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“Someday we shall be able to see by what torturous paths modern psychology has made its way from the dingy laboratories of the alchemists, via mesmerism and magnetism . . . to the philosophical anticipations of Schopenhauer, Carus and von Hartmann” (Jung, CW 4: 748). This remark by Carl Jung reveals both the breadth of his understanding of the lineage of the unconscious and an important oversight. Missing from the genealogy is German Idealism, most notably, F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854), who is, we will argue, the philosopher with the greatest claim to being the original theoretician of the unconscious. And behind him stands the massively underrated figure of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), whom Hegel called “the first German philosopher” (Hegel, 1896: 188), but whom we could just as accurately describe as the first depth psychologist. Prototypes for three of the major models of the unconscious in the twentieth century, the Freudian bio-personal unconscious, the Jungian collective unconscious, and the Lacanian semiotic unconscious, can be traced back to Schelling. Unlike Jacques Lacan, neither Sigmund Freud nor Jung read the German Idealists carefully, but they did not need to: by the end of the nineteenth century, German Idealism had infiltrated most fields of German academic life, either negatively, inspiring materialist reactions in logic, metaphysics, and natural science, or positively, influencing historiography, hermeneutics, and the burgeoning science of dynamic psychiatry. Late nineteenth-century psychologists no longer speculated about demons, spirits of the dead or mysterious invisible fluids to explain non-rational psychological phenomena; they had their theoretical model, the unconscious psyche, handed to them on a platter so to speak, not only theoretically well developed, but to some degree over-developed in hugely popular studies such as Eduard von Hartmann’s 1869 Philosophy of the Unconscious (a bricolage of Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer, which everybody seems to have read). Jung singles out Schopenhauer’s “anticipations” of psychoanalysis without reflecting on the relative lateness of Schopenhauer’s contribution or showing any sense that Schelling might be the missing link he seeks. The historical claim of this book is that Jacob Boehme’s alchemico-theosophical
psychology, modified and given metaphysical grounding by Schelling, is the origin of the psychodynamic notion of the unconscious.

**The unity of Schelling’s thought**

The interpreter of Schelling faces a particularly difficult hermeneutical challenge: as soon as Schelling had developed a workable theoretical frame (say nature-philosophy or identity-philosophy), he seems to have abandoned it. Schelling appears to have been repulsed by the prospect of settling down into a system, as though the real always beckoned to him from the far side of whatever set of categories were recommending themselves, compelling him to leave for others the frame he had constructed while he continued his restless search for the logical and historical relation between the infinite and the finite. For Heidegger, Schelling’s flagrant neglect of the canons of consistency and coherence is not a sign of the weakness of his thought, but exactly the opposite: thinking, according to Heidegger, never enjoys arrival, certainty, or stability (Heidegger, 1971). Schelling, whose philosophy was always underway, is the quintessential Heideggerian thinker.¹

Schelling’s inconsistencies notwithstanding, we can discern a set of recurring concerns in Schelling’s collected works, leitmotifs, which do not a system make, but constitute a style of philosophizing which we can call Schellingian. First in appearance is a theme most characteristic of Schelling’s nature-philosophy, but which also plays a central role in the philosophy of freedom and returns in the Trinitarian metaphysics of the late lectures: the notion of polarity. Schelling remains convinced, from his earliest treatises to his last lectures, that all intelligible structure, mental or material, physical or metaphysical, finite or divine, is characterized by polarity, opposition, and the creative and dynamic tension between incommensurables, a tension which must not be abrogated in a spurious logic that presumes to deny the principle of contradiction (Hegel’s). The production of being in Schellingian ontology is not by means of Hegel’s *qualitative* differentiation, the collapse of the identical into the play of contradictories and the subsequent negation of and re-inscription of difference into a higher standpoint, but by means of *quantitative* intensification of power, generation of difference within an essential identical being through progressive potentiation, which renders the latent power of anything available. For Schelling, contradictories are never fused, and the opposition between them highlights the primacy of will over thought, for in the face of incommensurable options, thinking can go no further until the will decides. However, Schelling is not Kierkegaard: all polarities are undergirded by a concealed commonality, a deep ground of unity that makes the opposites possible, for only that which is in secret alliance, according to Schelling, can be truly opposed. Thus the other-side of Schellingian polarity is the crucial notion of teleology: polarity is never something that just happens to be; it is always something that has come to be.
for the sake of a higher development, be it life, consciousness, the personalization of God, or the production of love. The one divides into two so that it might give birth to a one that knows itself as such and can be lovingly related to others.

The second recurring theme in Schellingian thought is the finitude of human experience, which is, for Schelling, neither a dogmatic assertion nor romantic Schwärmerei, but an experience of the crucifixion of thought against the real. The sense for finitude draws the middle Schelling to theosophy, but the late Schelling will re-consider this move, distancing himself from theosophy because the theosophist’s enthusiasm for the non-rational is too cheaply purchased. For Schelling, the understanding must go the distance with thought, concept, and logic, a distance which cannot be measured a priori but must be traversed to be known. The late Schelling stages a critique of “negative philosophy,” rationalist idealism, which he more or less invented and Hegel perfected, but he nonetheless insists that the passage to “positive philosophy,” the philosophy of existence, is only by means of negative philosophy. We cannot deduce existence from concepts but neither can we understand existence without concepts. Carried as far as it goes, the understanding discovers unsurpassable limits, whether this be the subject–object identity of the early Schelling, the contingencies of history of the middle period, or, in the later Schelling, the existence of reason itself, but these are not concepts (Hegel is thus far correct, concepts represent no real limit to thought); they are, rather, existential realities. For the early Schelling, an anticipation of the real shows itself in the symbolic and aesthetic patterns of experience, which always disclose more than reflective reason can ever comprehend; in the late Schelling, the real is not only an aesthetic experience, it is a religious experience, a revelation. The resistance of the real to idealization is at the heart of Schelling’s dispute with Hegel. To make the rational coextensive with the world, that is, to correlate logic or the symbolic with the whole of nature and culture, may in fact be an inevitable move for philosophy, which finds intelligibility everywhere it looks, structure that appears to be little more than an expression or exteriorization of the implicit logic of reason itself. But Hegel’s absolute idealism explains nothing, for the whole of the rational is not intelligible in terms of itself, it does not explain itself; as the brute fact of intelligibility, it is as absurd as it is meaningful. In the light of this fundamental antinomy of the existence of reason, the late Schelling regards logic as “negative,” a non-knowledge, a play of concepts, the significance of which remains opaque to philosophy.

The third Schellingian theme is contingency: the teleology of spirit is undergirded, qualified, and to some degree undercut by the formlessness of matter: older than order is accident, more basic than necessity is freedom. About this proto-existentialist/proto-materialist/proto-Marxist Schelling, much has been said. Schelling’s “irrationalism” can be overstated: without order and necessity, thought cannot exist, for the ordered, the ruled, and
the necessary constitute the proper medium of thought, the warp and woof of the ideal. From his earliest rebellion against subjectivistic interpretations of transcendental philosophy, to his re-evaluation of negative philosophy at the end of his career, Schelling rejects any suggestion that ideality, however insufficiently explanatory, is illusion, virtual, a merely subjective synthesis. Ideality is one face of the absolute; it is not the whole, but neither is it merely reflective of “the hard-wiring” of the mind. The absolute manifests itself in the ideal to some degree and therefore order and necessity are undeniable on a certain level of experience. In the maximum reach of the understanding, every order is revealed to be in fact contingent, grounded in something “ruleless,” something out of which order has been brought but which is not itself ordered.

We see these three motifs, polarity, finitude, and contingency, in the early Schelling, especially in the nature-philosophy; we also see them at play in the middle Schelling, in the dialectic of ground and existence and the combustive interaction of the three potencies; and in the late Schelling, the motifs come to mature expression in the last version of the doctrine of the potencies and the distinction between negative and positive philosophy. That said, Schelling’s work can hardly be described as a continuous evolution of thought: a sea-change separates the later from the early Schelling. Schelling’s thought was transformed when he moved to Munich in 1806, whether this be because he came to a new appreciation for the Catholic Middle Ages (Laughland, 2007), or discovered the significance of Jacob Boehme for the question concerning nature (Fuhrmans, 1954; Brown, 1977), or had a religious experience (Horn, 1954/1997), or perhaps all three. But what does remain consistent between the later and the early Schelling is the refusal to follow the trajectory of early modernity and split spirit from nature. It is in this historical context that we must read the Freedom essay: Schelling attempts to resolve the modern philosophical problem of freedom by moving the discussion to a deeper level of analysis in which both freedom and determinism can be understood as essential moments in freedom’s experience of itself.

