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Schelling's Nothingness—the Figuration of the Death Drive in German Idealism in Žižek's reading of *Ages of the World*

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Abstract:

This article examines Slavoj Žižek's reading of F.W.J. Schelling's *Ages of the World* (1813 second draft) from the standpoint of the ontological status of nothingness in Schelling's idealism as contrasted with Žižek's methodology of dialectical materialism. Although Schelling's theosophical theism differs from Žižek's materialist hermeneutic, Schelling's thought nevertheless enacts an important breakthrough in Western philosophy that anticipates the dynamics of the Marxist interpretation of the dialectic. In particular, his positing of opposed unconscious drives within the ante-cosmic Godhead prefigures Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive.

What is the ontological status of nothingness in Slavoj Žižek's dialectical materialist methodology? There are, broadly, two alternative concepts of nothingness in the Western philosophical tradition. Nothing can be thought of in idealist terms, in the metaphysical sense of an ante-cosmic super-consciousness which unfolds the universe out of itself. The theistic concept of a personal creator God would fall into this category, for example. In contrast, nothingness can be conceived in naturalized terms as the opposite of what actually exists, or the order of potential being. Under such a materialist understanding of nothing, however, nothingness "as such" does not exist as a phenomenon; it is not the mysterious object of negative theology, for example.

The historical decay of the metaphysical concept of nothingness in favor of its alternative materialist sense occurs decisively along the trajectory of German Idealism that runs from Kant's transcendental idealism to Marx's historical materialism, enacting the transition from traditional onto-theology to modern historicism. In particular, Žižek emphasizes the thought of F.W.J. Schelling as a moment that decisively anticipates the position of Žižek's updated version of dialectical materialism towards negation. Žižek's interpretation of Schelling's philosophy focuses on his reading of the latter's *Ages of the World* (1813, second draft) as developed in his essay *The Abyss of Freedom* (1997), published as a preface to a contemporary English translation of Schelling's text. (Schelling & Žižek 1997)

According to Žižek, Schelling's *Die Weltalter* plays a central, albeit complicated role in the thematic mutation of German idealism into its philosophical successors. *Ages of the World*, Žižek explains, is "The philosophical system Schelling was working on from about 1807, after abandoning his earlier project of the so-called philosophy of identity." (Žižek 1997:4) The identity philosophy, initially articulated in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), had superseded Fichte's post-Kantian project of articulating a "science of knowledge"¹ (*Wissenschaftslehre*), and had in turn been superseded by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). The three aborted manuscripts of *Ages of the World* (1811, 1813 and 1815) enact Schelling's break with two distinct but related positions: that of his own earlier identity philosophy, heavily influenced by Fichte's position, and Hegel's absolute idealism as announced by the

publication of the *Phenomenology*. This maneuver ambiguously generates Schelling's late "positive philosophy."

Žižek writes:

"In its time, the predominant perception of this system was of a hopelessly outdated regression to premodern theosophy.² It is now clear that the entire post-Hegelian constellation—from Marxism to the existentialist notion of finitude and temporality as the ultimate horizon of being, from deconstructionist 'decentering' of the self-presence of *logos* to New Age obscurantism—has its roots in Schelling's late philosophy." (1997:4)

Invited to lecture at the University of Berlin after Hegel's death in 1831, the elder Schelling's classes were attended by Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels, Marx's anarchist rival Mikhail Bakunin, and the founder of existentialism Søren Kierkegaard. Although Kierkegaard's philosophy is not reducible to Schelling's positive philosophy, there is nevertheless a clear influence leading from Schelling's anti-Hegelianism to Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel in *Either/Or* (1843) and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). Both Kierkegaard and Schelling emphasize the dialectic's inability to achieve a complete understanding of determinate existence due to the persistence of historical contingency, and both theologically attempt, for better or for worse, to reassert a Christian theistic orientation for philosophy within that gap.

