



## Schelling on the Unconscious

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### Abstract

The early Schelling and the romantics constructed the unconscious in order to overcome the modern split between subjectivity and nature, mind and body, a split legislated by Cartesian representationalism. Influenced by Boehme and Kabbalah, the later Schelling modified his notion of the unconscious to include the decision to be oneself, which must sink beneath consciousness so that it might serve as the ground of one's creative and personal acts. Slavoj Žižek has read the later Schelling's unconscious as a prototype of Lacan's reactive unconscious, an unconscious that only exists as the excluded other of consciousness. This reading, though close to the text of Schelling, misses something essential: the unconscious for Schelling is not a repression but a condition of the possibility of life and love.

### Keywords

Schelling, psychoanalysis, Boehme, Kabbalah, Žižek, Lacan, Jung, Romanticism

The great advance Schelling makes on Kant and Fichte in his essay on Freedom is to disassociate two notions that had become fused in the modern tradition: freedom and consciousness. Schelling postulates at the ground of personality “an act of freedom, which in accordance with its origin, is utterly unconscious,” an act that stands to all future acts as irreversible ground and destiny.<sup>1</sup> However paradoxical, Schellingian responsibility is in fact close to our everyday moral experience. When I take responsibility for a course of events, say the influence I have on my child's development, am I saying that all that I did or will do in this regard I do deliberately, with full knowledge of what I am doing and why I am doing it? Or am I rather owning what I do, even though much of what I do I do not understand? I can neither fully know

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<sup>1</sup>) F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 52. Hereafter cited as *Freedom*.

my motives nor can I foresee the consequences of what I do. And the more I grow in self-knowledge, the more I realize that in some fundamental sense I could not do otherwise.

Schelling's departure point is an observation made in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. The morally corrupt person is experienced as someone who is corrupt from the core of their being; their corrupt acts are expressive of their corrupt character, or as Kant calls it, their "disposition" (*Gesinnung*), "the subjective ground of their maxims."<sup>2</sup> Because freedom is spontaneity, Kant argues that it cannot appear, it has no phenomenality, no presence in the order governed by causal relations. Our decisions and choice of maxims appear as causally conditioned in the web of nature; their ultimate condition, the disposition of the agent, does not and cannot appear in time. Hence the paradoxical experience of guilt as both necessary and morally culpable.<sup>3</sup>

In the Eichmann trial reviewed by Hannah Arendt, it became painfully and absurdly clear as the trial progressed that the accused could not have acted differently than he did when he engineered the death of millions of Jews by attending to the logistics of transporting them to death camps from all over occupied Europe.<sup>4</sup> The clownish stupidity of the man, his mechanical observance of his duty, his petty desire for promotion, his obstinate refusal to think beyond the goals and values of his small, mid-level bureaucratic career, prompted Arendt to coin the phrase "the banality of evil." And yet no one would call Eichmann innocent.

The transcendental identification of freedom and consciousness, initiated by Descartes and reaching its apogee in Fichte, split nature and subjectivity into irreconcilable opposites. Nature became the exterior order of causality,

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 20. Hereafter cited as *Religion*.

<sup>3</sup> "That Judas became a betrayer of Christ, neither he nor any other creature could change, and nevertheless he betrayed Christ not under compulsion but willingly and with complete freedom. It is exactly the same with a good individual; namely he is not good arbitrarily or by accident and yet is so little compelled that, rather, no compulsion, not even the gates of hell themselves, would be capable of overpowering his basic disposition (*Gesinnung*). This sort of free act, which becomes necessary, admittedly cannot appear in consciousness to the degree that the latter is merely self-awareness and only ideal, since it precedes consciousness just as it precedes essence, indeed first produces it; but, for that reason, this is no act of which no consciousness at all remains in man since anyone, for instance, who in order to excuse a wrong action, says 'that's just the way I am' is surely aware that he is like he is through his guilt, as much as he is right that it was impossible for him to act otherwise" (Schelling, *Freedom*, 51–52).

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on The Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

the order of things that are bound by their essences; subjectivity was the interior order of spontaneity. The Cartesian self severed its relations to nature for the sake of achieving a pure self-foundational act of “I think.” Schelling’s early notion of the unconscious undercut the Cartesian subject by exposing the deep unity of nature overlooked by it, the primordial oneness of subject and object, consciousness and matter. Nature was not *res extensa* but “invisible spirit”; spirit could no longer be characterized as “subjectivity” but must be understood as “visible nature.”<sup>5</sup> The later Schelling turned to the question of responsibility for the first time, but never abandoned the early emphasis on nature as ground of consciousness. Freedom and subjectivity are grounded in materiality and yet remain curiously irreducible to it. Freedom, in this *naturphilosophische* key, must be reconceived not as consciousness but as self-appropriation. I may never have the ground at my disposal but I have the duty to take it over as *my* ground, to subjectify it, personalize it, and use it as the matter of my self-actualization. Responsibility is no longer consciousness-dependent in this account; consciousness is responsibility-dependent. It is not that I am responsible to the degree that I am conscious; rather I am conscious to the degree that I am responsible.

## 1. The Unconscious as Ground/Nature

Nature is the leitmotif connecting Schelling’s early systematic work and his fragmented later writings. The material world in space and time is reducible neither to consciousness nor to some spiritless illogical stuff outside of subjectivity. The early notion of “visible spirit” becomes, in the later Schelling, “ground,” the dark side of God, which leaves its trace in the impenetrable and inexplicable reality of things, “the indivisible remainder” (*der nie aufgehende Rest*), which is never subsumed into a concept and frustrates every attempt to build a rational system.<sup>6</sup> Nature, for the early Schelling, is not mindless material awaiting the synthesizing powers of subjectivity to give it sense and structure but spirit in its undeveloped potency for consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Freedom, in the later Schelling, is not nature-transcending consciousness but consciousness of

<sup>5</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, “Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature as an Introduction to this Science,” trans. Priscilla Hayden-Roy in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York, NY: Continuum, 1987), 167–202.