The early notion of nature as “visible spirit” (Schelling, 1797: 202) becomes, in the middle Schelling, “ground,” God’s dark other, which leaves its trace in the impenetrable and inexplicable reality of things, “the irreducible remainder” (der nie aufgehende Rest), never to be subsumed into a concept and frustrating reason’s every attempt at system (Schelling, 1809: 29). The Freedom essay is a continuation of nature-philosophy by other means: Schelling’s impulse – to bring freedom and nature within one comprehensive view – remains the same as in his first explorations of post-Fichtian metaphysics. For the middle Schelling, the opposition between freedom and nature is overcome when nature is no longer understood positivistically as a substance or a network of substances, but rather onto-dynamically as difference, non-being, potency, desire: “Nature in general
is everything that lies beyond the absolute being of absolute identity” (Schelling, 1809: 28). Essential to this naturalization of freedom is the middle Schelling’s replacement of the Kantian notion of existence (position in space and time) with the neo-Oetingerian notion of life as spontaneous self-revelation. Freedom is the potentization of organic life, just as organism is the potentization of non-organic life, a perfection of the power of internal causality that is latent in the non-organic and first manifest in the lowest living organism. The archetype of both human freedom and organic life is the self-actualizing freedom of God. As image of God, nature is no mechanism but an evolving, self-moving life, the pinnacle of which is reached in man, who not only moves according to internal principles, but brings the dynamic of self-movement to its highest expression by authoring himself.

Although the absolute in itself, the unground, lacks nothing, the middle Schelling sometimes speaks of it as though it did, for what is brought about by the unground’s decision – creation, difference, consciousness – is understood after the 1809 personalist turn as a real increase in being. By the late philosophy of mythology and revelation, Schelling will change his view yet again and insist that God as a free and personal creator lacks nothing and does not depend upon creation to become personal. This is where we would do well to emphasize the tension (not the split) between Schelling’s identity-philosophy, which explores the impersonal and eternal self-sufficiency of the absolute, and the 1809 philosophy of freedom, with its breakthrough to the concept of personality. Identity-philosophy argues that, from the vantage point of the absolute, multiplicity, consciousness, and history are appearances produced by deficiencies in knowledge, degrees of separation from intellectual intuition: “All that is is, to the extent that it is, One: namely, it is the eternally self-same identity, the One that alone exists, and that therefore is all that can be known” (Schelling, 1804a: 153). In his middle period, Schelling argues, to the contrary, that difference is not an imperfection: the absolute is in process, giving birth to itself as a divine personality by means of duality, multiplicity, and history. The late Schelling returns to the assumption of the divine aseity characteristic of the identity-philosophy and corrects his theological “error” of ascribing historical development to God; in the same moment Schelling’s theology becomes less psychologically relevant. If we suspend the theological problems resulting from a God who begins imperfect and creates the world to perfect himself and, for a moment, follow Žižek in interpreting the theogony of the middle Schelling as a metapsychology, or better, a speculative psychology, a metaphysical analysis of the structure of personality by means of a projection of these structures onto a model of the absolute personality – for whatever else the middle Schelling is doing he is clearly also writing a psychology of the unconscious – we discover a narrative that anticipates not only Lacan and the resolution of the Oedipal complex in psychoanalysis but also the birth of
the hero in analytical psychology: a being that begins in unconscious unity with the system that produces and initially sustains it, achieves personal consciousness, individuality, and freedom by dissociating from that system and establishing a conscious relationship to it.

**Historical immanentism**

German Idealism is often identified with the thesis of historical immanentism, the metanarrative that describes the history of being as a dialectical process through which God achieves consciousness of himself. The thesis is essential to the genesis of the notion of the unconscious, for it offered thinkers like Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and von Hartmann (among others less known) a speculative tableau upon which they could sketch a history of mind, which psychoanalysis and analytical psychology later “discover” coincides to a significant degree with the development of the human personality. We call the thesis “historical” because it breaks with modern (pre-Kantian) a-historical metaphysics and insists on the inclusion in philosophy of the material and cultural reality of world-history: not all times and places are metaphysically equivalent, for being itself has a history, which coincides with man’s changing understanding of it. We call the thesis “immanentist” because it subsumes God into history: God does not begin conscious, he becomes conscious of himself through the developing consciousness of man, which presupposes the entire trajectory of natural and cultural evolution. Historical immanentism identifies the divine and the human mind through the medium of history, which could either mean that philosophy now finds a metaphysical way of expressing the Christian dogma, that God becomes man, or, that God as the transcendent origin and destiny of being does not in fact exist – what Christianity means by God is nothing other than man, as Feuerbach puts it.

Historical immanentism is arguably the young Schelling’s invention (even though Hegel deserves full credit for developing the thesis into a working system), an invention which came to haunt Schelling, for as Hegel makes clear, it implies that there are no real contingencies in the world just as there are no real limits to reason. The late Schelling breaks with the thesis: the freedom of the individual, the real contingency of material and cultural history, and the finitude of reason, not only in the face of matter, but in the light of revealed religion, strike him as too high a price to pay for a system of nature and history. And yet historical immanentism (re-conceived as “negative philosophy”) remains for Schelling to the end of his career the only adequate system of philosophy – its inadequacy to reality grants him the decisive impetus he needs to transcend the boundary between philosophy and religion in the *Philosophy of Revelation*.

The thesis of historical immanentism is founded upon the presumption that a system must comprehend all things as a unity, not simply a collection;
rather, everything in the system must be demonstrated to be necessary to the
dramatic unfolding of the logical pattern. The unity of being cannot be static
– this was the mistake of Spinozism – it must have the character of an event:
all things, material, cultural, spiritual, must be conceived as moments in a
developmental process. History cannot be merely a theatre of accidents and
arbitrary acts of will; it can only be a logical development, a movement from
a lower or primitive ontological position to a higher standpoint, which
includes the lower within itself even as it overpasses it. The significance of the
existence of the individual being as such disappears behind its mediating role
in bringing the whole of being into actuality: the idea, as Hegel puts it, is the
truth of the individual, the truth that the individual as such has no truth.
Historical immanentism can hardly be described as indifferent to theology:
the whole of material and cultural history is grounded in the being of God.
However, the historical immanentist’s God is no longer conceived as *ens
perfectissimum* or *actus purus*, whole, complete or perfectly actual being;
following Fichte’s notion of the self, and receiving decisive impulses from
Eckhart (God needs me to be God), the Kabbalah (the doctrine of divine
contraction or *zimzum*), and Boehme (God gives birth to himself), historical
immanentism conceives of a God who becomes God by positing his other
and becoming self-conscious by means of his opposition to it.

Historical immanentism is the entry point for the first philosophical
figure of the unconscious in the Western tradition: the unconscious as
the divine abyss out of which God emerges as an infinite drive for self-
knowledge. Henceforth dissociation from a primitive fullness of being, the
introduction of lack and absence into the infinite, is understood to be
essential to the growth of personal identity: God only acquires self-
knowledge by dissociating from his eternity, his infinite and undiffer-
entiated unity with being, and inaugurating the drama of creation, posting
another to himself, contracting himself from unrelated infinity into one who
has another and finding himself in it. In human self-consciousness, God
achieves his goal, consciousness of himself; therefore God’s consciousness is
not other than man’s consciousness. God’s desire for consciousness drives
world-history, his dissatisfaction with his own unconsciousness is the
driving force of being, for consciousness requires duality, the opposition of
self and other. God cannot remain in his primordial state of undiffer-
entiated self-identity for without the infinite–finite duality, God is less than
fully actual; he is driven by the inadequacy of his initial state of being into
dialectical development. The paradox at the heart of the thesis is the notion
of the imperfection of infinity: God without world is less perfect than God
with world. The world adds something essential to the infinite: relationship.
The creation of the world, therefore, is not a free and arbitrary act that
adds nothing to God, but neither is it a spontaneous emanation: these two
alternatives, respectively classical theism and classical pantheism, are fused
in historical immanentism. Creation for the historical immanentist is like an

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emanation insofar as it is an emergence of being *ex Deo* (not a creation *ex nihilo*), but it is not simply an involuntary process such as the emergence of light from the sun; creation is born of a crisis, a decision or break guided by a final cause: creation is for the sake of God’s becoming free, self-conscious, and personal. God’s becoming conscious, then, is identified with material and cultural history, with the historical dialectic of events and concepts, all of which only appear contingent but are in fact necessary. With this thesis, a priori metaphysics, seemingly abolished by Kant, returns with a vengeance in German Idealism and absorbs history into itself.