In particular, Schelling's critique of the *Phenomenology's* dialectical closure provides Žižek with a point of connection between Marx and Lacan. This linkage emerges with the historicist turn represented by *Die Weltalter*. The text, Žižek asserts, "functions as a kind of vanishing mediator, designating a unique constellation in which, for a brief moment after the disintegration of Absolute Idealism, something became visible that, once so-called post-Hegelian thought settled itself, and found shape in the guise of Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche, was again lost from sight." (1997:4)

Basically, Schelling's maneuver is to relocate the contingent divergence from the divine ground within that ground itself, in contradistinction to the identity philosophy, which posits a pure, ideal, divine absolute "I" behind the horizon of historical appearances, and in distinction with absolute idealism, which posits Spirit as the whole

of the systemic totality. Schelling's intent is to reopen the ontological difference between existence and essence that was (apparently) closed by the absolute mediation of Hegel's Spirit by redoubling the ontological difference into the primordial absolute mind in the form of opposed unconscious drives within the Godhead. This strategy derives from Jacob Böehme's theosophy, which locates the duality of good and evil within the Godhead in the form of opposed wills.³ God, as it were, develops a split personality. The resulting divine psychosis spills out of God's mind into creation.

Schelling's late philosophy is therefore *historicist* in the sense of describing God's divine history. Schelling's method can be described as a "historical idealism," but it is not thereby equivalent to Marx's historical materialism. The Godhead in Schelling's thought remains an ideal, mental entity, albeit one that is now thought within (its own) history. Schelling thereby abandons Augustine's position that God exists outside of time,⁴ but he otherwise remains a relatively orthodox theist. Schelling's positive philosophy also fails to escape the horizon of the Hegelian dialectic insofar as its themes are already implicit to the position of the *Phenomenology*. Hegel's dialectic already historically mediates essence and existence. Schelling's contribution to post-Hegelian thought is to provide the initial impulse to further develop the historicist themes within the dialectic. However, his claim to have overcome the revolutionary character of Hegel's thought by successfully theoretically grounding a conservative, bourgeois positivistic historicism should not be endorsed from the negative critical position of dialectical materialism, which consistently regards the present social order as incomplete.

Before discussing Žižek's materialist re-inscription of Schelling's theosophy in terms of his Lacanian-Marxist method, the position of *Ages of the World* should be made clear on its own idealist terms. Schelling begins by positing science (*Wissenschaft*) as the quest for the primordial living essence:

"From now on, science will present the development of an actual, living essence. In the highest science what is living can be only what is primordially alive: the essence preceded by no other, which is thus the first or oldest of essences. Since there is nothing before or outside of this primordial life by which it might be determined, it can only develop (to the extent that it does

develop) freely, purely from itself alone, out of its own drive and volition.”
(Schelling, 1997:113)

Because human essence is still the Cartesian-Christian self-conscious soul for Schelling, it follows that the soul’s ideal essence partakes in the primordial ideal life of eternity due to this ontological likeness. It is therefore possible for human beings to contemplate and know the essence of eternity. “Drawn from the source of things and akin to it, what is eternal in the soul has a co-science/con-sciousness (*Mitt-Wissenschaft*, literally “knowing-with” in the sense of a scientific cognition) of creation.” (1997:114) In theosophical-hermetic terms the microcosm of the soul corresponds with the macrocosm of the divine life, “as above so below.”⁵ Because the soul is an emanation of the divine mind it can know God’s essence through philosophical self-reflection. Thought is the expression of the divine nature. The basic myth of Gnosticism is repeated here: the soul has emanated from an ante-cosmic *pleroma* with which it retains a consubstantial essence.

Schelling writes: “the higher essence notices that the lower is assigned to it, not to be held in idleness, but rather that it might have an instrument in which it could behold itself, express itself, and become intelligible to itself.” (1997:115) Therefore:

“This separation, this doubling of ourselves, this secret intercourse between the two essences, one questioning and one answering, [...] this silent dialogue, this inner art of conversation, is the authentic secret of the philosopher from which the outer art (which for this reason is called ‘dialectic’) is only a replica and, if it has become bare form, is only empty appearance and shadow.” (1997: 115)

The “dialectic” in question is, of course, Hegel’s in the *Phenomenology*, distinguished from the theosophical gnosis described in *Ages of the World*. Yet, is Schelling’s position clearly distinct from Hegel’s in a way that would allow it to lay claim to an advance in philosophical methodology from the dialectic? For example, in *Ages of the World* the exercise of reason is not to be fundamentally distinguished from religious contemplation. Schelling’s rejection of an immediately direct intellectual intuition of the

divine mind through mysticism indicates a sharpening of his critical stance towards a primary romanticism which seeks truth through an aesthetic absorption in the sublime. This shift in Schelling's thought is against himself; the aesthetic sublime had been posited as the endpoint of the identity-philosophy in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* as his solution to the deadlock of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, where an infinite, striving drive (*Treib*) suffuses and holds open the space of practical human activity in an insatiable longing to overcome the separation between phenomenal and absolute self-identity.⁶