<sup>6</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> See especially the concept of nature developed in F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press,

nature. Schelling's first major move as a young philosopher was to correct Fichte's reduction of nature to a screen upon which the ego comes to know itself, making a case both for the spirituality of nature and its irreducibility to consciousness. For the early Schelling, nature is a dynamic evolving system, internally directed to self-manifestation, which it achieves when self-consciousness emerges. The developmental stages of nature are marked by the tension between polar forces, a conflict between centripetal and centrifugal drives, gravity and light, no and yes. These tensions are necessary for life: without a withdrawal of being into itself, nothing would emerge and grow. Nature is the involuted side of the spirit, the internalized activity of self-developing freedom, a dynamic emergent being, the goal of which is to be revealed but which it can only accomplish if it also hides itself. For this reason, nonrational nature exhibits features typical of rational beings: in its being designed, its teleological structure, nonrational nature is 'goal oriented' and yet without consciousness of the goal towards which it is directed. In the human being, nature becomes conscious of itself; it develops from being unconscious goal-oriented activity to consciousness setting its own goals. The difference between rational and nonrational being is underwritten by a primordial and metaphysical unity: both emerge from a common unconscious ground. The human being cannot, therefore, be reduced to consciousness, for the unconscious ground remains active in the soul as the foundation of its life and thinking.

A sea-change separates the later from the early Schelling: something indeed happened to Schelling when he moved to Munich in 1806, whether this was a new appreciation for the Catholic Middle Ages,<sup>8</sup> or the discovery of the significance of Boehme for the question concerning nature,<sup>9</sup> or his experience of the occult,<sup>10</sup> or perhaps all three.<sup>11</sup> In any case something changed, and the change was momentous. But what does remain consistent between the early

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2004), and Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, Press 1978).

<sup>8</sup> John Laughland, *Schelling versus Hegel. From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809–1815* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Friedmann Horn, *Schelling and Swedenborg: Mysticism and German Idealism*, trans. George F. Dole (West Chester, PA: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Horst Fuhrmans argues that in fact these three influences—medieval theology, Boehme, and the occult—converged in the person of Franz von Baader, who became something of Schelling's mentor between the years 1806 and 1813. See Horst Fuhrmans, *Schellings Philosophie der Weltalter. Schellings Philosophie in den Jahren 1806–1821. Zum Problem des Schellingschen Theismus* (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1954).

and the later Schelling is Schelling's refusal to follow the trajectory of modernity and split consciousness from nature. It is in this historical context that we must read the passage from the *Freedom* where Schelling attempts to resolve the problem of freedom or determinism by moving the discussion to a deeper level of analysis where both could be understood as essential moments in freedom's experience of itself. Schelling is still doing *Naturphilosophie* in the *Freedom*. Another name for "ground," Schelling tells us, is "nature."<sup>12</sup> Nature/Ground should not be understood as some kind of solid substantial being; it is difference, nonbeing, potency, desire: "Nature in general is everything that lies beyond absolute identity."<sup>13</sup>

The problematic that most concerns Schelling in *Freedom* arises from Book One of Kant's *Religion*. Because of the dependency of our choice of maxim on disposition, the burden of responsibility must be pushed further back than Kant had left it in the second *Critique*: it is not in my choice of maxim that I am most free but in the authoring of my character, which determines my choice of maxim.<sup>14</sup> Kant does not explain how this self-authoring is possible, only that it must be possible, and it must be noumenal, that is, trans-temporal, if we are to admit the causal dependency of maxim on character *and* the fact of freedom, or the possibility of the moral law. Schelling follows Kant quite closely on this point: "Idealism actually first raised the doctrine of freedom to that very region where it is alone comprehensible. According to idealism, the intelligible being of everything and especially of man is outside all causal connectedness as it is outside or above all time."<sup>15</sup> Determinism and libertarianism are equally one-sided perspectives on a structure that can only be understood dialectically. The determinist is right insofar as he recognizes that the web of causality has no gaps in it to allow for spontaneous agency. The libertarian is right insofar as he holds that the good will authors itself. Both are

<sup>12</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> According to Kant disposition is the product of a free act occurring outside the phenomenal order, "an intelligible act" that "precedes all experience" and cannot in itself be known, even though its effects are everywhere visible in the moral choices of the individual. The intelligible act is "the ground of the exercise of freedom" (See Kant, *Religion*, 34, 35). "To have a good or an evil disposition as an inborn natural constitution does not mean that it has not been acquired by the man who harbors it, that he is not the author of it, but rather, that it has not been acquired in time (that he has *always* been good, or evil, *from his youth up*). The disposition, i.e., the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of maxims, can be one only and applies universally to the whole use of freedom. Yet this disposition itself must have been adopted by free choice, for otherwise it could not be imputed. But the subjective ground or cause of this adoption cannot further be known" (Kant, *Religion*, 20).

