since for Schelling “the symbolic meaning encompasses the allegorical”<sup>5</sup>, but still misses the nature of the symbol. In a genuinely Tautegorical symbol, the expressed would be identical to the expression itself, while this identity would have to incorporate the internal dynamics of its own differentiation. The similarity to the Copula is not circumstantial.<sup>6</sup> The Tautegorical seems to indicate a dialectical notion of a dynamic symbol, and even to an organic comprehension of language itself.

Without this development, I argue that the book's last part gives a somewhat dualist view of language, separating its concreteness from its meaning – or, in other terms, its positive and negative aspects. The author is well aware of this and openly discusses various philosophical interpretations of the multiplicity and unification of mythological meaning and mythological conscience. But still, the take on language falls short of overcoming the negative aspect in the evolution and multiplicity of languages.

The transition from chapter 8 to chapter 9 appears quite natural, since Vanden Auweele tries to show how Nietzsche saw the “pedagogical potential of religion to inspire a more life-affirmative composure by inculcating bravery, and by providing the festivals that provide comic release where and when bravery is not an option” (p. 261). In this description, religion seems to work as a cultural pharmakon – poison and medicine, depending on the dose, since the fight against disease “can be waged in a healthy or sick fashion” (p. 291) – and laughter as a tonic towards the continuous self-creation of the overhuman. This is all against the background of a conception of culture as a never-ending search for the space of openness to revelation and self-honesty where man and his freedom intertwine.

A deeper exploration of language both in Schelling and Nietzsche could be a very fruitful addition to the author's aims. There's even a moment where Vanden Auweele refers to Nietzsche's claim that “...one culture's art and morality [...] are incredibly difficult to translate into a different language because of the tempo or style of the language. Different languages have a different tempo” (p. 288). With such a strong indication of the importance of the concrete fact of language to culture in general, the book refrains again from approaching the theme of the linguistical nature of humans with more emphasis.

As with any solid work of historically grounded philosophical questioning, the book stimulates later inspections of Nietzsche and Schelling through a fairly original lens. Initial

<sup>5</sup> SCHELLING, F.W.J. *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Stott, D. W. – Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Pg. 47

<sup>6</sup> On this, cf. TORRES FILHO, R. R., *O Simbólico em Schelling* [Symbolic in Schelling]: “The symbol, as identity of being and signification, *stages* this active and transitive “is”, the only one effectively stated in the proposition A *is* A. And the positivity of identity as principle of philosophy is in [the symbol]: not as mere non-contradiction (tautology) but as absolute self-affirming (Tautegory) [My translation, PNS]” (In: *Ensaio de filosofia ilustrada* – São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2004. p. 133).

uncertainties about the potential parallel between the two seemingly distant philosophers are relieved by the fruitful analysis of *Exceeding Reason*. Vanden Auweele's own project of an "organic metaphysics" stands on the shoulders of such a dynamic duo. It seems natural, at the end, to regard "critical thought and faith as two necessary, unique, and interrelated aspects of a full philosophy: a doubleness rather than dualism. Human beings need both their highest heavens and deepest pits" (p. 293).

The idea of an organic approach to metaphysics stimulates discussions that go beyond the history of Philosophy, indicating a new perspective on traditional philosophical themes. This perspective is yet to be developed by Vanden Auweele and others, but the book lays the groundwork by recovering Schelling and Nietzsche's attempt of a revitalization of Western thought through a renewed view on freedom, religion, and culture. *Exceeding Reason* should reinvigorate Schelling and Nietzsche scholars in their respective fields while providing a fresh and fertile ground for future explorations.