Now, however, Schelling writes, "the goal is not reached through mere intuition. For there is no understanding in intuition, in and of itself." (1997:117) Immediate aesthetic experience must be mediated and developed by philosophical thought for it to obtain the content of positive science, "for all things must be brought to actual reflection so that they might achieve the highest representation." (1997:118) Therefore, although the soul is implicitly united with the divine, this connection has no significance for historical consciousness without its rational cognition: "beginning with the unconscious presence of the Eternal, science leads it up to the supreme transfiguration in a divine consciousness." (1997:119)

However, an "anxiety of influence" towards the Hegelian dialectic lies over these passages, insofar as they echo and replicate the criticism of romanticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁷ Missing from *Ages of the World* is Hegel's mediation of the divine beyond with human historical self-consciousness such that the difference between the two is dissolved and negated *on the side of the negative*. Traditional Christian-metaphysical dualism, where the ontological difference is read as the distinction between God and creatures, is problematically preserved in Schelling's positive philosophy, which thereby remains fixed within the historical-hermeneutical horizon of medieval-magical Catholicism, even while the contents of traditional Christian metaphysics are simultaneously modernized—in this context passed through the lens of enlightened Protestant philosophy—by being historicized in proto-existentialist terms.

Although Schelling's seeds find fertile ground for development in Kierkegaard's writings, a reconciliation of the theistic and existentialist option in modern philosophy with an explicitly atheist philosophy would have to wait for the work of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Furthermore, Sartre's articulation of what he dubbed "existentialism" subsequently collided in the 1960s with the context of the New Left's reappraisal of the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic in light of the rediscovery of Marx's early writings. These texts reopened the discourse on Marxist philosophy, emerging out of the shadow of Soviet-Stalinist orthodoxy, especially as related to Marx's critical appropriation of Feuerbach's theological anthropology. This in turn allowed Marxist and Marxist influenced intellectuals, such as Sartre, to regenerate a constructive dialog with theology, (initially via Sartre's atheist appropriation of Kierkegaard's work) avoiding the total rejection of religious cultural content represented by vulgar Marxism, while retaining fidelity to the atheist hermeneutical horizon inaugurated by the Hegelian Left dialectic. It is within this post-Sartrean existentialist option for a theologically constructive atheism that Žižek's contribution to the philosophy of religion should be situated.

According to *Ages of the World*, why does the creation of the physical universe occur? Why does the Godhead emanate a material world in differentiation from the purely mental, ideal world of divine transcendence? Schelling speculates that, "the higher essence notices that the lower is assigned to [always already present within] it, not to be held in idleness, but rather that it might have an instrument in which it could behold itself, express itself, and become intelligible to itself." (1997:115) In other words, the Godhead needs creation to fulfill the potential of its essential nature. This occurs through the Gnostic-circuit of the self-recognition of the divine consciousness in and through its instantiation as human consciousness. The potential for self-externalization is eternally present within the Godhead as an unconscious drive within the primordial divine mind.

In Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* the ontological drive underlying the restless striving of temporal life—which Marxism recognizes as the psychological trace of the material class struggle—is the effect of the split between the noumenal and phenomenal selves. The drive is therefore part of the world of appearances, phenomenally spatial-temporally real for the experience of the phenomenal subject, but transcendently ideal, or an illusory construction from the standpoint of the transcendental ego. Schelling redoubles Fichte's drive, locating it as the transcendental cause of the phenomenal world, not merely its effect. The absolute is therefore

internally polarized as “being” (*Seyn*⁸), an inwardly attractive force (potentiality), and “what-is” (*Seyende*), an outwardly expressive essence (actuality). These are the principles of “affirming and negating, light and darkness, good and evil.” (1997:130)

Schelling speculates:

“For considered purely as such, being is selfless and completely immersed in itself. But on precisely this account, being draws its opposite into itself and is a constant thirst for essence, a yearning to attract a subject, so that by means of this subject it might step forth from a state of mere potentiality into activity. [...] [Being] is necessarily already accompanied by a thing-that-is (*ein Seyendes*) [namely the Absolute’s self-activity of “yearning”]; and this conflicts with the being, with what is based entirely in itself.” (1997:124)