<sup>15</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 49.

wrong insofar as they imagine that freedom can be accounted for in temporal-causal terms. Schelling speaks of a beginning outside of time, but we should not cling too tightly to the image of a prelapsarian state of being ‘prior to’ the creation of the world; rather, we should understand that the inside of every moment is a timeless ground that can only appear as always past.<sup>16</sup> The will acts out of the necessity of its nature. This necessity is not mechanical: it is the being of the will, the core of freedom out of which its individual acts unfold. “But precisely this inner necessity is itself freedom; the essence of man is fundamentally *his own act*; necessity and freedom are in one another as one being that appears as one or the other only when considered from different sides, in itself freedom, formally necessity.”<sup>17</sup>

What is demolished by this account is *libertas indifferetiae*, the notion that freedom consists in absence of motive. The undetermined will is a construct of the already determined will imagining itself otherwise: will only exists as determined, for good or evil. Prior to its determination, will is not in a state of vacillation between equally un compelling alternatives; rather, it does not exist at all. With Fichte, Schelling insists that the will is its own activity; beyond Fichte, he argues that the activity by which the will constitutes itself is unconscious and can never be made conscious. “We too assert a predestination but in a completely different sense, namely in this: as man acts here so has he acted from eternity and already in the beginning of creation. His action does not *become*, just as he himself does not *become* as a moral being, but rather it is eternal by nature. This oft-heard and tormenting question also falls by the wayside: Why is exactly this individual destined to act in an evil and base manner while, in contrast, another is destined to act piously and justly? For the question presupposes that man is not initially action and act and that he as a spiritual being has a Being which is prior to, and independent of, his will, which as has been shown, is impossible.”<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Zizek’s Reading of Schelling

In a remarkable deconstruction that turns the later Schelling on his head and makes him a contributor to a Fichtian-style severance of subjectivity from nature, Slavoj Zizek reads Schelling’s theory of freedom as a forerunner of

<sup>16</sup> The point is central to Schelling’s theory of time in the *Weltalter* drafts. See F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, Third Draft 1815, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 2000, hereafter cited as *Weltalter*.

<sup>17</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–53.

Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>19</sup> In Žizek's view the later Schelling's notion of the unconscious as ground is something quite other than the slumbering spirit of the *Naturphilosophie*. Ground is a self-conflicting nest of cycles of expansion and contraction, a "rotary motion" of conflicting drives, centering upon two incompatible possibilities: willing oneself at the expense of the other, or willing the other at the cost of one's singularity.<sup>20</sup> The decision that resolves the conflict, the decision to be oneself, for good or ill, is always forever lost to the self, a "vanishing mediator" that must sink into unconsciousness the moment the decision is made. Hence consciousness is not a synthesis but a displacement, not a resolution of unconscious conflict, but a symptom. In Schelling's *Weltalter*, the notion of a decision that is, in its first moment of actuality, irretrievably lost to consciousness, the "intelligible act" of the *Freedom* essay, becomes a model for understanding God's act of creation. When God creates, in effect breaking the circle of his infinity, he puts an end to the equilibrium of eternity and inaugurates the drama of time with a violent, interruptive event. The decision to create is as much a self-limitation, that is, a negation, as it is a self-donation or affirmation. For Žizek, the notion of the unconscious as vanishing mediator is a decisive development in the later Schelling's thought. The unconscious is no longer a material stratum, but the decision that is simultaneously the birth of consciousness and the ejection of an unconscious ground. 'Nature,' on this view, does not precede subjectivity; rather, it comes to be at the precise moment that subjectivity separates itself from its own life. Žizek comments:

Apropos of his claim that man's consciousness arises from the primordial act which separates the present/actual consciousness from the spectral, shadowy realm of the unconscious, one has to ask a seemingly naive, but crucial, question: what, precisely, is here unconscious? Schelling's answer is unambiguous: the 'unconscious' is not primarily the rotary motion of drives ejected into the eternal past; 'unconscious' is rather the very act of *Ent-Scheidung* by means of which drives were ejected into the past. Or—to put it in slightly different terms—what is truly 'unconscious' in man is not the immediate opposite of consciousness, the obscure and confused 'irrational' vortex of drives, but the very founding gesture of consciousness, the act of decision by means of which I 'choose myself,'—that is, combine this

<sup>19</sup> See Slavoj Žizek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996); Žizek, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Žizek, "From Proto Reality to the Act," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5 (2000): 141–48, <http://www.lacan.com/zizproto.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> "Two principles are already in what is necessary of God: the outpouring, outstretching, self-giving being, and an equivalently eternal force of selfhood, of retreat into itself, of Being in itself" (Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 6).

multitude of drives into the unity of my Self. The ‘unconscious’ is not the passive stuff of inert drives to be used by the creative ‘synthetic’ activity of the conscious Ego; the ‘unconscious’ in its most radical dimension is rather the highest Deed of my self-positing, or—to resort to later ‘existentialist’ terms—the choice of my fundamental ‘project’ which, in order to remain operative, must be ‘repressed,’ kept out of the light of day.<sup>21</sup>

For Žizek, ground is not a substratum of potencies and impulses that are only fully actualized in subjectivity, but is the residue of the excised life of the subject. Subjectivity does not ‘evolve’ out of materiality. Rather, the illusion of an extra-subjective natural order begins with the decision of the subject to be *for itself*, a decision which can only be made by setting up the *in itself* as that which the subject is not. As with everything Žizek writes, Lacanian presuppositions determine this reading of Schelling. Lacan’s “subject” is the Cartesian subject living in a disenchanted world, a subject deprived, by virtue of the structure of consciousness itself, of ‘roots’ in ‘nature.’ Subjectivization is not a reversible procedure: there is no way back into the pre-subjective realm. This is the significance of Lacan’s *Vel*, the mathematical sign for an either/or choice. The human being is faced with an impossible choice, akin to the pseudo-choice of the mugger, ‘your money or your life.’ The choice is between subjectivity (rationality, symbolic life, etc.) and being (natural life, immediacy). Just as one cannot really choose to save one’s money in the mugger’s dilemma, for the man who chooses to save his money loses his life, and therefore his money as well, so too the modern subject cannot choose being or nature over subjectivity because there will be no one left to enjoy that which is chosen.<sup>22</sup> The unconscious, which was the ground of unity between the human and the cosmos in the early Schelling, becomes, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the unbridgeable gap between subjectivity and nature. On this reading, the later Schellingian ‘unconscious’ comes to mean exactly the opposite of the romantic unconscious. Subjectivity is only possible on the grounds of a severance of consciousness from ‘the real’ (the cut effected by ‘the symbolic’); the unconscious is a trace of this scission, not the remains of nature, as though some dimension of man’s natural origin remains on a subterranean level of the psyche, but rather the excluded other necessary to maintaining the bubble of the symbolic, a sign of an absence, a gap, or lack.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Žizek, *The Invisible Remainder*, 33–34.