The working out of the thesis of historical immanentism is the central trajectory of German Idealism, from its inception in Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge*, through the treatises of the early Schelling, to the final form of Hegel’s system in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. The history books have allotted Schelling the minor role of passing the historical immanentist torch from Fichte to Hegel and adding the reminder that nature, the “not I” in Fichte’s system, is as essential to the development of consciousness as the transcendental ego. In fact, Schelling seems to have become bored with historical immanentism after working out its rough outlines in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, dropping it for a more classical Neoplatonic emanationism in the identity-philosophy, only to re-awaken his interest in the idea in his middle period under the influence of Boehme and new psychological questions concerning the history of the personality. Identity-philosophy does not deny the articulation of the self-sufficient absolute in hierarchically ordered levels of being; it denies the autonomous ontological reality of the hierarchy and thus does not seriously consider history as an event in the life of God. In its most mature expression, the 1804 Würzburg lectures (Schelling, SSW 6: 71–576), identity-philosophy insists on an abiding identity of reason with the absolute, the non-duality of being, which is essentially non-conscious. But this absolute unconsciousness is not a deficiency; rather, consciousness, characterized by the subject–object distinction and the experience of quantitative (comparative) differences among individuals, is a decline from the absolute, a descent into non-being, the “infinite fracture of the crystalline monolith of reason into the endless repetition of finite subject–objects” (Vater, 2000: 220). Schelling wavers back and forth in the 1801–1804 heyday of identity-philosophy on the question of whether philosophy possesses an intellectual intuition of the non-dual absolute or merely negatively, therapeutically, facilitates the recovery of such an intuition by removing obstacles to it (the last of which is philosophy itself). In the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion* essay, which inclines towards the latter, therapeutic, view of philosophy, Schelling describes intellectual intuition as the substantial being of the soul. Schellingian philosophy is always de-centred, thought thinking itself in the finite thinking subject, and, to this degree, the absolute indifference of the identity-philosophy is immanent in history. But the history in which
the absolute is immanent in identity philosophy is not yet a real history and a history of the real. On the contrary, for identity-philosophy God does not need history or human consciousness which is its fruit; in the strongest sense of the notion of being, neither truly exists. For historical immanentism *sensus strictus* it is not enough to say that my knowing is God’s knowing of himself, one must also add that God needs my knowing in order to know himself.

In 1809 Schelling returns to historical immanentism in a more robust sense than the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* had articulated, driven by new questions about the anarchic nature of “freedom,” the contradiction between good and evil, and the irreducible remainder left out of every movement of idealization. These questions precipitate Schelling’s personalist turn and culminate in the final disentangling of Christianity from idealism in *The Philosophy of Revelation*. In his late philosophy, Schelling denies historical immanentism altogether: the ontological difference between God and creation, between the absolute and the finite, between eternity and time, the late Schelling argues, underwrites all of the discontinuities in being which historical immanentism always glosses over. God is not an idea but being itself. Being is freedom; therefore that which God creates is contingently real. The history of consciousness remains a central theme of the late philosophy, only now it is the history of human consciousness, teleologically evolving out of matter toward personhood and friendship with the always already individuated God.

Given that he cut his teeth in the opposite camp, in transcendental idealism, how does Schelling arrive at the extreme form of transcendental realism characteristic of his late period, alternatively described as the overcoming of idealism (Fuhrmans, 1940) or its completion (Schulz, 1955)? The answer to this question would involve us in a systematic overview of Schelling’s long career, only the main moves of which can be outlined here. Identity-philosophy is the first step towards positive philosophy since it problematizes the main assumption of historical immanentism, that the absolute could be contained within a historical world-process. Identity-philosophy produced a conundrum for Schelling for it presumed to deploy absolute knowledge, intellectual intuition, but only by denying the reality of freedom, contingency and the finite. Schelling’s disciple C.H. Eschenmayer suggested a solution: we must distinguish the appearance of being, with its dualities of subject–object, substance–attributes, infinite–finite, from being itself, which is one, undivided and timeless; philosophy concerns itself with the former, finite being sundered into inevitable dichotomies, religion with the latter, the absolute in itself. Schelling’s answer to this suggestion was the 1804 *Philosophy and Religion* treatise (Schelling, 1804b), the text often referred to as the turning point in Schelling’s career. Schelling argues against Eschenmayer that finitude is more than mere appearance; it is, rather, an indication of a historical break in the absolute. The question then
becomes: why did this break with the absolute occur? The answer Schelling provides in 1809 is the great thought of his later period, perhaps his one great thought, which had to be wrested from his own pantheistic inclinations: being is free and freedom is anarchic, the capacity for good and evil (ein Vermögen des Guten und des Bösen (Schelling, 1809: 23)). The unity of the absolute is not necessary to spirit and the break with unrelated infinity ushers in not only human self-consciousness and responsibility but all of the evils of finite existence: sin, disease, madness and death. The 1809 turn in Schelling’s thought is not merely a qualification of the identity-philosophy’s impersonal notion of the absolute (the timelessly undifferentiated), it is also the dawning of a new concern in Schelling’s work: the real problem for philosophy is not the absolute as such but the freedom which has deprived us of it.

Why does such freedom exist? What purpose does it serve? It is clear enough to Schelling in 1809 that freedom must be able to disrupt the absolute, otherwise nothing would exist. But since such disruption must be possible, the monism of identity-philosophy is thrown into question: only a real power can disrupt reality. The existence of such freedom, Schelling concludes, cannot be known a priori; hence the identity-philosophy, which aimed at the construction of an a priori system, was not wrong in denying the existence of negative freedom; it was only wrong in assuming that idealist philosophy could be adequate to reality. The existence of negative freedom can only be discovered a posteriori, in real history, especially the religious history recounted in the Old and New Testaments. In the Bible, philosophy discovers a religious solution to its problem, albeit one that still needs to be thought through philosophically: the break with the absolute can only be the result of a rebellion of freedom. Evil now becomes a real issue for Schelling, and he sympathizes greatly with Jacob Boehme, for whom it is the only issue, one that drove Boehme to overhaul conventional understandings not only of God, but of the nature of the human being. Evil is not simply a power of self-destruction original to man, as Kant would have it, it is the primal otherness in being for which God himself must be ultimately responsible, else he is not God.

Schelling’s 1809 turn pivots on a new assessment of personality, relatedness, and self-differentiation: no longer conceived as departures from reality, degenerations of the absolute, or surface distinctions that do not apply to the depths of being, they are now regarded as conditions of the possibility of love. It is in this personalist context that Schelling sets to work on what Fuhrmans has aptly named “a teleology of evil” in the 1810 Stuttgart Seminars (Fuhrmans, 1940: 43). Schelling asks: how could evil make the revelation of the divine possible? How could evil be in itself contingent but historically necessary to the revelation of God? If it is not to lead to a gnostic dualism of equal and opposing forces, the reality of evil must be a later development in being, which once again must be understood
to have a history. Evil cannot be something which develops necessarily out of being, the way the essential properties of a thing develop necessarily out of the concept of the thing, it can only be an event, a disruption in excess of its occasioning causes. The immanentist’s dream of an a priori history is dashed against the surd of sin: the reality of evil means that history cannot be understood as a continuous development but only as a series of ruptures, and, to that degree, as irrational, but nevertheless culminating in something glorious, the incarnation of God. The concept of the individual also changes under the force of Schelling’s new questions: no longer a mere medium of spirit, the person becomes a God-like being with anarchic power to disrupt the ideal, a self-determining and absolutely responsible being. By means of these ideas, which Schelling explores in a patchwork of small publications between 1809 and 1815, Schelling arrives at his psychodynamic concept of personality. The self, of course, was a constant theme of German Idealism, but under the scrutiny of the later Schelling, the elaboration of the theme changes; it is no longer a question of the relation of the I to the not-I, but a question concerning the developmental structure of the whole personality, of which the I could only be a part.

The Schellingian unconscious

The three leitmotifs of Schellingian thought, polarity, finitude, and contingency, underscore the centrality of the concept of the unconscious for all phases of his thinking: the unconscious is the other pole of consciousness, the limit to the ego, and the abyss of unfathomable freedom at the ground of culture and nature. At its base, the Schellingian unconscious is non-dual, but since consciousness presupposes duality, first a developmental logic and then a voluntarist teleology are introduced to explain the transition from the monism of absolute being to the dualism of personal being. For the unconscious to give rise to consciousness, unity must divide itself, and the one give rise to two, so that the one might know itself and become capable of relationship. Uncovering the secret of this happening, above all explaining why it should have happened, the ultimate purpose served by the absolute’s break with itself, is the fundamental impulse of the second half of Schelling’s career. Although Kant and Fichte provide arguments for the notion of an essential duality in consciousness, Schelling’s real guide here is Boehme: without duality, Boehme argues, there can be no self-revelation (Boehme, BSS 7: 3.22), and what else is consciousness, Schelling adds, but the self’s revelation of itself to itself? The one divides so that it might be revealed to itself, and thereby love itself, that is, so that love might be.

“My ego contains a being that precedes all thinking and representing,” Schelling declares in his first major philosophical work, On the I (SSW 1: 167). The young Schelling’s idea of a non-representable and pre-cognitive

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other of the self is little more than a development of Fichte’s assumption of a primordial act at the foundation of transcendental subjectivity, which is in turn an elaboration of Kant’s conclusion that the activity of the noumenal ego, which can never be fully recovered by reflection, grounds all subjective synthetic acts. The inception of the Schellingian unconscious is therefore a Kantian figure, but Schelling develops it in ways unanticipated by Kant or Fichte. The unconscious act of self-constituting subjectivity is connected to the Fichtian “not-I,” empirical nature in Schelling’s nature-philosophy of 1797–1799. This first original form of the Schellingian unconscious (visible spirit/invisible nature) is succeeded by the absolute identity of subject and object in the 1800 System of Transcendental Idealism – in effect two variations on a theme. For the early Schelling the unconscious is emphatically impersonal. What Schelling discovers in Boehme in 1806 is the volitional unconscious, the unconscious of drives (as distinct from the epistemological unconscious, the Kantian unconscious of “dark representations”\textsuperscript{13}). After the personalist turn, the other of subjectivity is no longer merely “the real,” the “not-I,” but “drive,” “desire,” and “will” (Furhmanns, 1954: 230). That the acknowledged sources of Schelling’s early philosophies of the unconscious are Spinoza, Kant, and Fichte does not diminish the significance of Schelling’s 1809 return to Boehme. Schelling enters into the Boehmian labyrinth armed with the questions and concepts of modern philosophy, which had already led him in his early work to conclusions similar to the main tenets of Boehme’s theosophy: the non-duality of the deep unconscious; the emergence of consciousness through self-division and self-return; the fallenness of time and materiality, et cetera. What is new for Schelling in 1809 – the biggest lesson he learns from Boehme – concerns the dynamic structure of the personality.

