

Creating the Past: Schelling's *Ages of the World*

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Abstract

F.W.J. Schelling's *Ages of the World* has just begun to receive the critical attention it deserves as a contribution to the philosophy of history. Its most significant philosophical move is to pose the question of the origin of the past itself, asking what "caused" the past. Schelling treats the past not as a past present (something that used to be a 'now' but no longer is) – but rather as an eternal past, a different dimension of time altogether, and one that was never a present 'now'. For Schelling, the past functions as the transcendental ground of the present, the true 'a priori'. Schelling's account of the creation of this past takes the form of a theogeny: in order to exist, God needed to separate the past from the present. By grounding the creation of the past in a free decision of God, Schelling tries to conceptualize temporality so as to preserve the sort of radical contingency and authentic freedom that he considers essential features of history. In so doing, he opens up a way of viewing time that avoids the pitfalls of the Hegelian dialectic and anticipates some of the 20th century developments in phenomenology.

Keywords

Schelling, *Ages of the World*, Hegel, history, time, God, transcendental logic

Introduction

When Schelling sat down to write the *Ages of the World* he had a large number of seemingly contradictory philosophical commitments to reconcile. He wanted to avoid dualism and yet acknowledge the essential and

irreducible roles of both spirit and matter. He wanted to give a law-like description of the creation of the world and yet preserve divine freedom. He wanted to treat God as perfect and self-sufficient and yet also account for the motive underlying God's decision to create the world. Perhaps most paradoxically of all, he wanted to explain what events led up to the creation of the past – what 'caused' time.

Not all of these problems were new to Schelling. In his 1809 essay, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, he had made a concerted attempt at addressing a number of these issues, and in the *Ages of the World* (from 1811, 1813 and 1815) Schelling remains largely within the theoretical framework of that earlier work. What changes now is his focus: in the *Ages of the World* we see Schelling bringing the philosophical resources he developed in the *Freedom* essay to bear on the problems of history and time. As such, the essay is an important contribution to the philosophy of history. Its reception has been hampered by difficulties due in part to problems and delays in its publication (and translation), and in part to the philosophical language of the text itself. This essay presents a new reading of the *Ages of the World* in an attempt to emphasize its rich philosophical significance.

The Dark Ground

One of the most fruitful and enduring concepts from the *Freedom* essay was the idea that all of existence (including God's existence) is based on a dark, irrational ground. Schelling famously writes:

order and form nowhere appear to have been original, but it seems as though what had initially been unruly had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest exertion but always remains in the depths. Out of this which is unreasonable, reason in the true sense is born. Without this preceding gloom, creation would have no reality; darkness is its necessary heritage.¹

¹) *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1936), 34. Further references to this text will be marked as FS with a page reference to this translation.

In the *Freedom* essay, this notion of a dark ground was key to Schelling's explanation of God's freedom as well as God's personality, because both depend on a certain facticity, a blunt and pre-rational foundation that the ground is able to provide. There must be something outside of spirit, Schelling argues, an obscurity (associated with materiality) that cannot be assimilated to, reduced to, or deduced from, spirit.

Although Schelling retains the notion of a dark ground in the *Ages of the World*, one key point of departure from the *Freedom* essay is his increased epistemological optimism. As the passage above makes clear, the *Freedom* essay regarded the ground as "incomprehensible." Now, he says of the material ground that it is "less easy to comprehend and harder to penetrate. It requires diligence and mental effort to become comprehensible..."² So it is hard work but no longer impossible, and Schelling is committed to developing a set of conceptual tools that will do the trick. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the *Ages of the World* is Schelling's predilection for logic, the way he conceptualizes his project in what we might (following Kant) describe as a sort of transcendental logic. But unlike Kant, Schelling did not simply adopt the conventions of traditional logic. Instead, he pushes logical principles to a point where they themselves are subject to revision: in theorizing the ground, Schelling is expanding, not policing, the boundaries of what is thinkable.³ Kant understands transcendental logic to mean that logic is the ultimate ground for the possibility of experience; Schelling however is asking a transcendental question of logic: how is logic itself made possible?⁴

Schelling's desire to bring logic into contact with material existence is apparent everywhere. One of his most powerful arguments for believing in an irrational ground emerges directly from the principle of sufficient reason, which holds that everything has a cause, ground, reason or motive for

² *Ages of the World* in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 142. This is a translation of the second draft of the *Ages of the World*; further references to this text will be marked as WA II with the page number to this translation.

³ Here we see Schelling parting ways with Schopenhauer as well. Schopenhauer had considered the "will" to be unthinkable because it did not conform to the dictates of reason in general and the principle of sufficient reason in particular.