Again: “as what-is and as being, it [the absolute] is not two different essences, but rather only one essence in two different forms.” (1997:127) Therefore, again echoing Hegel’s dialectic, Schelling concludes:

“[...] contradiction is not only possible but in fact necessary. [...] life itself is in contradiction. Without contradiction there would be no life, no movement, no progress; a deadly slumber of all forces. Only contradiction drives us—indeed forces us—to action. Contradiction is in fact the venom of all life, and all vital motion is nothing but the attempt to overcome this poisoning.” (1997:124)

Furthermore, freedom is ontologically grounded in contradiction, “The unconditioned can express itself as what-is and as being, and it can refrain from expressing itself as both; in other words, it can be both, or it can let both alone. Free will is just this ability to be something along with the ability to not-be it.” (1997:131-2) Therefore, “If there were no contradiction then there would be no freedom. In the strain of forces, when life hangs in the balance, as it were, only the deed can decide.” (1997:172)

Due to the personal soul's *Mitt-Wissenschaft* with the Godhead it instantiates and realizes the divine freedom through its own creative willing. "A thing that is free, not either to be *something* or not to be it, but rather to exist or not to exist—such a thing, by itself and with respect to its essence, can only be *will*. [...] It alone is allowed to stand in the middle as it were, between being and nonbeing." (1997:132) The will that mediates between existence and non-existence names the negativity holding open the historical dialectic of the interchange of potentiality and actuality. Žižek's Lacanian methodology identifies this negativity as human subjectivity; however, in *Ages of the World* Schelling thinks out the contours of the existential negativity of the subject in onto-theological and idealist terms. The negativity of the human will is a reflection of God's divine negativity. Ironically, but never quite tragically, God's inner psychological crisis grounds human spirituality in the gnosis of the "will that wills nothing." (1997:132) "Only an immovable, divine [...] indifference is absolutely First; it is the beginning that is also at the same time the end." (1997:132)

Read on its own terms, Schelling's positive philosophy is a conservative or "Right" version of the dialectic because it asserts the unity of opposites: the striving and violence of historical reality are ultimately, from the perspective of the divine/human "will that wills nothing" an ironic illusory comedy. Here, it is precisely the negative or Left valence of Hegel's theology that possesses a truly tragic dimension. In Hegel's version of the theodicy God fully falls into the created order and is negated as a transcendental Beyond. Eternity, in the immediate literal sense of a transcendent spiritual reality, is unavailable within the dialectic except in the negatively sublated form the Notion, in the form of the self-recognition within self-conscious thought of its own infinitely self-relational Spirit.

Like the Gnostics who claimed the crucifixion of Christ had been a magical illusion, Schelling's ostensibly Christian theology does not seem to be able to take the tragic implications of the incarnation seriously. Here, following Žižek's lead, I would oppose and invert Thomas Carlyle's famous assertion that Christianity does not know tragedy. On the contrary, it is in Christian self-consciousness that tragedy is first culturally comprehended against the background narrative of God's abyssal, contingent decision to become fully human and suffer death. For Hellenic paganism, tragedy is the

expression of divinely ordained fate ultimately subordinated and justified by the unity of opposites within the divine governance of the cosmos. Pagans can experience *catharsis* in pious dread and excitement before the bloody spectacle of tragedy, like in Seneca's gore drenched dramas, or like the coliseum crowds cheering the (hegemonic appearance of the) just execution of the criminal classes, but they do not experience the Christian's existentially abyssal decision for faith against the historically *open* horizon of apocalyptic religion.