<sup>22</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 211.

<sup>23</sup> See Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).



Key to Zizek's meta-psychological reading of Schelling's theogony is his appropriation of Schelling's notion of ground as an abyss of drives in agonistic conflict with each other. In *Weltalter*, Schelling introduces the notion of divine potencies to further elaborate the hunger and dissatisfaction of the ground, a notion that becomes central to his later philosophy of mythology. The divine being "before" creation is an eternity constituted by an endless rotation of three mutually exclusive possibilities of willing: a will that contracts into itself and desires only itself, a second will that expands outwardly and affirms otherness, and a third that unites both the negation of the first and the affirmation of the second. One might ask: why these three? The only three possibilities for will are self-assertion (negation of the other), self-donation (affirmation of the other), or a compromise between the two, a self that asserts itself by giving itself away or a self that receives itself by giving itself away, a no and a yes at the same time. The three can be parsed out in various ways: ipseity, alterity, and community; identity, difference, and plurality, etc. Since the absolute is indifferent to all distinction, each of these potencies or wills have equal claim to be God; no one of them can assume primacy over any other. Rather each one emerges into presence only to invite succession by the next, *ad infinitum*.<sup>24</sup> Zizek reads this as the madness of God, the infinite reflection of a schizophrenic God who cannot decide who or what it is, a being divided into conflicting desires, incapable of authentic action because it lacks the requisite self-identity.

Zizek's agonistic reading of ground, however antithetical to the romantic spirit of Schelling's philosophy, is close to the source. Schelling's ground is a

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<sup>24</sup> "God, in accordance with the necessity of its nature, is an eternal No, the highest Being-in-itself, an eternal withdrawal of its being into itself, a withdrawal within which no creature would be capable of living. But the same God, with equal necessity of its nature, although not in accord with the same principle, but in accord with a principle that is completely different from the first principle, is the eternal Yes, an eternal outstretching, giving, and communicating of its being. Each of these principles, in an entirely equal fashion, is the being, that is, each has the same claim to be God or that which has being. Yet they reciprocally exclude each other. If one is that which has being then the opposed can only be that which does not have being. But, in an equally eternal manner, God is the third term of the unity of the Yes and the No. Just as opposites exclude each other from being what has being, so again the unity excludes the antithesis and thereby each of the opposites, and, in turn, the antithesis or each of the opposites excludes the unity from being what has being" (Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 11). There are two things worth noting in this passage. Schelling distinguishes 'being' from 'having being,' such that that which *is* may not always *be*, that is, may not always have being. Second, Schelling, unlike Hegel, maintains the principle of noncontradiction in his dialectic. Indeed, without the principle of noncontradiction there would be no tension in the divine that calls for resolution in a decision.

repetition of Boehme's "dark-fire," the first-principle, which churns in the agony of the conflict of the first three "forms of nature," "harshness," "bitterness," and "angst."<sup>25</sup> The first two "dark" forms are diametrical oppositions, a centripetal force countered by a centrifugal force; the conflict between them generates the tension of the third dark form, angst, until the pressure becomes unbearable and explodes in the "crack" (*Blitz*), which opens up the next three "light" forms of the second principle. Zizek does not need to impose a psychological reading on to Schelling, for the psychology is already there in Boehme. Without conflict and contradiction, Boehme says over and over again, there would be no events, no movement, no life, no self-revelation, and therefore, no consciousness. "If everything were only one, that one could not be revealed to itself."<sup>26</sup> Without struggle and opposition, God (and by implication, the subject) would remain submerged in unconsciousness. "The life itself standeth in strife, that it may be made manifest, sensible, and palpable, and that the wisdom may be made separable and known."<sup>27</sup> God can only be self-conscious if he allows for difference in being—for difference, dividedness, of himself from his ground, of himself from creation, of every creature from every other. Without division there could be no return, spirit, or love. Read meta-psychologically, the point is that subjectivity requires division: the subject must stand over and against itself on some level, threatened, haunted, and erotically drawn to that which it is not, that with which it could be united only at the expense of itself. The analogy with Lacan is indeed striking. It may have as much to do with Lacan's reading of Alexandre Koyré's monumental study of Boehme as it does with therapeutical 'results.'<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Jacob Boehme, *Concerning the Three Principles of Divine Essence*, trans. John Sparrow (London: John M. Watkins, 1910). On the Boehme-Schelling relationship see S. J. McGrath, "Boehme, Schelling, Hegel, and the Hermetic Theology of Evil," *Philosophy and Theology* 18, n° 2 (2006): 257–85; Robert Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809–1815* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1972).

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Boehme, *177 Theosophical Questions*, trans. John Sparrow (London: 1661), part 3, § 6, cited in Margaret Lewis Bailey, *Milton and Jacob Boehme. A Study of German Mysticism in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Haskell House, 1914), 146.

<sup>27</sup> Boehme cited in Robin Waterfield, *Jacob Boehme*, Western Esoteric Masters Series (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2001), 134.