⁴ As we will see at the end of this essay, Schelling's quite technical interest in logical issues also brings him into contact with the logical linguistic focus of twentieth century analytic philosophy.

why it is as it is (the German term for the principle of sufficient reason is the ‘principle of the ground’ [*der Satz vom Grund*]). Schelling makes frequent use of this principle, and a central argument of the *Ages of the World* is: if X is the ground of Y, then X cannot have the same properties as Y. For instance, if X is the ground of spirit, X cannot itself be spiritual. This follows from the principle of sufficient reason because if the ground shared the character of the grounded (if X were spiritual) then it would presuppose a prior ground (since, according to the principle, everything has a ground). So, if X were spiritual then we would need to locate the ground of spirit in something prior to X, which is necessarily not itself spiritual but rather material. So the existence of spirit entails the existence of matter. (The obvious next question, about whether the existence of matter in turn entails the existence of spirit, is one we will see Schelling grappling with below.)

Interesting results arise when Schelling begins to apply this reasoning to God, since God is traditionally considered to be a *causa sui*: a self-caused cause, or his own ground:

... people have appealed long enough to the idea that God is the ground of his own existence... Now, that which is only the ground of existence cannot have an essence and qualities which are as one with what exists; and if existence is to be regarded as free, conscious, and (in the highest sense) intelligent, then what is merely the ground of its existence cannot be conscious, free, and intelligent in the same sense. Moreover, since most people call the opposite of these qualities ‘physical,’ let them now see whether they themselves have not unknowingly attributed a primacy of the physical in God, despite their repugnance at the thought. (WA II, 149)

God as his own ground must be both spiritual and material. As God, He is spiritual (conscious, intelligent, and so on). The ground of spirit however cannot itself be spiritual; it must therefore be material (unconscious, for instance). But if God *is* his own ground, then God must *also* be material. Matter is the ground in God that is not itself God, as Schelling argued in the *Freedom* essay. In fact, Schelling takes this argument even further: while spirit can be said to exist, the material ground cannot: it is ontologically incomplete, prior to existence and therefore not itself something that exists in the fullest sense. One commentator aptly describes it as a “ham-

pered” Being.⁵ Schelling’s application of the principle of sufficient reason leads to a novel ontology in addition to a heterodox theology.

This argument makes it clear how Schelling’s rigorous emphasis on the logical consequences of one principle (that of sufficient reason) starts to problematize another principle (that of identity). In what sense is God himself *and* his own ground? This is a question that had perplexed Schelling since the identity philosophy and his intense encounter with Spinoza. But it also looks forward to quite modern – or postmodern? – concerns about identity. Even for God (who is, after all, the foundation of self-identity) to be himself, he must also somehow incorporate what he is not. As such, God’s identity is something produced, fragile almost, and in its identity also not the same as itself.

To these logical and ontological conundrums of the *Freedom* essay, Schelling now in the *Ages of the World* adds a *chronological* dimension, arguing that the material ground also plays the role of God’s past. In the *Ages of the World*, the question of how God can act as his own ground now becomes the question of how God created a past for himself.

The History of the Project

Given the paradoxical, almost unimaginable nature of this question, it is hardly surprising that Schelling spent years struggling to give an answer. In fact, the *Ages of the World* is the name of an on-going and ultimately unfinished project rather than a single text. In 1810 Schelling produced a fairly complete draft of the work that he almost published in 1811 (he allowed the manuscript to be typeset). But he was dissatisfied, and rather than proceeding with publication he decided to re-write the work completely, submitting a second draft to the typesetters in 1813. But he cancelled this publication too, and then cancelled a third one (in 1815); at this point, Schelling stopped trying to draft a monograph to be called *Ages of the World*. Nonetheless, he continued to be engaged with the themes of the work, and in 1827/28 he gave a series of lectures under this title to students at the University of Munich.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Abyss of Freedom’ in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, 6.

The history of the publication of *The Ages of the World* is equally fraught. When Schelling's son, K.F.A. Schelling, published a collection of his father's complete works in 1861, he chose the 1815 draft for inclusion, because it was the longest and seemed the most complete. The other drafts, as well as the numerous notes on the project, remained in a truck in the cellar of the library of the University of Munich until 1939, when Horst Fuhrmans dug out the printer's proofs of the first two drafts, along with other material. In July 1944, the US Air Force bombed Munich for three days.⁶ The library of the University of Munich burnt to the ground, and the Schelling truck along with it. Everything in it was destroyed, and it is sheer luck that Fuhrmans had removed the other drafts of the *Ages of the World*, finally published by Manfred Schröter in 1946.⁷

The ages of the world are, of course, the three dimensions of time: the past, the present and the future. Schelling originally conceived the *Ages of the World* as a three-part work, but none of the existing drafts discuss anything except the past (a few of the notes have a brief discussion of the present, but there is nothing on the future). Strictly speaking then, the *Ages of the World* is a fragment rather than a work, the beginning of what was to be a much larger and more comprehensive project explaining each of the dimensions of time.

Creating the Past: the Narrative of the Ages of the World

Perhaps it is just sour grapes, but it is difficult to imagine that any of the other, unwritten parts would grapple with problems as philosophically engaging as the ones Schelling faces in describing the origin of the past. Not only does Schelling pose the question of *how* God created his own past – he is also concerned to explain *why* God decided to do so. This latter problem is a more familiar one: not only had it dogged Schelling's own attempts at philosophical systems over the past few decades, but it has

⁶ This attack killed almost 1500 civilians.