Hence, Schelling's theology arguably remains pagan, insofar as it posits the absolute end-point of the dialectic as a theosophical quietism under the form of the unity of opposites. "To be as if one were not, to have as if one had not; that is in man, that is in god, the Highest of all." (1997:133) The will that wills nothing, "is the composure (*Gelassenheit*⁹) that thinks about nothing and rejoices in its nonbeing." (1997:134) The contradictions of material existence are overcome in the blissfully divine self-consciousness of the will that wills nothing, "all of this—the entire fullness and future splendour of nature—is only built upon the ground of an eternal, self-negating will that returns into itself, and without which nothing could be revealed anywhere." (1997:140)

Again, what is missing in Schelling's Gnostic theology is an adequately incarnational dimension, where God does not return to God's-self, but where instead the divine falls completely out of itself, negating the metaphysical dimension entirely in favor of the horizon of human history. If the striving of existence is in some sense redoubled into Schelling's Godhead, how might that Godhead, in dialectical materialist terms, find itself likewise redoubled into the phenomenal world? Schelling locates this moment of double reflection in the will that wills nothing, to which a Marxist critic would respond that Schelling's concept of the will is abstract and formal. Whose will is meant; in what historical context? The answer in Schelling's case is the will of the class-consciousness of the liberal-bourgeoisie. Appropriated and re-inscribed in dialectical materialist terms the will that wills nothing can be interpreted as the will, or rather the willed *activity*, which wills the negation of negation, not in thought but through concrete material human labor.

Schelling's Gnostic rejection of Hegelian-Christian incarnation appears in his religiously conservative argument against the atheist implications of Hegel's dialectic:

“The unconditioned [Godhead], they [the Hegelians] say, is at first purely in itself, devoid of externalization and hidden; but now it steps out, externalizes itself, and sublates its eternal indifference by itself. But these are words without sense. 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, takes place only when something is posited permanently and immutably and becomes the ground of elevation and progression.” (1997:135)

This passage clearly demonstrates the formal deployment of the unity of opposites in Schelling’s argument. Although the “what-is” of the negative is within the Godhead, it is only present within the divine super-consciousness as latent *potential* negation. The *actual* historical process of negation is a play of appearances before a transcendent Godhead whose strivings are meditatively suspended in the sublime gnosis of *Gelassenheit*, the will that wills nothing. Against Schelling’s theistic version of the dialectic Žižek’s atheist position should be strictly distinguished. What Schelling’s method cannot think is *a nothingness that would really be nothing*, that is to say, a concept of nothingness as that which is latent in the system of positive being, but which is “dead,” lacking actual existence in the present. Instead Schelling thinks nothingness in platonic-metaphysical terms, as a negative existence transcendently above and behind materiality, which, nevertheless, exists positively in immaterial idealist terms. Nothingness is conceived as the substance of the supernatural, which is negative only in contrast to phenomenal materiality, while existing as absolute positivity in-itself.

Therefore, Schelling writes, “There is no mere being, nothing that is purely, vacuously objective in which there is nothing subjective.” (1997:141) Schelling’s nothingness is nothing only in appearance, while in-itself “nothing” is conceived as a platonic archetypal positivity, a noetic dimension to which the non-conscious domain of material extension stands in a normatively subordinate relation.

In contrast, Žižek's Hegelian-Marxist dialectical materialism interprets nothingness in naturalized terms. Nothingness is *material* nothingness, driving both the entropic disintegration and evolutionary development of physical systems. Žižek explains how Hegel's concept of nothingness:

"[...] resides in the assertion that finite (determinate, positive-substantial) reality is in itself void, inconsistent, self-sublating. From this, however, it does not follow that this reality is just a shadow, a secondary reflection, etc., of some higher reality: there is *nothing but* this reality, and the 'suprasensible is appearance qua appearance,' i.e., the very movement of the self-sublation of this reality. So we really pass 'from nothing through nothing to nothing': the starting point, immediate reality, deploys its nothingness, it cancels itself, negates itself, but there is nothing beyond it. ... This is why Hegel cannot be situated with regard to the opposition between transcendence and immanence: his position is that of the *absolute immanence of transcendence*." (Žižek 2009:107)

It may seem after what has been said that there is little left of use in Schelling's *Ages of the World* for Žižek's theology, but the reverse is the case. Žižek's basic interpretive shift is to sublimate and re-inscribe the metaphysical framing of Schelling's philosophy within the hermeneutical horizon of Lacanian psychoanalysis. By redoubling (re-tripling?) the ontological difference into material subjectivity the metaphysical context of Schelling's thought is negated and replaced by Lacanian interpretive coordinates. From this new standpoint Schelling anticipates Freud's theory of the death drive as the compliment of the libido in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this text, written to oppose Jung's spiritualistic distortions of psychoanalysis, Freud posits oedipal, socialized subjectivity as the product of a latent psychological negativity, namely the genetic deadlock of the opposed drives which together constitute the subject's desire.¹⁰