<sup>28</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *La Philosophie de Jacob Böhme* (Paris: Vrin, 1971). Lacan had read Koyré's *Böhme* as early as 1929 and participated in Koyré's seminar in 1934. The two become close collaborators in the '50s. See Bernard Burgoyne, "From the Letter to the Matheme: Lacan's Scientific Methods," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69–85, at 77. Lacan's debt to Western Esotericism is in need of scholarly attention. The connection between Lacan and Boehme has been noticed in the

What happens in Zizek's Lacanian reading of Schelling, however, is an overturning of the theistic teleologico-vitalistic context of Boehme by an atheist absurdist materialist presupposition. On Zizek's view Boehme and Schelling could only be dreaming when they posit that the telos of theogony/cosmogony/psychogony is life and love (the inevitable fantasy of "the Big Other"). Lacan's fearless acceptance of the absurdity of subjectivity ostensibly shows us the truth of the matter. The dialectic of consciousness and unconsciousness is not the production of love but a defense against horror and meaninglessness. Certainly, Zizek helps us to see that Schelling's ground is not an ontological foundation, not a substance, or a natural network of causes in any deterministic sense. On the contrary, the ground is less real than what it grounds. To say the ground exists "prior" to the grounded is to make a category mistake, applying a category, "existence," which is an ideal determination, to the real. Again, the point is firmly rooted in Boehme: the dark-fire is not being, but a hunger for being. The divine abyss (*Ungrund*) allows itself to become possessed by what Boehme calls *Trieb* (the same word Freud uses for "drive"); it churns with a desire for a relation with itself; it seeks, obscurely, blindly, for itself. What it finds is nothing other than its own seeking, "the hunger, which is itself."<sup>29</sup> Schelling writes that ground is "the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself";<sup>30</sup> "pure craving or desire, that is, blind will."<sup>31</sup> The ground longs for existence, which means, of course, that it lacks existence. For Zizek this indicates that lack is more primordial than fullness, that at the origin of subjectivity is a repression of the primordial lack necessary for consciousness. For Boehme and Schelling it means that a mysterious purpose, hidden in the deep unconscious of God, allows for limitation, negation, and finitude for the sake of love and community.

The most important contribution of Schelling to meta-psychology in Zizek's reading is not Schelling's theory of drives but his theory of decision as "the beginning that cannot know itself." Schellingian subjectivity comes to be in an eternal decision for itself that precedes its actual existence. This generates the

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French literature. See Dany-Robert Dufour, *Lacan et le miroir sophianique de Boehme* (Paris: Cahiers de l'Unébévue, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> "So erkennen wir aber / daß sich der Willen selber suche / vnd in sich selber finde / vnd sein suchen ist eine Begierde / vnd sein finden ist der Begierde wesen / darinnen sich der Wille findet. Er findet nichts als nur die eigenschafft deß hungers / welche er selber ist" (Jacob Böhme, *De Signatura Rerum*, in *Jacob Böhme Werke*, ed. Ferdinand van Ingen [Frankfurt, a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997], c. II, p. 521, l. 10–14).

<sup>30</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

paradox of a being that presides over its own birth. The decision is the creaturely repetition of the act by which God contracts his infinity into a chaotic ground, the instability of which invites the emergence of an existent God of love. Zizek argues that what is properly unconscious in Schelling is not the ground, or the proto-subject that appears to precede the self-generated subject; what is unconscious is the decision (*Ent-scheidung*) by which God/the subject brings himself into being out of nothingness. Adrian Johnston has cut through Zizek's tiresome style (a frenetic bouncing back and forth from brilliant hermeneutical work, to obscure pop culture references, to occasionally insightful political observations) to show us how Zizek's Schelling-Lacan fusion overturns a common reading of psychoanalysis as a variety of determinism.<sup>32</sup> Zizek applies Schelling to Lacan and Lacan to Schelling to elaborate psychoanalysis as a philosophy of freedom. The break with causality, system, the symbolic, etc., which is the condition of the possibility of freedom, is itself made possible by the inconsistencies, the insubstantiality, fracturing the real (the ground) within itself.<sup>33</sup>

Is it not the case, however, that Zizek's opposition of the later Schellingian unconscious to the romantic unconscious effectively divides Schelling against himself? That is, does not Zizek in fact oppose (between the lines) the later Schelling's notion of the unconscious as "the beginning that cannot know itself" with the early Schelling's notion of the unconscious as "visible spirit"? For the early Schelling the unconscious is nature, the ground of spirit; consciousness is nature become conscious of itself. We can easily fit this into an evolutionary narrative whereby consciousness emerges out of the long night of unconscious natural life, which subsists within the emergent consciousness as its primordial ground. For Zizek's Schelling there is no nature in the strict sense of the term, no order that precedes subjectivity. "The unconscious, along with consciousness, is created by the *Ent-Scheidung*, and the latter itself is almost instantaneously absorbed into one of the products of its very own

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology. A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> "In other words, freedom doesn't arise from a special faculty with an innate capacity for autonomy hard-wired into the individual's constitution; instead, the capacity for autonomy is a consequence of the deficient and incomplete harmonization of the various faculties forming the individual's constitution. This represents a 'negative' account of human freedom, namely, an account based on the absence, rather than the presence, of certain attributes and properties... Individuals are capable of achieving the ideality of a freedom transcending material determination precisely because their drives are constitutionally divorced from a strict anchoring to the innerworldly domain of natural objects" (Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 114).

intervention.”<sup>34</sup> What lies ‘beneath consciousness’ is not nature, a reservoir of potencies and possibilities for being, but the void that is always only partially concealed by subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> Zizek’s reading of Schelling questions (once again) the unity of the early and the later Schelling, urging us to read the later Schelling not as a continuation and development of the early Schelling but as a *volte face*. Is consciousness still “invisible nature” for the later Schelling, and nature still “visible spirit”? Or has Schelling, under the impulse of Boehme and Baader created a fundamentally different, much more deeply anti-realist model of the subject?