⁷ *Die Weltalter. Fragmente in den Urauffassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed. M Schröter (Munich: Biederstein and Leibniz, 1946). This volume contains the first two drafts. The second and the third have been translated in to English; the second by Judith Norman in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, op. cit., and the third by Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000) – referenced henceforth as WA III, with page numbers referring to this edition.

perplexed the history of philosophy since Plato: why would a perfect, self-sufficient God create an imperfect world? Or, in the terms Schelling came increasingly to adopt: why did God decide to reveal himself in history? If this question is a traditional one, Schelling's answer is not, as we will now see.

a) *Primal Nature*

Schelling begins his history of creation by describing what is essentially the dark ground of the *Freedom* essay: he calls it primal nature or 'God's eternal nature'. It is characterized by an incessant clash of forces caught in an inescapable cycle. There are three fundamental forces (or potencies): a negating, inward-turning, contracting force; an affirming, outwards-flowing, expansive force; and a third force that is their unity. The first two forces are opposed: the expansive force is constantly overcoming the contracting force. And the third force, being the unity of the two, opposes and overcomes this conflict – unity here is conceived as the opposition of opposition. But this achieved unity is instantly negated by reinstated opposition of the first two forces, and the cycle begins all over again. Schelling describes the interaction of the forces as cyclical (successive) because their antagonism prevents them from coexisting.

Schelling describes this cycle in fairly strong terms, as a nightmarish spiral or chaos – but at this same time, he insists that this is the necessary nature of God. This is the primordial chaos out of which the world was created, and the three potencies are fated to become the recognizable features of the created world.

Schelling considers the order of these potencies to be highly significant. Which one comes first? Here, he argues that the negative force has to be first in the sequence (if the notion of a first even makes sense when discussing a cycle – but we will return to this problem later). "There is therefore no doubt that if a succession takes place among the primordial powers of life, only the power that contracts and represses the being can be the initiating power" (WA III, 17). Natural phenomena repeatedly reveal the priority of negation:

Darkness and concealment are the dominant characteristics of the primordial time. All life first becomes and develops in the night; for this reason, the ancients called night the fertile mother of things and indeed, together with chaos, the oldest of beings (WA II, 179).

And in the *Freedom* essay:

All birth is a birth out of darkness into light: the seed must be buried in the earth and die in darkness in order that the lovelier creature of light should rise and unfold itself in the rays of the sun. Man is formed in his mother's womb; and only out of the darkness of unreason (out of feeling, out of longing, the sublime mother of understanding) grow clear thoughts. (FS, 35)

As the language in these passages makes clear, this is not simply a question of the order of the forces in primal nature, Schelling is making a general point about the nature of origins. *The Ages of the World* is a primer in the 'logic' of the beginning as such.⁸

Schelling gives several reasons for this choice of priority. The first is that the most basic conditions of identity require some kind of self-enclosure and that can only be provided by the negative force (which Schelling sometimes describes as that of selfhood or egoity [WA III, 16]). Another consideration is that Schelling believes development is essentially an overcoming and requires a resistance at the onset in order for there to be something to overcome. But perhaps the main reason why the negative force necessarily precedes the positive force has to do with Schelling's alternative characterization of primal nature: he describes it as a type of will and writes:

only together do the three potencies fulfill the concept of the divine nature, and only that this nature is so, is necessary. Since there is consequently an unremitting urge to be, and since it cannot be, it comes to a standstill in desire, as an unremitting striving, an eternally insatiable obsession with Being. The ancient saying is appropriate regarding this: Nature strives for itself and does not find itself. (WA III, 21; also 27–28)

As we saw Schelling arguing before, primal nature is the ground of existence and therefore cannot itself be said to exist. Here he clarifies that it is in fact a *longing* for existence. This suggests an Aristotelian dimension to the text: nature is something potential whose *telos* is the perfection of pure actuality. (This will prove to be even more Aristotelian when Schelling equates the actuality nature longs for with God.) But the passage recalls Plato as

⁸⁾ A problem Hegel was also famously occupied with at this time, in the *Science of Logic*.

well as Aristotle, since Schelling follows the *Symposium* in characterizing this state of longing (what Plato calls *eros*) as a combination of poverty and plenty – or in his terms, negative and positive forces (WA III, 31).

Characterizing nature as a sort of will or *eros* has implications for the question of the priority of the forces; specifically, it provides one more reason why poverty (negation, contraction) must come first:

beginning really only lies in the negation. All beginning is, in accord with its nature, only a desire for the end or for what leads to the end and hence, negates itself as the end. It is only the tension of the bow – it is not so much that which itself has being as it is the ground that something is. It is not enough for a beginning that now commences or becomes not to be. It must be expressly posited as that which does not have being. A ground is thereby given for it to be (WA III, 16).

So given the structure of will, negation needs to come first. Will cannot, by definition, possess its goal at the outset; it is a negation of its goal and this negation serves as a ground for the positive existence of the goal.