On Freudian terrain Schelling's Godhead appears as the unconscious in its twin phases as superego and id, the soul is the ego, the primordial drives "being" and "what-is" are the libido and the death drive, respectively, and the ascetic "will that wills nothing" names the process of oedipal sublimation, whereby the paternal gaze or

oversight provided by the *Mitt-Wissenschaft* of the soul and the Godhead functions analogously to the superego which castrates and restricts the subject's desire. Gnosis for Schelling turns out to be quite conservative: it facilitates the aesthetic harmonization of private subjectivity with the flux and chaos of economically ordered modern society, not the negation of the given social order.

Nevertheless, Schelling's metaphysical formalism obscures the anthropological focus of his work. He writes, "Everything divine is human, according to Hippocrates, and everything human is divine. If so, we can hope to approach the truth by relating everything to man." (1997:157) In *Ages of the World* the ontological difference between the human and divine realms is dissolved. What had been an unbridgeable chasm for the medieval scholastics, solely mediated by a sacramental relationship to the unique figure of Christ, is for Schelling implicitly mediated by every human soul. Schelling has liberalized the divinity of Christ and democratized the gnosis; it is the formal horizon of his project that is at issue in Žižek's critique, not the insights found within its content.

Žižek writes:

"In short, Schelling's crucial point is that the domain of Ideas becomes actual Spirit only through its 'egoist' perversion/inversion, in the guise of the absolute contraction into a real Person. One must be careful not to miss the point here: it is not only that what we experience as 'material reality' is the perversion/inversion of the true ideal order; reality emerges insofar as the true ideal order gets inverted in itself, runs amok—in Schelling's terms, the inertia of external material reality is a proof of the divine madness, of the fact that God himself was 'out of his mind.'" (Žižek 1997:11)

Nevertheless:

"What Schelling is not ready to accept is the logical consequence of his reasoning: this perversion is unsurpassable, the Spirit in its actuality is irreducibly "out of joint," the stain of perversion is the unavoidable price for the Spirit's actualization—the notion of a Reconciliation that would 'sublate' the contractive force of egoism in the ethereal medium of Spirit is purely fantasmatic." (1997:11)

The atonement of the historical dialectic on the side of the universal according to the unity of opposites is the false, liberal-utopian face of German idealism. According to Marxist-Hegelian logic only concrete production, or movement pivoting on the side of the particular, can shift and change the contours of the universal social medium. From the perspective of the dialectical materialist hermeneutic the radical contingency of material reality demonstrates after the fact not the madness of God, but the primordial absence of God. However, Schelling's idealist misrecognition is fruitful. Following Feuerbach's inversion of the subject and predicate of theology, it follows that it is not God but humanity which is insane. This occurs because the "individual" identity available to subjects of globalization is determined by their class experience, which is in turn constructed by the historically alienated horizon of the commodification of all modern cultures under capitalist production. This horizon ideologically neutralizes the political recognition of the radically contingent basis of the historical socio-economic status quo. This neutralization is named liberalism.

Žižek draws attention to German idealism's tendency, running from Kant to Hegel, of inverting the traditional hierarchy of scholastic-platonic metaphysics: "The perversion of the 'proper' hierarchical relationship between potencies is the key feature of the German Idealist notion of a philosophical 'system.' [...] 'System,' in the precise sense of German Idealism, is a totality that is all-encompassing since it includes/contains its own inversion." (1997:11)

For example, in Kant the formal categories of being are not objective, as the empiricists and dogmatists had presumed, but subjective; experience is constructed in and through cognitive categories, not immediately given to consciousness through experience. For Fichte, the intellectual intuition that was to have bridged Kant's antinomy between the transcendental ego and phenomenal experience instead locates the noumenal absolute "I" in a deadlocked opposition with the historical subject, resulting in an infinite striving of the latter towards the former. Hegel wrenches the very formal horizon of western metaphysics out of itself and rethinks its categories from the standpoint of historical socio-linguistic externality, for which he retains the name of Spirit. Finally, the concept of a totality which incorporates its own negation allows Marx to think the form of capitalism as the system of hierarchical, global social exchange

which swallows up all local opposition within its hegemonic horizon. (For example, competition with global capitalist production simply produces more products for the world market.)