No doubt, nothing like the *Ent-Scheidung* is found in the early Schelling. The canonical roots of the notion are Kantian, the decision for character that must ground all choices of maxims if the subject is to be imputable. But the way Schelling develops the *Ent-Scheidung* shows Schelling’s profound reading of theosophy accompanying the retrieval of Kant’s meta-ethics. Schelling’s *Ent-Scheidung* is a curious cross-breeding of Kantian transcendental philosophy with Kabbalistic-Bohemian cosmology. The Kabbalistic creator also creates himself in a decision that generates an eternally inaccessible Godhead as the ground of an emergent cosmos, an eternal opaque ground as support of the order of intelligible structure.<sup>36</sup> The transition from the early Schelling to the later Schelling on this point is difficult to reconstruct, perhaps impossible. But we would do well to remember that the fusion of transcendental theories of subjectivity and *Naturphilosophie* was at the heart of Schelling’s various efforts at a system. The choice between a naturalist theory of the evolution of consciousness from unconscious nature and a psychoanalytical theory of the constitution of the unconscious by self-positing consciousness is a choice that the early Schelling himself urges us not to make. If we were to put the early Schelling into discussion with the later Schelling on this point, we might want

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<sup>34</sup> Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology*, 101.

<sup>35</sup> “The unconscious, concealed behind the veils of repression, isn’t to be understood (merely) as an aggregate of overdetermining forces and factors compromising or impeding the individual’s autonomous capacities as a free agent.... Rather, repression frequently conceals the opposite, indeterminacy and groundlessness covered over by various psychical layers seeking to avoid this void” (Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology*, 102).

<sup>36</sup> We refer here to the notion of *Zimzum* or contraction in the Kabbalistic theogony of Isaac of Luria, a likely source of Boehme’s theogony. Before God could create the world, he needed to contract his being, negate his infinity, to create the space within which creation could come to be. The contraction results in the production of, on the one side, a void, on the other, an impenetrable Godhead, hidden even from himself. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1974), 128–35.

to say that two perspectives are possible on this issue: a naturalistic perspective, which would see the unconscious as prior to consciousness, and a transcendental perspective, which would see consciousness as prior to unconsciousness. Both perspectives are justified because the *Ent-Scheidung* is at once a free decision of a self-positing subject and an event in the history of nature. “In the circle out of which all things become, it is not a contradiction that what engenders one thing is itself regenerated by it. Here there is no first and last, because all things mutually presuppose each other; nothing is the other, and yet nothing is without the other. God has within himself an inner ground of his existence which to this extent precedes him in his existence; yet God is just as much prior to the ground insofar as the ground, also as such, could not be if God did not exist *actu*.”<sup>37</sup> Schelling would see no conflict between a naturally evolving consciousness and an unconscious posited by consciousness because there is no first and second in the metaphysics of ground and consequent. To rephrase Žizek, the unconscious is *both* “the passive stuff of inert drives to be used by the creative ‘synthetic’ activity of the conscious Ego” and “the highest Deed of my self-positing.” One must recount both a history of nature in which consciousness is the product of natural evolution, and a history of consciousness in which the unconscious, or nature, is posited by consciousness as the condition of the possibility of its own existence.

### 3. The Productive Unconscious

The most serious problem with the Lacanian appropriation of Schelling is the imposition of a theory of repression onto the Schellingian unconscious. Nowhere does Schelling say that the unconscious is constituted by acts, contents, experiences, which are unconscious because subjectivity could not bear them. The Schellingian unconscious is not reactive but productive, not repressive but dissociative. Here we refer to a distinction between two broad classes of theories of the unconscious: the reactive unconscious, which is an effect of the loss and disowning of the individual’s past (of which Lacan’s is the most philosophically sophisticated account), and the productive unconscious, which is widely associated with Jung, and increasingly with Deleuze and Guattari, but whose historical inception is Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*.<sup>38</sup> The productive unconscious is the future-oriented, creative ground of the polymorphous

<sup>37</sup>) F. W. J. Schelling, *Freedom*, 13.

<sup>38</sup>) See Christian Kerslake’s study of the non-Freudian unconscious, *Deleuze and the Unconscious* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007).

self, a collective layer of potencies and possibilities that are for the most part unrecognized by the ego but that make possible the development and transformations the psyche undergoes in its progressive individuation. Where the theoreticians of the reactive unconscious have broken with the theosophic-romantic lineage of dynamic psychology, the advocates of the productive unconscious have actively elaborated and developed it.