Schelling attempts to use this analysis of the structure of beginning in general without reference to the will. To begin something is precisely not to actually be doing it yet. The beginning of anything must therefore involve the actualization of something that is *not yet* what is beginning: if what was beginning were already actualized, then it would already have begun. As Schelling's prosaic example has it: "The beginning of the line is the geometrical point – but not because it is extended itself but rather because it is the negation of all extension" (WA III, 16). Of course the question of whether the conception of negation in the absence of something to be negated (or indeed desire existing before its object) is a sound one is certainly a worry, and one that the vocabulary of actuality and potentiality does not fully dispel.

When focusing on Schelling's characterization of primal nature, it is possible to find strands of a certain materialism in his thinking: even God, the creator of the cosmos, is dependent on an inner material kernel. And in a number of places Schelling seems to speak as if this matter gives rise to everything else (WA III, 17, 19). The prime matter that Schelling has in mind here is of course very different from the passive recipient of form that Aristotle and the tradition had in mind. It is a surging chaos of unreason

and unfulfilled desire. It is precisely because of this immanent activity that Schelling can contemplate it as productive of forms. With this active conception of matter, Schelling can be located within a line of thought that leads in the direction of Schopenhauer,⁹ Nietzsche,¹⁰ and a Freudian, psychodynamic conception of drives,¹¹ and then beyond, into the energetic materialism of twentieth century French philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari.¹² The fundamental insight of this line of materialist thinkers is that it is an impoverished conception of matter as passive or ‘dead’ that has, historically, driven idealist thinkers from Plato to Kant to posit a transcendent realm of forms that have a separate, extra-material origin. Schelling may have been the first to consider the consequences of a wider conception of matter that already includes a capacity to develop forms without presupposing a separate realm of forms themselves.

b) *Longing for God*

The characteristic preoccupation of Schelling’s work from this period however problematizes any facile conception of a materialist Schelling. This becomes evident from the manner in which Schelling motivates the transition from God’s eternal nature to an actually existing God. At this point in the text Schelling has established that God’s necessary nature consists of an eternal rotary motion of contractive and expansive forces or drives. But far from resolving any philosophical difficulties, this actually constitutes Schelling’s problem: how did we ever get *out* of this eternal – and eternally necessary – self-enclosed round into the linear temporality with which we are familiar?

⁹ There is some evidence that Schopenhauer had read the *Freedom* essay: see Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 111. Certainly Schelling’s admission that “the true prime matter of all life and existence is precisely what is horrifying” (WA III, 104) suggests a close proximity in their thought: the inner nature of things is a horrible and eternal cycle of unfulfilled and insatiable desire. There are even closer parallels, well worth exploring, between Schelling’s *Ages of the World* and Schopenhauer as well as Nietzsche on the issue of music and the importance of the Dionysian. See WA III, 102–3.

¹⁰ See J. Norman, “Schelling and Nietzsche: Willing and Time” in *The New Schelling*, ed. J. Norman and A. Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹¹ See O. Marquard, “Several Connections between Aesthetics and Therapeutics in Nineteenth-century Philosophy” in *The New Schelling*.

¹² See A. Toscano, “Philosophy and the Experience of Construction” in *The New Schelling*.

Here Schelling introduces an apparently new conception: that of the godhead [*Gotttheit*]: “we had to acknowledge still something else outside and beyond that necessity of God... This Other is eternal freedom, pure conation itself” (WA III, 27). But there is some ambiguity in the texts themselves about whether the godhead really is something new – indeed, the worry mentioned earlier about the coherence of the priority of negation seems to require that it not be new. And in fact, in the second draft Schelling suggests that God was there all along, while in the third draft Schelling states that during its chaotic stage, “there is nothing outside of [primal nature]” (WA III, 12). But in a sense this ambiguity is the ambiguity of Schelling’s philosophy itself. The ‘nothing’ of the 3rd draft is also Odysseus’s pun from book 9 of the *Odyssey*: the godhead itself, as Schelling declares a few pages later, *is* nothing (WA III, 24; see also 60, 86).

Indeed it is possible to locate the kernel of the diverging historical interpretations and influence of Schelling at this very point as well. The materialist line regards the introduction of the godhead as nothing new: nature already has the capability ultimately to produce something like the godhead. The non-materialist line sees the whole problem precisely in the nature of this ‘nothing.’ Heidegger’s 1929 lecture ‘What is Metaphysics’ encapsulates this neatly: metaphysics is traditionally understood as what is ‘beyond’ physics. But there is nothing beyond physics: literally, no thing. However this should not be understood as a denigration of the task of metaphysics, but rather as an intimation of its difficulty: to think the condition or fundamental presupposition of things is to think something that cannot itself be a thing. Schelling’s conception of God operates in a very similar intellectual register. For many German commentators (including Heidegger) Schelling’s God marks the intervention of a fundamental (and necessary) presupposition of thought that cannot be expressed in the vocabulary of existing things and is therefore, in a sense, nothing.¹³