The subjective generation of a world in which consciousness can carry out its activities of knowing and willing is “noumenal” in Kant: it is to be affirmed without being understood. Just so, the Fichtian act of self-positing by which consciousness constitutes itself cannot itself be conscious. The I that posits itself first becomes conscious of itself through the positing of another, a not-I, in which it then recognizes the effects of its recurring synthetic acts. The self-positing that produces consciousness cannot itself be conscious. Fichte understands the significance of this point to be primarily moral and practical: because the I can never recover the primordial act of its being posited, it is called to infinitely strive against that which resists reason, order, and the good. Schelling understands the point in a predominantly metaphysical way: lacking a full and transparent possession of the act that brings it into being, reason can never arrogate to itself mastery of the conditions of its own possibility. Schelling reconceives Fichte’s self-positing I along the lines of Spinoza’s substance, as a non-dual absolute, the original indifference of subject and object. Only the I that stands limited by an object, by nature, is conscious of itself. Hence in order to become a self-

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conscious I, the absolute I had to generate an opposite to itself and then forget that it had done so, for the I’s positing of the not-I cannot be conscious if the latter is to truly function for it as a not-I. Conversely, the absolute I can never become an object for a knowing subject: when the absolute I becomes conscious of itself, it is no longer absolute.

Schelling’s Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature (1797) and On the World Soul (1798) mark the beginning of his turn from Fichtian idealism to an increasingly de-subjectified nature-philosophy. Fired up by his Swabian sense for nature and a strong affinity for Spinoza, Schelling undertakes to show that nature is just as much “spirit” as subjectivity, only in a different sense: nature is spirit prior to self-consciousness, an unconscious subject out of which self-consciousness emerges. Kant had shown that nature must be thought of as an organism, a self-organizing teleological whole; such an organism requires a principle of organization, that is, a “world soul.” Inorganic and organic forms develop through a natural process that mimics the dynamic Fichte describes as the law of subjectivity: mediated self-return through the overcoming of antitheses. Governing and motivating all dynamic exchanges between opposites is the spiritual principle in nature, the world soul, which is more than human if less than divine. It has not been sufficiently acknowledged that, by retrieving the notion of world soul, Schelling betrays his early theosophical proclivities. For Giordano Bruno, after whom Schelling titled one of his works (Schelling, 1802), the world soul holds together the infinity of the material universe, animating it with a single life and setting in motion the productive exchange of energies and forms. The Brunoian world soul is the vitalizing power that holds sway in the whole as much as in every part, a daemon that influences everything through love and hate, the motivator of all sympathy and antipathy in nature, all attraction and repulsion, and the condition of the possibility of “natural magic.” Similarly for the early Schelling, nature is an organic whole. The teleology that animates nature is not the result of a Kantian transcendental synthesis, an imposition of form upon matter that encases subjectivity in its representations; rather, it is an indication that what modernity holds to be exclusive to subjectivity – purposiveness, design, spontaneity, and freedom – is also found to a lesser degree in matter, which can and must be considered in some sense a subject in its own right.

The Fichtian works and the nature-philosophy had led Schelling on the hunt for a conception of unconscious knowledge – that is, knowledge without reflection and its inevitable dualisms (subject–object, mind–body, spirit–nature). In the 1800 System of Transcendental Idealism, unconscious productivity, intelligence free of reflection, emerges as the master concept. What nature produces with such purposiveness and design, she produces unconsciously. Art occupies a place of privilege in Schelling’s System because artistic creation, like natural production, emerges spontaneously from the unconscious. By allowing herself to be a medium of spirit (rather
than trying to control the means of production), the artist becomes the shaman of the absolute. Like a somnambulist, she knows what she is doing without knowing what she is doing and her activity is unhampered by the reflection that splits the absolute self into subject and object.

It is often noted that a “turn” in Schelling’s thought already occurs in the 1804 Philosophy and Religion treatise (Schelling, 1804b). The real existence of the world, with its subject–object duality and its temporalized particulars, can only be a fall from the absolute: the finite is still denied full reality, but the emergence of the finite from the infinite is now thought of as catastrophe, collapse, and decline. The path to the positive philosophy begins here. The next move is to trace individuality, personal existence, and time itself to a dark volition in the divine, which Schelling, with Boehme’s help, does in the Freedom essay and the three drafts of the unfinished Ages of the World. The philosophy of freedom (1809–1815) represents Schelling’s most sustained effort to think the unconscious. On the grounds of a metaphysically reconstructed Boehmian theogony, Schelling constructs, in his own view, “the first clear concept of personality” (Schelling, 1809: 73). In the Freedom essay Schelling struggles to draw analogies between the God who births himself from darkness and the human personality which is beholden to an unconscious decision for good or evil. The fall of the absolute into finitude is now conceived as God’s decision to allow for something rather than nothing, which God accomplishes by contracting his being and distinguishing within himself an unconscious ground and a conscious personality; this decision is then repeated in the prehistory of the individual, who contracts a character in an unconscious decision that marks the subject’s descent from possibility into actuality.

In the Ages drafts, the three potencies are distinguished from “the will to revelation,” which is latent in the unground and becomes manifest in third potency. God’s decision to personalize himself is an actualization of the will to revelation, a decision that requires the splitting of the absolute into opposed desires, first and second potency, which creates the tension that calls for the resolution of third potency. The ultimate purpose of this resolution is not merely to heal the split but to reveal the Godhead to itself, that is, to personalize God. First potency is the new figure for the dark ground, distinct from the absolute and from the existence of that which it makes possible. It is negative, contractive, but also productive, a lack that generates determinate being. Where the absolute is wholly unconscious, first potency is relatively unconscious, a will moving with a dark presentiment of what is needed if it is to achieve its desire for existence, namely humility, subordination, what Boehme, following Eckhart, calls Gelassenheit (letting be). The dark ground, the negative desire for self without other, is now called “being” (das Seyn). Second potency, the positive, expansive desire for other without self, is still associated with existence (das Seyende) and consciousness, which Schelling seems to have always understood in a proto-
Heideggerian way, as ecstatic, a being outside of itself. Third potency is the unity of the first two, thus the unity of *Sein* and *das Seyende*, the real and the ideal, and the concrete realization of personality through the successful coordination of opposed desires. Third potency brings about a return to the unity of the unground, but unity in a new sense: the impersonal unground – non-dual, unrelated, and therefore unconscious – has become a personal God, self-mediated, self-related, and self-conscious. Understood psychodynamically, first potency is aggressively self-assertive, schizophrenically introverted, lost in an interiority without boundaries because it refuses to recognize the other. Second potency is ecstatically self-abnegating, a hysterical, whose whole identity is transferred to the other, to whom it defers in everything. First and second potency both lack boundary and psychic definition, but for different reasons: first potency does not recognize the other while second potency does not recognize itself. Third potency achieves a functional relation of self to other by integrating these opposite tendencies: it alone is capable of love in the genuine sense of the term.

The middle Schelling’s model of divine personality, which the human personality mirrors, repeats in all essentials Boehme’s triadic pattern of the self-revelation of God (see Figure 1.1). What is not explicitly found in Boehme is Schelling’s notion of “the intelligible deed,” the founding act of freedom, arguably the most profound development in Schelling’s lifelong effort to think the unconscious. The concept is a curious fusion of Kant’s notion of a transcendental determination of character, Spinoza’s idea of freedom, and the Lurianic Kabbalistic zimzum – set in the context of Schelling’s repetition of Boehme’s theogony. The greatness of the concept – often missed by commentators who see in it nothing more than an eccentric position on the relation of freedom to determinism – consists in its capacity to condense these diverse historical influences into a new paradigm for thinking the self. Schelling finally separates two ideas that had become fused in the modern philosophical tradition – spirit and consciousness – something he had been endeavouring to do, with varying degrees of success, since the nature-philosophy. Surely spirit is only free to the degree that it is conscious of what it does? But Schellingian spirit is not conscious of what it does when it makes the choice that determines its character (and thereby all subsequent choices): the unalterable decision for good or evil. Just as “self-revelation” comes out of the unground’s separation into two wills, consciousness emerges out of but (does not precede) its fundamental choice. To be conscious is to be aware of who you have become, and by means of consciousness of having become someone, to have a past for the first time.