Schelling and the romantics constructed the unconscious in order to overcome the modern split between subjectivity and nature, mind and body, a split legislated by Cartesian representationalism. When everything becomes object for a subject, the subject becomes worldless, disconnected, without ontological relationship to the things it represents. To counter the ascendancy of representationalism—in the thought of Descartes, Kant, and Fichte—Schelling, Novalis, Hölderlin, F. Schlegel, and Baader drew on older, esoteric models of the soul, hermetic, Kabbalistic and theosophical: the soul as ‘microcosm,’ as the heart of the world, beating with natural instinctive rhythms and connected via “sympathy” with all that is, was, and will be. The microcosm-macrocosm homology is a central theme of Kabbalah, Mesmerism, theosophy, and Renaissance Hermeticism (cherished subjects of romantic research). Paracelsus is pivotal for the modern memory of the theory. Like the universe, which it represents, the human being, according to Paracelsus, is double: the visible, corporeal side is grounded in a hidden sidereal body (*corpus sidereum*).<sup>39</sup> The invisible side is the source of the human being’s implicit knowledge of the universe. Through “natural light” (*lumen naturae*) the human being is able to communicate with the invisible side of the macrocosm, the eternal “virtues” or divine archetypes that constitute the foundation of creation.<sup>40</sup> This knowledge of sidereal bodies is, in modern psychological terms, unconscious, that is, unrepresented and unrepresentable. It makes itself known through sympathy. Paracelsus’ “light of nature” should not be confused with reason in the modern sense of the term. It is unconscious knowledge, as Jung puts it in his study of

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<sup>39</sup> “The world we do not see is equal to ours [the world we do see] in weight and measure, in nature and properties. From this it follows that there exists another half of man in which this invisible world operates. If we know of the two worlds, we realize that both halves are needed to constitute the whole man; for they are like to two men united in one body” (Paracelsus, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. Sudhoff and W. Matthiessen [Munich: R. Oldenberg, 1925], 1, 9 I. Abt., p. 258, cited in *Paracelsus. Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi [Princeton University Press, 1951], 43).

<sup>40</sup> “If we follow the light of nature, we learn that there exists another half of man, and that man does not consist of blood and flesh alone... but also of a body that cannot be discerned by our crude eyesight” (Paracelsus, *Werke*, 1, 9, pp. 254–5, cited in Jacobi, *Paracelsus*, 43).

Paracelsus, “the light of darkness itself.”<sup>41</sup> It is not day-light but the light of the black sun (*sol niger*) of alchemy, which makes hidden things visible. The media of the natural light are dream, trance, and hallucinogenic drugs.<sup>42</sup> Paracelsus also refers to the natural light as ‘animal reason,’ for it is bound up with the human being’s animal life and maintains the mind in vital contact with mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms.

Freudian psychoanalysis follows Schopenhauer rather than the early Schelling.<sup>43</sup> Phantasmic knowledge, imagination, sympathetic intuition, etc., become for Schopenhauer illusory, the product of tragic desire. The goal of Schopenhauerian philosophy is the subject’s emancipation from the phantasmic, which is inextricably entwined with eros and self-centred will. The emancipated subject, who no longer believes in what he or she sees and feels, becomes “the pure subject of knowledge.” Freud’s “primary process,” the image-generating power of the Id, is likewise modulated and restrained by “the secondary process,” which substitutes realistic alternatives for the Id’s infinite desires. Lacan’s “subject of destitution” is the heir of Schopenhauerian pessimism: the gnosis of one who realizes that all that they hitherto held as most valuable, essential, and desirable, is irredeemably unsatisfying and inherently meaningless.

Schelling’s notion of the productive unconscious had an enormous effect on whole schools of romantic psychiatry and medicine, which are almost entirely forgotten today.<sup>44</sup> Something of the Schellingian unconscious survives in Bergson, Janet, Jung, and Deleuze/Guattari. The distinction between the productive and reactive unconscious is not primarily a question of meta-psychology but a question of alternative therapeutics. The progressive and reactive unconscious have different kinds of illnesses. The reactive (Schopenhauerian) unconscious leads to psychological breakdown when the repression without which the psyche cannot live becomes for whatever reason intolerable. The illnesses characteristic of the productive (Schellingian) unconscious are dissociative rather than repressive. The reason why the hysteric or schizophrenic

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<sup>41</sup> C. G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, in Vol. 13 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (Princeton University Press, 1968), 160.

<sup>42</sup> “This light reaches man, as in a dream.” Paracelsus, *Werke*, 1, 13, p. 325, cited in Jacobi, *Paracelsus*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> On the relationship of Freud to Schopenhauer see Marcel Zentner, *Die Flucht ins Vergessen: die Anfänge der Psychoanalyse Freuds bei Schopenhauer* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> For an overview of romantic psychiatry, see Henry Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 199–223.



experiences a split in the personality is not because of the eruption of repressed material into ordinary life but because of the experience of a form of consciousness that is strange to the ego. Artistic creation, trance, religious experience, and drug-induced hallucination are similar experiences of other forms of consciousness breaking free within the personality, forms of consciousness that are unconscious to each other or to the ego. The progress of psychological life inevitably leads to the differentiation and pluralization of the personality, much as an organism only grows by taking on new physical forms. The new forms of consciousness cannot but initially appear as strange and cut off from normal life. This is not because they were, prior to this moment of appearance, repressed. It is because they are new.

#### 4. The Beginning Cannot Know Itself

Schelling draws out the implications of Kant's account of the authoring of character, and the added detail only deepens the obscurity of the claim. The act of primordial decision by means of which I choose myself cannot be a self-reflexive act of the subject of self-consciousness. The intelligible act is my beginning, and my beginning is never available to me. I did not experience it consciously, for there was no I to experience it, nor can I revisit it in consciousness. The beginning is the past that was never present. I cannot experience my birth, for my birth makes all my experiencing possible.

The person becomes who he is in an unconscious decision for good or for evil. In a non-temporal, eternally past, unconscious but free act, the person chooses the character that undergirds his temporal existence. He can only experience his free decision in time as something irretrievably past, that is, as necessity. Free of the Kantian censure on metaphysics, Schelling is able to speculate that the act of self-determination is a repetition of what has happened in the Absolute itself. Insofar as the universe of finite being exists, the Absolute must have disengaged itself from primordial indifference, the will that wills nothing, and became a creator, a will that wills something. In language that directly repeats Boehme's theogony of God's birth out of the *Ung-rund* and the Kabbalistic *Zimzum*, Schellingian freedom contracts before it expands into self-creative act, withdraws into inaccessible unconsciousness and thereby makes possible revelation, theophany, and what is the same thing, consciousness. Freedom steps out of the pure potentiality of a will that is indifferent to good or evil, which could equally determine itself as good or evil, to become a being that has chosen good or evil. The intelligible act is a contrac-

tion of possibility to a single actuality. Only the being that descends into actuality is conscious, for it alone exists for itself: it alone has a history, a character, and a destiny. The act that makes consciousness itself possible cannot itself be conscious.