Schelling describes exactly what this ‘nothing’ entails: the godhead’s most salient characteristic is its static, self-contented actuality, its achieved nirvana. It is, as Schelling describes it, the will that wills nothing. Significantly, Schelling equates this with a state of pure freedom. This is because

¹³ Heidegger delivered a set of famous lectures on Schelling’s *Freedom* essay whose main thematic is the incompatibility of freedom with system. These constitute a remarkable close reading of Schelling’s text, but in some ways obscure the deeper kinship between Heidegger and Schelling.

the godhead is composed of two wills, the will to exist and the will not to exist – and Schelling defines freedom as the ability to do either. But these wills are not at war with each other in the way that the forces of primal nature were. Schelling describes their opposition as latent; the wills are not actively opposed but in a state of indifference or equipollence. In fact, this indifference is just what safeguards God's freedom – he is free to exist or not to exist.

The appearance of this divine essence brings about a complete change in the chaotic cycle of the drives. This is the goal of their longing and now they have their goal before them: freedom and tranquility. Consequently, as Schelling describes it, the forces separate out, draw apart from each other, and form a sort of chain of longing, a hierarchy with the negating force at the bottom, serving as the ground, the affirming force in the middle, and the unity on top. This is of course all highly metaphorical – it is difficult to make sense of the notion of forces 'separating' and forming a 'chain'. But Schelling hints that this 'separation' (which, strictly speaking is all occurring before creation) is the blueprint for spatiality once creation has occurred. (This is the moment, Schelling says, when the heavens separate from the earth; WA III, 28) Metaphors at this level are necessarily not merely decorative. If space was produced at all, then it must have been produced out of something non-spatial (this is the principle of the sufficient reason again). But this can be understood, if at all, only figuratively. The 'separation' that Schelling talks of here is therefore not *within* space, but *constitutive* of space.¹⁴

This spatial separation of forces eases their antagonism and they cooperate towards a common goal: achieving the recognition of the pure godhead. The forces want to be recognized as God's own nature, which is to say: collectively posited as the eternal ground of God. These different elements (primal nature and the godhead) are, strictly speaking, both aspects of God, and Schelling calls them God's nature and God's freedom or essence. So the longing is really God longing for himself, for his own organic wholeness or living existence. As Schelling had said in the *Freedom* essay: "It is the longing which the eternal One feels to give birth to itself" (FS, 34). This is why God's acknowledgment would be a form of recognition; God would recognize in nature his own desire to exist.

¹⁴ In this context, Schelling distinguishes a relative spatiality (left/right) from an absolute spatiality (under/over). See WA III, p. 38.

c) *God's Decision*

Primal nature is ultimately successful in achieving this recognition according to Schelling who writes: “now the Godhead recognizes in nature its own eternal nature and is from now on, albeit free with respect to nature and neither bound to it nor growing into it, nonetheless inseparable from it” (WA III, 38). Schelling describes this as a decision that God freely makes; it amounts to God's decision to exist. Primal nature gets positioned as the ground on which the divine essence can exist, and the result is a genuine, living God, not just the abstract, disembodied essence of the godhead. In Schelling's vocabulary of contagion, God ‘contracts’ existence, taking on nature *as* his nature.

But this decision gives rise to a crisis. We can recall that the divine godhead consists of two forces, a will to exist and a will not to exist, and God is, strictly, the indifference between these. If he were to eliminate either of these wills (for instance, by choosing to exist), then the essence of God would be essentially changed. Although this might not seem problematic on the face of it, this would mean that God would no longer be free. Freedom, to recall, is the freedom to be or not to be, and it is only the presence of both wills in God that assures his continuing freedom. The problem, then, is how a living God can remain free after deciding to exist. This is the crux of the essay and the key to the creation of time.

The only way for God to remain free is for him to retain both wills: he must both reject and accept primal nature. As Schelling describes it, God's initial response to the longing of nature is rejection: he makes clear that nature is his other, something distinct from himself. But this negation is accompanied by an affirmation, because in distinguishing himself off from nature, God implicitly affirms himself and his existence. We can understand this in terms of Spinoza's slogan that all determination is negation – God's determination of his existence entails a rejection of nature. But in order to exist, God needs to accept primal nature. So the acts of affirmation and negation cannot be distinct.

In rejecting primal nature, God is refusing to allow it to become the ground of his existence, and is thus rejecting his own existence. And in accepting it, he is assuming its grounding role. This duality is captured in the notion that God both is and is not his own ground. We can understand this by reference to our intuition that people both are and are not their own bodies. Of course we all are bodies, but the fact that we feel more comfortable saying that we *have* bodies rather than that we

are bodies shows that this identification is not complete, and that we strictly identify with something more than the corporeal (whether it be a mind, soul, or social character), something that is nonetheless grounded in the body.