To be conscious is to be aware of who you have become, and by means of consciousness of having become someone, to have a past for the first time. The decision by which an individual becomes the person he or she is destined to be separates time into a finite period prior to the decision (the eternal past) and a present that begins with the decision. Such an act must remain unconscious; to make it conscious would be to undo consciousness itself.
The intelligible deed is a finite repetition of the self-constituting act by which God becomes God, the decision by which the unground chooses to be revealed, a decision that entails allowing for the differentiations within it necessary for self-revelation and creation – in short, allowing for the basic duality of self and other. God “comes to be” a creator and self-conscious being in the same moment that the pre-personal divine retreats into the unknowable abyss. In *The Ages of the World*, God’s “un-prethinkable decision” is described as the abrupt and arbitrary break with the rotation of opposed drives in the absolute, which, left to themselves, would endlessly repeat the succession of mutually exclusive emerging-into-prominence and withdrawing-into-latency. No beginning would be possible without this violent break with eternity, this “fall” from the absolute, for in the eternal tri-potentized divinity no potency is strong enough to hold its ground against the other two. But creation comes at a price. God can only create free persons if he allows them the possibility of evil, which is the possibility of self-willed psychosis. On the level of the finite, personality has the option of refusing the transition into light, of deliberately staying in the chaos of mutually antagonizing drives. Following Boehme closely, Schelling describes evil as the will of the ground dissociated from the will of love, thus a willing of self in denial of otherness, a refusal to acknowledge otherness, an incoherent and unsustainable will to be oneself the all and everything.

The late Schelling leaves the terrain of philosophical psychology for cultural and religious philosophy, and lectures for two decades on mythology and revelation, but even here, the unconscious (no longer named as such) plays a decisive role. Mythology, the late Schelling argues, is the progressive birth of the consciousness of God in man: from an original relative monotheism, in which the human community is united as one people, speaking one language, and not yet reflectively aware of their differences or, indeed, of time itself (man not yet emerged from the unconscious), culture fragments into successive polytheism, which brings about the birth of nations, the
diversity of languages and consciousness of history, only to be united in a fully spiritual sense under the revelation of the one God of the Jewish and Christian Bibles. The transitional period is the epoch of mythology, an era characterized by a proliferation of stories of the gods, which appear everywhere at the same time and repeat transcultural patterns. The birth of consciousness from the unconscious in the late Schelling is not an event in the life of God but the history of humanity, the drama by which God drives man out of a primordial unconscious unity with the divine (primitive or relative monotheism), into religious diversity (polytheism), and then into a personal relationship with himself (Christianity). In order to support this narrative, Schelling must assert a common foundation to human consciousness, a stratum of natural mental life structured a priori by the divine potencies.

On the Schellingian assumption that consciousness is a teleological development out of the unconscious – nature climbing toward absolute consciousness – the Schelling school of romantic psychiatry (Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, Karl Friedrich Burdach, Ignaz Troxler, and C.G. Carus) elaborated the unconscious in non-pathological terms. Schubert’s expression “the night-side of nature” (die Nachtseite der Natur) sums up the Schelling school’s fascination with intuition, dreams, clairvoyance, hypnosis, and somnambulism – phenomena that not only give the lie to the self-mastery and self-possession of the Cartesian ego, but also indicate higher states of awareness in the unconscious. In *Die Symbolik des Traumes*, Schubert claims that in dreams the soul expresses itself more fully than in waking life, speaking a language of universal symbols. The poet “hidden in us” re-activates the original language of consciousness, for Schubert shares Schelling’s contention that poetry precedes prose in the history of language (Shamdasani, 2003: 109). In several entirely forgotten works, Burdach develops the speculative psychology implicit in Schelling’s nature-philosophy on the assumption that “the soul is not outside of nature, not supernatural, counternatural or unnatural,” but the inside of nature (Burdach, cited in Orth, 1914: 23). Carus’s *Psyche: Zur Entwicklungs geschichte der Seele* outlines the various stages soul passes through in its evolution from primitive life forms to the human being.

The elevation of certain unconscious states (inspiration, aesthetic experience, mystical experience, intellectual intuition) above reflective consciousness by Schelling and his followers inaugurates the era of romantic psychiatry. Bookended between the pathologizations of early mesmerism, with its diagnostics of “magnetic diseases,” and early psychoanalysis, with its institutionalized hysteric and schizophrenics, romantic psychiatry lasted seventy-five years, from Anton Mesmer’s 1776 defaming of the exorcist Josef Gassner, whose spectacular exorcisms Mesmer reproduced and explained in “scientific terms,” to James Braid’s 1851 coining of the term “hypnosis.” Just as Mesmer took the steam from the baroque industry of exorcism, so did Baird take the steam from animal magnetism, with its
occult notions of invisible fluids and spiritual energies. In between these events, Schellingian researchers run with Schelling’s philosophy of the unconscious and construct medical anthropologies in which man is conceived as “a double star,” consciousness concealing a creative unconscious centre of the personality that only gradually emerges into being through a series of transformations in the life of the individual. Their efforts are linked to allied movements in France, especially the transformation of mesmerism into animal magnetism by Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet de Puységur (1751–1825), who claims that the unconscious states enacted by the somnambulist are not lower but higher than ordinary consciousness. It is Hegel who first endeavours to call a halt to this subordination of reason to the non-rational in his 1830 lectures on madness where he characterizes the unconscious as a primitive stage of spirit (the moment of immediacy) that can only exist for rational mind as negated (Hegel, 1845 [1830]: 124–139). Moments of return to unconscious states are regressions, if not signs of perversity and delusion (genius, inspiration, and artistic creativity not excepted): at best these are merely natural moments in the development of spirit that must be raised to consciousness; if fetishized they become obstructions to the progress of spirit.19

Matthias Ffytche has broken the silence about the Schelling school’s role in the history of psychiatry, in an article (Ffytche, 2008) and a book still forthcoming as this one goes to press (Ffytche, 2012). I have not had an opportunity to review the latter. In the 2008 article Ffytche takes the safe approach to the unconscious as a socially constructed phenomenon, adding a narrative elaboration as to when the construction began and what purposes it served. Ffytche locates the construction in German romanticism, which is not controversial (see Ellenberger, 1970; Shamdasani, 2003). What is new is Ffytche’s socio-political argument for why the construct was undertaken. In Ffytche’s reading of Schelling, Schubert, Carus and Freud, the unconscious served to protect the autonomy of the liberal subject against the encroaching determinism of nineteenth-century natural scientific and social political trends. The unconscious secured for the self an inscrutable and unrepresentable ground outside the material and historical nexus of causes. Of course, Kant did as much with his notion of transcendental freedom; the romantics added that freedom was not merely an ideal of reason, a practical belief necessary to the rational synthesis of moral life, it was also a trans-rational experience. In those areas where consciousness finds itself productively outflanked by motives and aims which it does not understand (somnambulism, trance, art, history, religious experience), the romantic subject experiences the agency of a self that is deeper and more essential than the conscious ego. Ffytche writes:

The turn to the psyche involves not simply the attempt to produce an adequate language for the phenomena of inner life, but is at the same
time concerned to establish the metaphorical representation of autonomous individuality. The metaphors of obscurity serve, then, not only as placeholders for kinds of process – moral, psychological, biological, experiential – which are thought to be too complex to be represented by simple “chains” of determination; they serve also to introduce the notion that the self is radically self-caused by a logic which belongs wholly to itself and thus is in some way inscrutable. In this resistance to rational conceptions of causal process, the self has acquired a certain inalienable freedom. It is here that psychology tips over into ontology with moral and political implications for a theory of man. The philosophers and anthropologists looked to psychiatry both because they were interested in describing the basis of the individual mind and because in doing so they were able to draw on a whole range of metaphors – trance, seizure, unconsciousness, inner vision – with which to supplant the language of determinism in their depictions of the human world.

(Ffytche, 2008: 27)

The ensuing psychology of the unconscious fails for Ffytche because it confuses two discourses that operate and, it seems, must operate according to different methods, norms and sources: the medical science of the psyche and the ontology of the self.

The problem is that such moral and existential discourses about identity and the medical descriptions of psychic states belong within different paradigms; there is no simple way to suture them together. . . . These different languages of self-presence cannot simply be joined together by hypothesizing some innermost link or yet-to-be discovered substance. This is one reason why the language of the psyche remains bound to a kind of obscurity and liminality – it remains inconsistent, in its very essence, and this inconsistency can’t be easily dispensed with.