So that there would be a true beginning, this higher life had to sink back down into unconsciousness of itself. There is a law in humanity: there is an incessant primordial deed that precedes each and every single action and through which one is actually Oneself. Yet this primordial deed sinks down into unfathomable depths with respect to consciousness that elevates itself above it. Thereby, this primordial deed becomes a beginning that can never be sublimated, a root of reality that cannot be reached through anything. In the same way, in the decision, that primordial deed of divine life also eradicates consciousness of itself, so that what was posited as ground in divine life can only be disclosed again in the succession through a higher revelation. Only in this way is there a true beginning, a beginning that never ceases to be a beginning. The decision that would make any kind of act into a true beginning may not be brought before consciousness. It may not be *recalled*, which rightly means as much as taking it back. Whoever reserves it to themselves again and again to bring a decision to light never makes a beginning. Hence, character is the fundamental condition for all morality.<sup>45</sup>

Whoever reserves the right to reverse a decision never decides. To decide is to cut (*decision*—literally a cutting off) a line between oneself and one's past; only on the basis of a decision does one have a past for the first time, and therefore, an identity. But notice: this is not repression. This is not the deliberate expulsion of an act or an experience that is unbearable to consciousness, incompatible with an 'ego-ideal,' and that is destined to return as an irremovable obstruction to life. Rather, this is production. The only way to get anything started is by choosing, in an irreversible way, and without full consciousness of what is beginning in one's choice. An order of possibility opens up in the decision that was not implicit prior to the decision but did not exist at all. Only by letting the new disrupt the present—by letting personality be pluralized—is anything started. A good deed, then, is not one that is done with full consciousness of its moral significance, repercussions, and value. On the contrary; the deed that is truly good does not know itself as good, is only revealed as such afterward. The beginning cannot know itself. The human re-enacts the drama of *Ein-Sof* negating itself so that it can be a self, setting limits to its boundlessness in order to have something to give away. As the Kabalistic Creator remains a mystery to itself, grounded in something that, strictly speaking,

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<sup>45</sup> Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 85.

it is not, so freedom is never transparent to itself, never possesses its ground as a conscious datum, but is always thrown into a trajectory that it does not command.

Can we then be held responsible for what we do?

In order to hold the Schellingian will responsible, we must abandon the idea of responsibility as self-mastery and move toward a notion of responsibility as self-appropriation. To appropriate myself means taking over the ground of my being as *mine* and taking up the burden of my willing. This ‘taking over the ground’ is the act of one who is first of all divided: I can only actively own that which is initially not me. I am called to appropriate the ground because it is other than me; it is alien and foreign. To paraphrase Heidegger, not through myself but released to myself am I called to take responsibility for myself.<sup>46</sup> How can I hold you responsible for who you are when you were not a participant in the construction of yourself? But how could you be a participant in the construction of yourself? The first of the Twelve Steps in AA is for the alcoholic to admit his powerlessness over alcohol; the fifth is for the alcoholic to take responsibility for his alcohol abuse. On one reading of responsibility, this is a plain contradiction: the alcoholic makes amends for actions that he did not intend to perform, that in a strict sense he did not consciously will. How could this bit of pop wisdom (in fact a development of Jungian psychology) have such dramatic power, not only to console but to convert, if it did not have some purchase in human living and suffering?

To take responsibility for the unconscious is to expand the compass of our accountability to include that which we do not recognize as ourselves, but which in fact must be so recognized, to own the ground that we have not laid for ourselves and could not lay for ourselves, precisely because it is our ground. What is the goal of psychotherapy? A stock answer runs, “to make the unconscious conscious.” This cannot mean, obviously, that I become absolutely conscious through therapy. Psychotherapy does not even presume to rid the soul of its neuroses, complexes, etc. At best it can make the client conscious of

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<sup>46</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, paragraph 58: “Being the ground, that is, existing as thrown, Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities. It is never existent *before* its ground, but only *from it* and *as it*. Thus being the ground means *never* to gain power over one’s ownmost being from the ground up. This *not* belongs to the existential meaning of thrownness. Being the ground, it itself is a nullity of itself. . . . *Not through* itself, but *released* to itself from the ground in order to be *as this ground*. Dasein is not itself the ground of its being, because the ground first arises from its own project, but as a self, it is the *being* of its ground. The ground is always ground only for a being whose being has to take over being-the-ground” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Albany, N. Y.: 1996], German pagination, 284–285).

these, so that he no longer attributes the disruptions of ‘normalcy’ he experiences to anyone other than himself. Freud said the goal of therapy was to convert neurotic suffering into ordinary unhappiness. According to Lacan, this means that the client learns to live with their peculiar kind of habitual madness. Schelling might have said, the goal of therapy is to witness what you are becoming. For Schelling we are always catching up with what we are. Taking responsibility, in a Schellingian register, is exactly this act of consciously owning what we are. To take responsibility for Schelling is not to say: I did what I did freely and with full consciousness of what I was doing. It is to say: I see what I did. I recognize it as mine. This act of self-appropriation, in Schellingian psychotherapy, would not be *resignation*; it would be, rather, *commitment* and the beginning of something new.