So God is both an affirmation and negation. But how is it possible to be both at the same time? Schelling's answer is that it is not possible. In order to appear as the eternal indifference between what is and what is not, God must appear as both; and the only way to accomplish this, to appear as both of two contradictory things, is to separate the past from the present and reveal himself sequentially, in time – and it is clear what order the sequence will take. The negating will, the jealous, exclusionary, wrathful side of God (the Hebrew God) precedes the affirming will, the loving, inclusive (Christian) God. We can see that Schelling is using the pattern he established before, that negation has to precede affirmation both logically – and now also chronologically; in other words, that the succession of wills in the revelation of God recapitulates the succession of forces in primal nature. In creating himself, God creates time and history.

Schelling's Theory of Time

The Ages of the World is a narrative of the creation of time. Before looking at the paradoxes inherent in this project, we can note the logical mechanics of Schelling's account. Temporality emerges from a combination of the principle of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and the principle of sufficient reason. The principle of sufficient reason dictates that God must have a ground (nature) that is material, i.e. different in kind from God. But the principle of identity means that God must *be* that ground. As it happens, however, God both accepts his ground (the ground is an essential part of what he is, it is the principle of his existence) and yet negates it (since the ground cannot be the same as what it grounds). So God's existence is a contradiction. The scholastic definition of a contradiction is that it is impossible for both *x* and not-*x* to be the case *at the same time*. This traditional caveat suggests the solution that Schelling radicalizes: the only way to resolve a contradiction is through time; although opposites (in this case, negation and affirmation) cannot be predicated of the same thing (God) at the same time, they can at different times,

with the past as backwards-pulling negation and the present as outwards-flowing affirmation.¹⁵

What this means is that time was created to solve the logical dilemma of God's existence. Just as space must have been created out of something non-spatial (or at least *differently* spatial), so this temporal ordering of negation and affirmation must not be understood as just happening *in* time; rather, it is constitutive *of* time. God's decision to exist had the effect of splitting eternity up into the dimensions of time. (And the decision itself occurs at the interstices between eternity and time.) The past was placed at the ground of the present; in a sense, the past and the present were created simultaneously. But Schelling writes that this grounding relation

cannot be of the sort where the predecessor is sublated when the successor is posited. Rather, it is of the sort where, when the successor is posited, the predecessor is as well, although it remains only *as a predecessor* (WA II, 173).

What this means is that the past and present occupy different planes of existence, as it were. Schelling rejects the notion, almost universally held since Aristotle, that the past is a past present – something that used to be a 'now' but no longer is. For Schelling, the past was never a present or a 'now', it has always been the past, it is always already past. He writes:

The past clearly cannot be a present at the same time as the present; but as past, it is certainly simultaneous with the present, and it is easy to see that the same holds true of the future (WA II, 174).

Schelling believes that this is phenomenologically evident as well as rationally sound. He argues that a close inspection of our experience of time reveals two forces, one pushing forward and another holding back. If it were not for the one holding back, time would slip away instantly; if it were not for the one pushing forward, time would stagnate and not move forward at all. Once again, Schelling's claim is that a contracting, negative force is evident in all things, acting as a ground of an affirmative, expansive force.

¹⁵⁾ Although Schelling does not fill this out himself, we can see that the future would be the unity of the two opposing forces – a utopian, inclusive outcome where conflict is finally resolved.

Schelling offers arguments against two competitor theories that consider the flow of time to be based on succession rather than increase. The first is Hegel's dialectical model of development. Schelling objects to Hegel's dialectic because it has a model for progress that relies on sublation – the earlier stages are not preserved, but instead are taken up and dissolved into the succeeding stages (so the past is not separate from the present, it does not stay past but instead merges into the present). Schelling insists: “once and for all, it is impossible for any thing to be sublated” (WA II, 168). He explains elsewhere:

It is a founding and principle rule of science (though few know it) that what is posited once is posited forever and cannot be sublated again, since otherwise it might just as well not have been posited at all. If one does not remain steadfastly by what one has once posited, then everything will become fluid as it progresses, and everything will wear away again, so that in the end nothing really was posited. True progress, which is equivalent to an elevation, only takes place when something is posited permanently and immutably, and becomes the ground of elevation and progression. (WA II, 135)

Sublation can never provide an adequate ground, since a ground needs to remain fixed and inalterable, an anchor for further development. In terms of his theory of time, Schelling argues that the past needs to persist as a permanent ground, in order for there to be a present (and, in fact, a future). Again, in the specialized terms Schelling has developed, the past and the present must be “simultaneous.”

We can see the weakness of a Hegelian model of development for a theory of time when we look at the harm dialectical assumptions did to Marx's historical speculations. The futile churning of the drives, which is equally God's ground and the past itself, has its economic correlate in Marx's Asiatic mode of production. Marx was never able to account for the transition from an apparently ceaseless cycle of production to a historical development of the forces of production, or more widely, the transition into history itself. To do so requires a radical contingency that is anathema to the rationalism Marx inherits from his intellectual mentor Hegel. Schelling provides such a contingency in his theory of the event of God's decision to exist. Accordingly, he can explain the transition into history in a way that no dialectical theory can.