Dialectical materialism is therefore the culmination of the “systems” of German idealism. It thinks the thought of inversion to its end, passing into a new position whose presuppositions have altered the status of the bourgeois limit of philosophy. If Hegel’s absolute idealism deconstructs western metaphysics and replaces it with the ontological reification of liberal autonomy, then dialectical materialism recognizes the cause of this reification in the “false universal” of the social shape of the human life-world. By naming that horizon as capitalism, Marxism incorporates, if first only abstractly in theoretical praxis, that horizon within its speculative Notion of the present life-world. In this movement, Marx’s idea of communism stands beyond the limit of capitalism, but initially only abstractly, in the form of a *not yet* appearing folded within the governing hegemony. Marxism opens up a space of negative potentiality beyond the history of capital, but this space remains void until filled by concrete human activity. Yet the struggle to actualize the potential of this idea, to fill the emptiness of capitalist culture with the content of an actually existing socialism, over-determines the entire trajectory of 20th century politics. Although the outer forms of socialist *praxis* have mutated, this struggle, Žižek argues, is far from over.

“This of course,” Žižek writes, “brings us back to Schelling: the gap between the ethereal image [superstructure = the sublime commodities of the “free” market] and the raw fact of the—inert, dense—Real [base = the material wage-exploitation of capitalist production] is precisely the gap [in Schelling’s onto-theological terms] between Existence (ethereal form) and its impenetrable Ground, on account of which, as Schelling puts it, the ultimate base of reality is the Horrible [monstrously divine insanity = liberal hegemony].” (1997:24)

What is therefore great in Schelling’s *Ages of the World* for Žižek is the way its philosophical struggle with the contradictions of metaphysics represses, but also reflects

and represents the contradictions of modern self-consciousness as interpellated by commodity culture. He writes:

“The critical point of *Weltalter*—and, at the same time, [...] the sign of the absolute integrity of Schelling’s thought and the feature on account of which the *Weltalter* fragments are the founding text of dialectical materialism—resides in the repeated failure of Schelling’s desperate endeavor to avoid the terrifying intermediate stage between the pure, blissful indifference of the primordial Freedom and God as a free Creator. What comes between the primordial Freedom and God *qua* free Subject is a stage in which God is already a Subject (he becomes a Subject when, by means of contraction, he acquires reality), but not yet a *free* one. In this stage, after contracting being, God is submitted to the blind necessity of a constricted rotary motion [of the opposed primordial drives], like an animal caught in the trap of its own making and destined to repeat endlessly the same meaningless motions.” (1997:34)

This ontological deadlock is most clearly expressed in the second draft of *Ages of the World*, where, “as soon as the primordial Freedom actualizes itself, as soon as it turns into an actual Will, it splits into two opposed Wills, so that the tension is here strictly internal to freedom; it appears as the tension between the will-to-contraction and the will-to-expansion.” (1997:35) In Lacanian terms, an immediately external opposition (freedom versus resistance) is found to be redoubled within the subject of the opposition, (“the tension is [...] internal to freedom”) and to have its ground within that subject.

However, if the phenomenon of the death drive is manifest as the deviant urge to repeat behaviors in excess of the subject’s culturally pre-given social norms, how is it simultaneously the ground of human freedom? How can a self-destructive habit such as drug addiction, to give just one example of the death drive in action, be understood as arising from the psychological dynamic which is also the basis of human self liberation? The answer must be dialectical; in other words, it is *both* the case that the death drive can generate self-defeating behaviors, such as obsessive compulsive disorders, for

example, *and* that it ensures that the psyche can never successfully be conformed to any ideological system.

The politically decisive factor lies in the contextual determination of the drive, which, precisely because it is a drive in excess of any given symbolic order, is historically undetermined and non-totalized. *How* the drive is concretized is crucial. Seen from this perspective, obsessive compulsive behaviors actually stand for the thwarting of the potential for the free functioning of the drive, released from the neurotic “rotary motion” of merely habitual repetition. Thus released, the drive can more broadly repeat the freely creative self-positing of the subject itself, in excess of the assumed boundaries of the psyche’s ideological pre-programming. Hence, Freud’s insistence that the death drive stands “beyond the pleasure principle,” opposed to the libido’s narcissistic desire to maintain a psychic equilibrium of the lowest common denominator at fundamental odds with the subject’s need to risk itself in the drive for free creative self expression. In other words, if the libido desires for us to stay in bed in the morning, it’s the death drive that disturbs the easy repetition of sleep and gets us up to face the challenging projects of the day.