(Ffytche, 2008: 25)

In a refreshing change from standard English-speaking practice of treating only primary sources (as though no one before had written anything worth consulting), Ffytche brings heavyweight scholarship to his argument. The Freudo-centric reading of the history of the unconscious must be put to rest once and for all, and in this regard Ffytche’s project is allied with our own. However, Ffytche’s socio-political argument leaves something to be desired. Does Ffytche not more or less concede that psychology must be quantitative and reductively empirical, an assumption that can only result in the abolition of precisely that which depth psychology ventures, an account of psyche from within? Isn’t Ffytche in effect capitulating to clinical psychology and psycho-pharmacology and denying
the possibility of psyche or soul altogether? Schelling is presented by Ffytche as attempting artificially to fold medicine into metaphysics when in fact what Schelling attempted was to build up a new medicine upon metaphysical grounds. Depth psychology is crypto-metaphysics, to be sure. One solution to this is to free it from metaphysics, overhaul the whole enterprise in the direction of clinical and statistical work (by and large the general trend in post-Freudian and post-Jungian psychology), thereby attempting to rescue Freud’s and Jung’s common dream of psychoanalysis as an empirical science. But another option is to follow the immanent logic of depth psychology and make its crypto-metaphysics explicit, perhaps even to improve it, not by more precise accommodation to clinical results, but by creating more adequate speculative concepts. This is what the Schelling school ventured with respect to the medical psychology of their day, mirroring in medicine the method of Schelling’s nature-philosophy or “speculative physics” – not to deduce metaphysical principles from empirical results or hypothesize metaphysical structure only insofar as the empirical results warrant the hypothesis, but rather to fuse the a priori and the a posteriori element in psychology and approach the empirical through the metaphysical. This approach is still valid, however unpopular it might be in psychology departments. A speculative psychology would not grant empirical psychology its presumed metaphysical neutrality; on the contrary. The implicit metaphysics of empirical psychology (by and large Cartesianism) would be exposed and deconstructed, a critique that would happen on not only historical, but also explicitly metaphysical terrain.

We do not deny constructivism, for clearly the unconscious is a constructed concept, bearing the imprint – and the limitations – of modern presuppositions and values. But we are not so sure that its constructed nature means that it does not in fact reference a real phenomenon, which was experienced and named otherwise in different cultural epochs (the Dionysian in Greek religion, the mundus imaginalis in medieval Arabic thought, the desiderium naturale in Aristotelian Scholasticism, the will in medieval voluntarism, the anima mundi in Renaissance Hermeticism). The problem with constructivism is that it generally presupposes nominalism and rules out phenomenalological and experiential sources of concepts, instead finding only political motives behind the construction of the stories we tell about ourselves. Thus we read in Ffytche that the agenda of the liberal self, to shield individual autonomy from representation, is the hidden and somewhat desultory motive of romantic psychiatry. When one notices the strong strain of pantheism in German romantic thought one wonders if this could indeed be true. For the romantics seem equally motivated by a desire to restore nature to the divine status which it lost with the ascendancy of the liberal self. Even the early Freud enthuses about nature as a transpersonal nexus of forces, to which the psyche belongs and by which it is to some degree ruled (Bishop, 2009: 14–17). Schelling’s strategy is neither to
opt for the subject nor for nature but for an absolute which grounds both. Ffytche does not seem to consider seriously the possibility that the romantics had an experiential basis for their reflections, that something which Enlightenment science and philosophy ignored was pressing on the romantic psyche and demanding to be expressed.

We will argue in tension with Ffytche’s thesis that Schelling’s notion of the unconscious originates in Western esoteric discourses, that is in pre-modern or alter-modern traditions. After decades of abuse in theology and pop psychology, the term “esotericism” is gaining respect in non-foundationalist academic circles. Emboldened by the work of scholars such as Gershom Scholem, Frances Yates, Gerhard Wehr and, more recently, Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff, and in the postmodern absence of authoritative arguments for continuing to exclude whole genres of Western literature from more canonically respectable studies in religion and philosophy, Western esotericism has established itself as an inter-disciplinary domain in its own right.20 The admittedly vague term “Western esotericism” refers to a stream of alternative Western religious and philosophical discourses which have been influential in the development of European thought, but which until now have found no venue for academic study.21 These include gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, alchemy, theosophy, especially as these discourses merge at various nodal points in European history, for example in the Renaissance (Paracelsus, Ficino, Pico, Boehme), in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century secret societies (Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism), nineteenth-century romanticism, early twentieth-century occultism, and, more recently, in New Age religions and self-help therapies. What is increasingly recognized is that, while Western esotericism is not reducible to any single doctrine or system, the major texts display certain easily recognizable common features. Faivre has summed these up under four headings: correspondences, living nature, imagination, transmutation (Faivre, 1994: 10–14). “Correspondences” refers to the macro-micro homology typical of Hermeticism and alchemy, the revived ancient metaphysics in which the universe is assumed to be a complex, hierarchically structured material-spiritual whole within which lower levels image higher levels and seemingly unrelated things resemble or correspond to each other (the medicinal qualities of certain plants, for instance, correspond to the qualities of certain metals and their allied planets, and more generally, everything corresponds in one way or another to qualities of the human being, the microcosm). “Living nature” refers to the notion of nature as an organic whole animated by a world soul. “Imagination” refers to the role of fantasy and symbol in the discernment of the encrypted relations of all things to each other and to the whole, and the general subordination of conceptualization and objectification to imaginal, intuitive and sensual modes of cognition, particularly, though not exclusively, in magical practices. Finally transmutation refers to the assumption that since
everything is related, any entity on one level of being can be transformed into an entity on another level through an alchemical process of *solve et coagula*, the reduction of the thing to its component elements and the recombination of those elements on a higher level. If the term is properly understood, Faivre’s four themes can be reduced to one: living nature. The notion of nature as animated organic whole touches the core thought in modern esotericism (from the Renaissance to the present day): the rejection of mechanism and quantitative, value-free science in favour of organicism, qualitative amplification and holistic approaches.\(^\text{22}\)

I do not need to prove Schelling’s interest in matters esoteric; it is soundly demonstrated in several classic studies of Schelling, alongside other lesser known but equally reliable accounts of Schelling’s development from speculative Pietism, through pantheism, and back to Christianity via theosophy.\(^\text{23}\) Yet to be done is a narration of the essential role of the esoteric in the development of the non-Freudian unconscious, a task I will undertake in a forthcoming book.\(^\text{24}\) Contemporary forms of the non-Freudian unconscious (classical Jungian, archetypal, transpersonal, Deleuzian, etc.) are expressions of a counter-movement in Western intellectual history which is at least as old as Renaissance Hermeticism and as contemporary as Tolkien. The movement has no real homogeneity, varying from high-brow metaphysics and ultra-cool cultural studies to pulp fiction and Oprah Winfrey banalities, but the eclectic authors of this diverse literature are united by a common enemy: the desacralization of nature (material nature, human nature, cosmological nature) by techno-science and capitalist consumerism. Notwithstanding the massive commodification the esoteric has suffered in recent years, from the long-sighted perspective of the humanities its significance and influence are not easily dismissed. Its critics regard it as regressive or anti-modern, but this is a misreading; Western esotericism, at least in the forms it has assumed in the last 500 years, is an expression of the same wave of humanism that generated modernity, sharing the impulse toward human amelioration through science, although it articulates an alternative way of working with nature. Western esoteric nature-philosophy refuses to follow mainstream natural science and split mind from matter, spirit from animal, finite from infinite. Esoteric modernity is a road not *taken* in the history of science – here we depart from the Yates thesis that Hermeticism is the ancestor of modern science (Yates, 1964) – a modern approach to nature which was openly rejected in the seventeenth century because it did not grant us the calculative control which techno-science demanded of the Western mind (Foucault, 1966). Above all, esoteric philosophies of nature reject nominalism, with its subject–object dichotomy, its desacralized matter as value-free order of molecules-in-motion, its reduction of the many-sided qualities of things to homogeneous, manipulable quantities, and its apotheosis of instrumental or calculative thinking at the expense of the contemplative or what Heidegger calls meditative

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thinking (besinnliches Denken). A thorough reading of Schelling’s life and works shows that Schelling’s place in the history of Western esotericism is indisputable. The notion of “living nature” is the central assumption of his early work; he wrote and practised methods of what we would call holistic or alternative medicine, and was formally recognized for his contribution by the medical community, which granted him an honorary medical degree; clairvoyance, theosophy and alchemy are recurring themes of his middle period; even his more conservative later work shows the influence of esoteric notions: the collective and symbolic unconscious, for example, which is the presupposition of his approach to mythology, or the notion of correspondence in his doctrine of creation, in which ontological categories are held to correspond to natural forces because both have as their archetype spiritual potencies or divine attributes. With respect to the history of the unconscious, Schelling is the key node through which Western esoteric notions of will and the spirit–matter relation are transmitted to nineteenth-century medicine and psychology.

We will not be able to unpack all of the esoteric themes in Schelling for the esoteric unconscious is not our topic. But we will argue that Schelling cannot be understood without the most important figure in the history of German esotericism, Jacob Boehme. Through Boehme the Schellingian unconscious is animated by currents of thought older than romanticism – Kabbalah, Hermeticism, alchemy, and theosophy – which are passed on in more robust metaphysical form to his followers, including several influential figures in the history of psychology: C.G. Carus, Justinus Kerner, Ignaz Troxler, Gustav Fechner, Victor Cousin and Félix Ravaisson, among others.