The second competitor theory that Schelling is concerned to refute is the familiarly commonsensical ‘mechanistic’ (i.e. not transcendental) notion that time is an endless succession of ‘nows’. Schelling argues that on this theory there is no real difference between the dimensions of time, and thus no true concept of past or future. But since nothing can be present without a past, there must be some real difference between them. Another way of putting this is to say that the condition for something to exist is that it have a past. But to avoid regress, creation must have been creation of a past that was never a present. Here we see the principle of sufficient reason at work again: the present must have a ground, and we call that ground the past. And this entails that the past must be different in kind from the present.¹⁶

Schelling’s rejection of the Aristotelian conception of time as a sequence of instants puts him very much at home in twentieth century debates about time. For instance, Husserl develops a phenomenology of time consciousness that takes as its point of departure Schelling’s notion that our experience of time reveals a force driving us forward and another force pulling us back. In Husserl’s terms, there is a kind of elasticity in the instantaneous Aristotelian ‘now’ that stretches it out into a series of overlapping protentions and retentions. Each apparently hermetically sealed instant is in experience referred back to what preceded it and correspondingly itself refers forward (through our expectations) to what will succeed it.

While Husserl’s analysis focuses on our subjective experience of the flow of time, Heidegger’s early conception of temporality extends Husserl’s remarks in a more metaphysical direction. Still focusing on the elasticity of the Aristotelian ‘now,’ (he describes it as “*stretched out within its own self*”),¹⁷ Heidegger explains this phenomenon by referring it back to a more primordial form of temporality that he describes as ‘ecstatic,’ literally

¹⁶ Schelling’s theory is opposed to the mechanistic theory in being transcendental, but also in being organicist: as Manfred Frank points out in his lectures on *Zeitbewusstsein*, Schelling’s notion that the dimensions of time are ‘simultaneous’ and mutually presuppose each other is derived from his conception of the organism, whose functional design presupposes the same sort of interdependence of the dimensions of time (Pfullingen: Neske, 1990), 132–33. See also L. Knatz, “Schellings Welt der Geschichte” in *Weltalter – Schelling im Kontext der Geschichtsphilosophie*, ed. H.J. Sandkühler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), 54.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 270.

outside of itself, as if the moment has stretched itself completely inside out. Here, as with Schelling, dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian conception generates the idea of a kind of transcendental temporality quite different from, and making possible, the ordinary kind. Heidegger's famous epithet 'always already', shows the extent to which he is working within a specifically Schellingian framework of the transcendental past as something that is past 'already' but has *always* been so: a past that cannot be made present.

Bergson's conception of 'duration' also takes clear aim at a conception of time dominated by the Aristotelian instant: "the real concrete lived present – what I am talking about when I mention my present perception – that present necessarily occupies a duration".¹⁸ As with Heidegger, Bergson infers from this a new and more fundamental form of temporality. What brings Bergson however into particularly close proximity to Schelling is his insistence that there must be a "general past"¹⁹ that is different in kind from the present. Bergson argues that recollection would be impossible without it. To remember is for the past to be made present, but *as* the past; if a recollection were not qualitatively different from a present perception, it would be indistinguishable from a present perception and would therefore not be a memory. In order to perceive something that was once present but has now passed we must already understand something like a "general past" that was never present; and each recollection must already be steeped in this: "The truth" he writes "is that we would never be able to get to the past if we did not position ourselves there from the outset."²⁰

From Poetry to History

A striking feature about the mode of temporality Schelling attributes to the past – the fact that it is an *eternal* past – is that this is also characteristic

¹⁸ Bergson *Matière et Mémoire*, 7th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1949), 152. Bergson is known to have been influenced by Schelling through Ravaisson whom Bergson revered and who was himself, briefly, a pupil of Schelling's. See Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9ff. But aside from scholarly questions of actual influence, Bergson's understanding of time is clearly operating in a profound consonance with the Schelling of the *Ages of the World*. See also Deleuze, 'La conception de la différence chez Bergson', *Les Études Bergsonniennes* IV (1956), 77–112.

¹⁹ *Matière et Mémoire*, 148.

²⁰ *Matière et Mémoire*, 149–50.

of the time in which mythic narratives occur, according to Lévi-Strauss: they are always past, but equally ‘timeless’ and never present.²¹ Schelling certainly appreciates the proximity of his account to myth (mythology was soon to be the focus of his academic interests). For one thing, he looks to the literary style of mythic narratives as a solution to the problem of how to present the novel philosophical content of the *Ages of the World*, which is to say: how to ‘present’ events that were never ‘present.’ Schelling famously declares, the events of the text deserve to be “narrated” (WA III, xxxv) or even “sung” as the “greatest heroic poem” (WA III, xl).²² But in appealing to mytho-poetic literary form, Schelling is not departing from philosophy; indeed, he is helping reveal the affinities between these fields. This space of the transcendental as opposed to the chronological past is really just the space of philosophy itself. The wonder of the Greeks at geometry was primarily a wonder at the *a priori*. And, as Heidegger points out, the *a priori* is already a temporal designation, referring to a past that cannot have been present.²³