Recalling that in Žižek’s Feuerbachian theology God talk always implicitly refers to human historicity, Schelling’s concept that God’s freedom has been negated by falling into the co-ordinates of its own primordially self-referential “rotary motion” corresponds to the predicament of liberal autonomy under capitalism. What is “terrifying” for Schelling’s system is the deferred, traumatically sublimated recognition that the immediate, direct positing of liberal autonomy in the form of privatized market capitalism is simultaneously the negation of that autonomy. Human freedom is the basis for both tyranny and liberation. The animal “caught in the trap of our own making” is *Homo sapiens*, trapped within the alienating economic form materially posited and sustained by our own labor. Like God in Schelling’s theology, human beings are *not yet* the free creators of their conditions of existence. Our fate to “repeat endlessly the same meaningless motions” designates the futility and emptiness of the subsistence cycle of daily wage labor and the consumption of products.

Therefore, the sense in which Schelling’s thought in *Ages of the World* counts as a move beyond the Hegelian dialectic is at odds with the author’s own intentions.

Schelling's theosophical historicism does not succeed in reopening a space for Gnostic-theistic transcendence within the horizon of the dialectic. However, this failure is also a success. By emphasizing the self-oppositional deadlock inherent to "absolute" autonomy at the stage of its liberal actualization, Schelling's thought is released from Hegel's overconfidence in the self-transparency of absolute Spirit to mediate and overcome all opposition. In this sense, Schelling's *Ages of the World* anticipates and even lays the groundwork for the Left-Hegelian critique of the dialectic, even while his own methodology remains within an idealist horizon.

Notes

¹ Fichte produced numerous versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but the initial 1794 articulation of his system is the most important for the progression of thought from Schelling's 1800 *System* to Hegel's *Phenomenology*. (Fichte 1982)

² "Theosophy" here refers to the protestant tradition of speculative mysticism associated with Jacob Böehme, rather than the subsequent Theosophical Society and movement associated with H.P. Blavatsky, founded in 1875.

³ Böehme: "Indeed there is no difference in God, only when it is enquired from whence Evil and Good proceed, it is to be known, what is the first and original fountain of Anger, and also of Love, since they both proceed from one and the same Original, out of one Mother, and are one Thing." (Behmen [sic] 1909:14)

⁴ Augustine: "O Lord, [...] you are outside time in eternity." (Augustine 1961:253)

⁵ "That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing." (Hermes Trismegistus 2003:28)

⁶ Fichte: "[...] drive may be described as the self's *drive to interdetermination* through itself, or the drive to absolute *unity* and completeness of the self within itself." [I:326] (1982:284) However, this is an infinite ideal which can never be fully realized, which orients the subject towards ethical and creative activity: "The self is infinite, but merely in respect to its striving; it strives to be infinite. But the very concept of striving already involves finitude, for that to which there is no *counterstriving* is not a striving at all." [I:270] (1982:238)

Schelling describes how in aesthetic creation, "the feeling accompanying this intuition will be that of an infinite tranquility. With the completion of the [artistic] product, all urge to produce is halted, all contradictions are eliminated, all riddles resolved."

(Schelling 1978:221) Art unites the phenomenal-material and noumenal-spiritual halves of the self because “aesthetic intuition is merely intellectual intuition become objective,” mediating the gap between phenomenal experience and the noumenal absolute erected by Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. (1978:231)

⁷ Harold Bloom: “the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation [...] there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be idiosyncratic, and it is almost certain to be ambivalent [...]” (Bloom 1997:xxiii)

⁸ Schelling here uses the medieval German spelling of being as *Seyn*, rather than its modern High German spelling as *Sein*.

⁹ Heidegger appropriates Schelling’s concept of *Gelassenheit* in his later philosophy, with similar problems. In both cases mystical quietism covers over a politically conservative agenda. For subjectivity to posit itself at peace with being means there has been a disavowal of the symptoms of class struggle.

¹⁰ Freud: “now [...] we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-instincts and sexual instincts but between life instincts and death instincts.” (Freud 1989:620)

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