**Schelling’s Neoplatonic logic**

In the chapters that follow, we will have occasion to examine in detail two famous diagrams for the absolute from different stages of Schelling’s career: the equation from the 1801 *Presentation of my System of Philosophy* (SSW4: 137), and the 1815 “Formula of the World” (*Weltformel*) from *The Ages of the World* (Schelling, 1815: 89). I use the word “diagram” deliberately, for the formulas are meant to visually as well as algebraically represent the functions of their terms. While the diagrams represent quite different versions of the ideal–real relation (the 1801 diagram condenses Schelling’s early monistic understanding of the relation; the 1815 *Weltformel*, by contrast, is an expression of the later Schelling’s historical realism), they are nevertheless structured by a common logic, which is Neoplatonic in origin. This logical presupposition is key to understanding Schelling’s difference from Hegel and the difference between the Schelling unconscious and the Lacanian unconscious. Let us put the two diagrams together and tease out the common logic.
The principle structuring both diagrams is the Platonic argument that any two opposites must be grounded in a third term which is their relation and which makes possible their opposition by transcending it. Two can only be essentially opposed if they share some common ground which cannot be reduced to either one of them. The idea here is that opposition is not only disidentification, it is also a mode of relation: the one is related to its other as to that which it is not, and all such relations are only possible on the supposition of commonality. Thus the large can be opposed to the small because both are possible qualities of a body, which is in itself neither large nor small. Or in a more Schellingian key, mind can be opposed to matter because both are possible forms of some unknown order of being which is in itself neither mental nor material. The Neoplatonists used such arguments to make a case for spaceless and timeless forms as the ground of the variety of opposite determinations of beings we experience. Schelling uses the argument to overturn Cartesian dualism and to disidentify the absolute from concrete determinations that are proper to subjectivity (self-reflection, consciousness, immateriality, etc.). The latter point is crucial to Schelling’s rehabilitation of nature as spirit in another modality, for so long as spirit is confused with subjectivity, nature remains without dignity, autonomy, and spiritual standing, save as the negative of the subject, the object which the subject needs in order to be a subject. Modern philosophy cleaves being into two opposed structures, subject and object, without indicating why the distinction is necessary or showing what makes it possible. The Cartesian systems of philosophy, Descartes’, Kant’s, and Fichte’s, remain stuck in this unexplained duality, where all that is said is that subject is not object, even if it is never without it, a point we will formalize thus: \( S \neq O \). Schelling’s argument is that the subject–object distinction presupposes a common ground of the subject and the object which is neither subject nor object:

\[
\frac{S \neq O}{X}
\]

\( X \) is indifferent to but not identical with \( S \) and \( O \), therefore \( X \) can ground both \( S \) and \( O \). Thus is the oppositional relation of \( S \) and \( O \) explained even if \( X \) remains inscrutably mysterious – in fact its inscrutability is essential to
its explanatory power, a point which becomes clearer in the 1815 Weltformel. To see how this Neoplatonic logic is also at work in the 1815 diagram, more exegesis is required (see page 141 following). Suffice it to say here that A2 and A3 must appear sequentially after A=B is posited because the duality latent in the first potency, A=B, requires us to posit a third term which is neither A nor B but which could ground both. A2 is the ground, the condition of the possibility of A=B, but since this reinstates another level of duality (that of A2 and A=B), A3 must be posited as the ground of the possibility of that opposition, and in order to avoid an infinite regress of grounding, B must be posited (or rather not-posited although always already assumed) as the unground, the ground which is never made explicit, the ground which presupposes no ground, which has no opposite, and which is necessarily presupposed in any systematic relation or system of relations, but which can never be brought before consciousness, can never be objectified as a term in the system.

To explain A=A, if it is not a tautology, means A \neq A or A=B. But A=B introduces manifest opposition, for on some level A \neq B. Hence out of the monad (A) emerges the dyad (A2), where A2=(A=B). The same argument which requires us to see A=A as an implicit dyad, as A=B, compels us to recognize A2=(A=B) as dyadic, that is, as the positing of two opposed terms, A2 and A=B. A3 then is the synthesis of the explicit antithesis between A2 and A=B. Out of the dyad comes the tetrad. But why not look for a further level, for is the tetrad not opposed to the dyad just as much as the dyad is opposed to the monad? Why not continue potentizing to infinity? Because an infinite regress explains nothing. If the potencies are to be sufficiently explanatory, there must be one excluded term, a non-potency, a ground which is never foregrounded, objectified and made conscious in any equation. Just as the transcendental subject never becomes an object to itself, or as Wittgenstein puts it, the eye can never be given within its own visual field, just as the axiom upon which a Gödelian system rests cannot be explained but must be presupposed by that system, so does the Schellingian unground, the ground which is not itself grounded, withdraw from all positing and presentation. The fourth term, B, is not, then, the next level of potentization after the A3, but rather the always unmanifest ground of every potency; for this reason, it is outside the brackets in the Weltformel, i.e., outside the system of potencies.

Hegel, Lacan, and Žižek break with this Neoplatonic Schellingian metaphysics by following nominalism and refusing the move from opposition to common grounding in a third term. Opposites are merely the same thing in a process of necessary self-differentiation. Hegel’s alternative logic is: S \neq O means S=O. The second formula, S=O, is not a mystical conjunctio oppositorum; rather, it is a reinstatement of Cartesian dualism, but with a twist. The subject must alienate itself in a posited object because the subject is nothing other than that which intends an object, that which objectifies
itself by disidentifying with its immediate experience. The subject by definition has no substantiality, but directs itself towards substance, either epistemically as knower or psychologically as desirer, and in both cases in an impossible intention toward a union which can never be fulfilled, for fulfilment would mean the extinction of the one who intends the union. The truth of Cartesian dualism, according to Hegel, is the claim that \textit{res cogitans} and \textit{res extensa} are dialectically related, one and the same being in a process of self-alienation and disidentification. S=O means S=O, where O is S at a later moment of development (Hegel) or subjectivity in disavowal of itself, a constitutive repression, which cannot be undone without undoing subjectivity (Lacan/Žižek). For Hegel there is no logical necessity to posit a hidden ground of duality. The ineffability of the Schellingian X undermines the rationality of the real; only if reason’s other is reason in a constitutive (dialectical) act of self-differentiation, the negative of reason (subjective genitive), only then can we say that the real is rational, that there is nothing outside the system of reason, which could render the system fragile, epistemically suspect or merely relative to our finite cognitive capacities. For Žižek (and by implication, Lacan), the Schellingian X is the fundamental fantasy, as such psychologically inevitable – but seeing through its merely apparent logical necessity is the crucial breakthrough in the Lacanian cure, the move from subjectivization to destitution. To take X for something real outside of the subject–object dyad is ideologically to hypostasize the Big Other. Hence Žižek’s reading of the \textit{Weltformel} as the very image of constitutive repression: B is not the unground in the Boehmian-Schellingian sense but the excremental remainder giving the lie to the symbolic, the Lacanian real, that which must always be excluded if the symbolic is to function as a substitute for natural life.\textsuperscript{25} Schelling, according to Žižek, has correctly hit upon the formula of fundamental fantasy, but he does not see it as fantasy. Hegel does, hence his superiority.

**Reading Schelling against Schelling?**

In spite of his impact on nineteenth-century psychology, Schelling is scarcely mentioned by historians of medicine.\textsuperscript{26} In one of the few studies that exist on the Schelling school of psychology, Schelling’s eclipse is attributed to the non-teleological character of “the exact sciences,” which, following Herbart, was taken as a methodological ideal for psychology at the turn of the century (Orth, 1914: 3). In philosophy, Schelling has enjoyed a modest revival of late, but hardly enough to redress the century of neglect he suffered at the hands of Hegelian historians of philosophy. For the first time since 1800, when he shot to fame at the age of 25 with several widely influential books to his name, Schelling is almost relevant. Philosophers of mind find in the psycho-physical parallelism of the Schelling school a
peculiarly contemporary alternative to property dualism (Heidelberger, 2004); speculative realists discover in Schelling resources for supporting their ongoing war on “correlationism” (Grant, 2006); Lacanians find in Schelling the father of the disjointed subject whose recoil from reality founds its own existence (Žižek, 1996; Johnston, 2008). That these retrievals are sometimes in direct contradiction to each other is testimony to the fertility and breadth of Schelling’s oeuvre.