The resources Schelling develops in the *Ages of the World* to refer the transcendental past to the chronological past put him in a position to solve some difficulties in Kant’s epistemology, according to an influential albeit speculative reading by a German commentator, Wolfram Högbe. ²⁴ Kant’s project notoriously involves a conception of things as they are in themselves, independent of experience. In a sense this is a thought of a ‘phenomenological’ past of objects of experience. It is the thought of what things ‘were’ like, in themselves, ‘before’ they were worked upon by sensibility and understanding and crafted into objects that we can (now) experience. This is *exactly* a past that is not and can never be made present. For if the phenomenological ‘past’ of an object of experience were to be made present, it would become, by definition, something present, a

²¹ Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), 205.

²² Of course he is conscious of his failure to live up to this ideal. Peter Oesterreich suggests that Schelling’s inability to give the material the epic form it requires was responsible for the ultimate failure of the *Weltalter* project; in “Geschichtesphilosophie und historische Kunst”, in *Weltalter – Schelling im Kontext der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), 101.

²³ Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 324.

²⁴ Wolfram Högbe, *Prädikation und Genesis. Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings ‘Die Weltalter’* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

phenomenon, an object of experience. This experience would be of something that was no longer what the object was like ‘prior to’ its experience. It would be precisely an experience; and would have its own ‘past’ that could not be made present for the same reasons.

Hogrebe argues that Schelling goes a stage further than this phenomenological point however and asks the necessary question: what must have happened to things in themselves, in order for us to be able to work them up into objects of experience? And further, what must have happened to produce *us* as beings capable of having experiences in the first place? These are cosmological questions, but this cannot be a standard cosmological science because it refers to ‘things’ before they have been constituted as objects. Instead it must be a speculative physics of just the kind that Schelling develops. In this way phenomenological considerations press necessarily in the direction of cosmological or ontological ones; as well as cosmological issues clearly including phenomenological ones since humanity is also something produced, ultimately, by the cosmos.

Although Hogrebe’s sympathies are with an ultimately Heideggerian outlook, his account of the impact of Schelling on the sedate Anglo-German world of language philosophy is not unlike the impact of psychoanalysis on the similarly sedate French world of structuralism. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has shown that the linguistic world of the Symbolic realm is only possible on the basis of a primary repression of drives that cannot themselves be adequately symbolized. This moment of emergence of symbolization pushes the drives into a past (the unconscious) that can never be made present (conscious) but which always remains, threatening to overwhelm the fragile compromise of symbolic consciousness. It is no surprise that Lacan popularizer Slavoj Žižek should have written two books on the relation of modern psychoanalysis to Schelling;²⁵ the uneasy but productive binding of a theory of drives to the representational concerns of linguistics characteristic of Lacan’s rewriting of Freud finds its intellectual origin in Schelling.

Despite the manifold and fruitful applications of the *Ages of the World* to these problems of transcendental, cosmological, or psychoanalytic origin, we must remember that the text is foremost a contribution to an understanding of history, and Schelling’s governing concern is to develop a set of

²⁵ In addition to ‘The Abyss of Freedom’ there is his *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

intellectual (and aesthetic) tools to conceptualize and articulate the distinctive nature of the past. Schelling's insight is into the fundamental historicity of any kind of origin (theological, cosmological, psychoanalytic, or transcendental), a historicity that involves freedom and radical contingency on a fundamental level. One commentator sums up this point by noting that Schelling's object of analysis is not the Absolute but the living God,²⁶ it is not speculative rationalism but what can be described as a metaphysical empiricism. If this is an unprecedented theoretical space for philosophy to occupy, it is perhaps because Schelling is an unprecedentedly historical thinker. He does not consider the principles of a transcendental logic to be pre-given, but shows how they emerge – not in the manner of Hegel's *Logic*, but rather from a dark ground and free decision of God. In a manner, that is, that acknowledges and preserves the sort of radical contingency and authentic freedom that makes history true history and philosophy truly historical.²⁷

This, at least, was the plan. As we have said, Schelling never executed this plan, never reconciled, to his mind, the exigencies of philosophy and history, metaphysics and empiricism, mythology and logic. His achievement was rather to articulate lucidly the challenges that confront any reconciliation, an articulation that remains instructive and is responsible for the insistent modernity of the *Ages of the World*.

²⁶ See Wilhelm G. Jacobs in "Zur Geschichtsphilosophie des jüngeren Schelling" in *Weltalter – Schelling im Kontext der Geschichtsphilosophie*, and also Jacobs' *Gottesbegriff und Geschichtsphilosophie in der Sicht Schellings* (Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1993), 265.

²⁷ Aldo Lanfranchi develops this point in an interesting direction, discussing the sense in which the historicity of God (and the world) is at the same time the historicity of knowledge in his article "Die *Weltalter* lesen", 64; and also, and much more fully, in his book *Krisis: Eine Lektüre der "Weltalter" – Texte F.W.J. Schellings* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1992).