Yet another arena of relevance for Schelling has opened up with the advent of Web 2.0: personal identity theory. We appear to be moving beyond the era of self-psychology into an era of personality psychology. Identity is no longer primarily understood in terms of a substantial unity—the monolithic self with its hidden essence—but in terms of historico-geographical dissociation and social connectedness. No longer defined by place and time, personality is as multiple as its social contexts and “exists” to the extent that it is linked.27 With the exponential increase in information access (everything available all the time) and, especially, the new forms of exchange and social role playing made possible by participation in virtual communities, personal identity is now conceived wholly in terms of relationality. Schelling’s relevance to this discussion lies in his insistence, against pantheist, subjectivist, and mechanist impersonalism, on a positive sense of dissociation. Every act of becoming conscious is, for Schelling, a dissociation from that of which we are conscious. Dissociation in this sense is not an obstruction to personal identity but the condition of its possibility: only he who dissociates from who he once was emerges from the past and is able to establish a living relation to the present and the future (Schelling, 1813: 120). Positive dissociation must be distinguished from negative dissociation: where the former enlivens the relation to time, the latter encloses the personality in the past by dissociating from the dissociation life is demanding of the personality. Negative dissociation is wilful unconsciousness or what is commonly known as repression. The divide in the personality demarcated by consciousness–unconsciousness is, for Schelling, not so much a rigid binary as the axis around which revolve the multiple centres of the dissociative self. To be a personality in a Schellingian register is to be inextricably involved in such processes of dissociation and re-identification, of dialoguing with difference, and of consolidating an identity only to have time itself splinter the personality into an ever-greater number of constituent members. Like the divine persons of the Holy Trinity, each of the members of the dissociative self is defined by its relations to others. A certain face of the person emerges into the light of consciousness only at the expense of another receding into darkness. The Schellingian personality thrives in self-diversification much as living organisms grow by division and self-pluralization.28

We have Žižek to thank for reminding us of Schelling’s continued psychological relevance (Žižek, 1996, 1997a). Although Žižek’s interpretation of
Schelling as a misshapen Hegelian is slanted at almost every turn by his allegiance to Lacan’s peculiar brand of transcendental-semiotic materialism, Žižek’s Schelling studies nevertheless support the thesis of this book, that Schelling is the master architect of the notion of the unconscious, for not only can classical Freudian and Jungian thinking be traced back to Schelling, but to some degree so can Lacan’s structuralist overhaul of Freud. Žižek shows how Schelling’s neo-Kabbalistic notion of the contraction of being, which makes the finite order possible (God’s decision to become a creator and thus bring an end to eternity), mytho-metaphysically dramatizes Lacan’s developmental psychology: after the cut of the logos, the interdiction of the Father (le nom/non du Père), the pre-Oedipal unity of the child with the mother contracts into the ineffable and inassimilable “real” so that symbolically mediated ego-life can begin. To be sure, Žižek does not claim that Lacan’s psychoanalysis is based on Schelling; rather, he claims that Schelling can be fruitfully read through Lacan. There is however more to the story. Žižek never mentions Lacan’s collaboration with Alexander Koyré, the foremost interpreter of Boehme in the twentieth century, and he repeatedly underplays the significance of Boehme for Schelling. Lacan had read Koyré’s Böhme as early as 1929 and participated in Koyré’s seminar in 1934. The two became close collaborators in the 1950s (Burgoyne, 2003: 77). These historical facts are essential to understanding why Žižek’s cross-reading of Schelling and Lacan works so well: Boehme’s theosophy or Christian Kabbalism is a common denominator between Schelling and Lacan.29

Essential to Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Schelling against Schelling is the discontinuity Žižek sees between the middle Schelling’s Lacan-friendly notion of ground and the early Schelling’s proto-Jungian notion of nature as unconscious spirit. Ground is interpreted as the fictionalized origin of God, “the Signifier,” which stabilizes the symbolic by excluding itself from it. By means of this phantasmic theogony, the middle Schelling illustrates the positing of nature by subjectivity as the negative which positivizes its own vacuous pseudo-life, repeating in the dramatic fantasy of the birth of God the primal act of subjectivity constituting the symbolic by repression of the real and projection of the Big Other. The early Schelling’s concept of nature as unconscious spirit out of which consciousness teleologically evolves is the very fantasy of pre-subjective cosmological order that the later theogony unmask.

What fascinates Žižek most in the middle Schelling is how ground, a self-conflicting nest of cycles of expansion and contraction, the “rotary motion” of conflicting drives, must be “repressed” if consciousness is to exist. The decision that resolves the conflict is forever lost to the self, a “vanishing mediator” that must sink into unconsciousness the moment the decision is made. Lacanian consciousness is not a synthesis of conflicting desires but a displacement of drives – not a resolution of unconscious conflict, but a symptom of subjectivity forever out of sync with itself. For Žižek, the
unconscious in the middle Schelling can no longer be thought of as the visible spirit of the nature-philosophy; it is instead the decision that is simultaneously the birth of consciousness and the ejection of ground. On this view, nature does not precede subjectivity; rather, it comes to be at the precise moment that subjectivity separates itself from its pre-symbolic life; the illusion of a natural order begins with the decision of the subject to be for itself, a decision that can only be made by setting up the in itself as that which the subject is not. Adrian Johnston calls this “a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity” (Johnston, 2008: 69–122): transcendental because it begins with subjectivity and asks after the condition of its possibility; materialist because it discovers that the condition of the possibility of subjectivity is a denial of materiality. The denial is never entirely successful for the repressed always returns as irreducible remainder, reminding us that the ideal is a lie we tell ourselves in order to secure a place for subjectivity in a universe of unintelligible matter.

In Žižek’s reading, the eternal cycle of potencies in Schelling’s God – the rotation of three mutually exclusive possibilities for will – becomes the infinite reflection of a primordial psychotic subject who cannot decide who or what it is, divided as it is by conflicting drives and incapable of authentic action because it lacks the requisite self-identity to act. Schelling’s manifest argument, for Žižek, is that God can only be self-conscious if he allows for difference in being – that is, if he allows for the division of himself from his ground; of himself from creation; of every creature from every other. Psychoanalysed, the latent meaning of Schelling’s argument is that subjectivity must repress its Oedipal psychosis if it is to exist at all. The life of the subject can therefore only be a divided life in which subjectivity stands over and against itself on some level – threatened, haunted, and erotically drawn to that which it is not, the pre-verbal mother–infant dyad (hypostasized as “nature”), that with which it could be united only at the expense of itself.

Žižek’s psychoanalytical reading of Schelling (more accurately, a psychoanalysis of Schelling) highlights the radicality of the middle Schelling’s ontology, which breaks with traditional metaphysics by grounding being in drive. Žižek helps us to see how and why ground is not an ontological foundation in a traditional sense, not a substance or a natural network of causes. Ground is less real than what it grounds: beneath that which exists lies that which does not exist but “longs” to. To say ground exists “prior” to being is to make a category mistake, applying a category, “existence,” which is an ideal determination, to the real. The ground longs for existence, which means that it lacks existence. Where for Boehme and Schelling this indicates a mysterious purpose hidden in the deep unconscious of God, requiring limitation, negation, and finitude for the sake of love and community, for Žižek it indicates something far less sublime: at the origin of subjectivity lies a repression of the primordial absence of being necessary to consciousness. Žižek is the first, says Johnston, to overturn the common
interpretation of psychoanalysis as a variety of determinism (Johnston, 2008: 115). Freedom is primordially pathological, formless and abyssal, that is why we habitually repress it. Žižek is particularly adept at demonstrating how Schellingian freedom does not choose between good and evil; as the capacity for both, freedom is beyond good and evil. The problem of the formal identity of good and evil is another puzzle that Schelling inherits from Kant.31 Schellingian freedom does not respond to a pre-existing order of values; inasmuch as it makes possible the distinction between good and evil, freedom is itself neither good nor evil but equally open to both. What this means for Žižek is that evil must reside at the core of every good act as its repressed other: the good act is not one that has expelled the possibility for evil from freedom but has rather put it to use in another way. The subject’s inexhaustible capacity to repress freedom, to substitute functional neurosis for pre-subjective psychosis and to virtualize its life is not something to be overcome, for it makes subjectivity itself possible. In order for the subject to exist, it must repress the indifference of primal freedom, banish freedom’s anarchic openness from consciousness, and allow the absence it leaves in its wake (the real) to function as a ground.

Schelling’s breakthrough to dialectical materialism is ostensibly recalled before it begins as Schelling falls back on esoteric notions of polarity and premodern sexual cosmology. What Schelling truly discovered, says Žižek, eluded him. The real is not stuff that is idealized but the gap or break in the symbolic that indicates the contingency of the ideal. The ideal generates the real as the condition of its impossibility. The two cannot be grounded in an indifferent absolute without obfuscating their intimate dialectical entanglement with each other. For this reason Žižek ultimately prefers Hegel to Schelling, albeit a Hegel also standing on his head, not the arch-rationalist herald of “the march of spirit” but the thinker of negativity par excellence, the one who carries forward Schelling’s breakthrough to the essential role of the negative in the construction of identity (Žižek, 1996: 98). Žižek’s Hegel is an atheist masquerading as a Christian – not because Hegel is hiding from the truth, but for the sake of performatively unmasking the dissimulation inherent in all theories of the transcendent. Schelling’s failure in Hegel’s eyes is not, as is commonly said, to have resolved the ideal–real dyad into a point of indifference between them – their indifference is Hegel’s clue to their dialectical entanglement with one another; rather, Schelling’s failure is to have hypostasized this point of indifference into the Godhead outside of all dialectical process.32 Schelling’s absolute indifference is an instance of Lacan’s Big Other, the fantasy by which subjectivity both consolidates itself by negation of the real and conceals its own inherent negativity from itself (constitutive repression), only Schelling fails to recognize the vacuity of the construct. In Žižek’s view, this Schellingian fantasy of transcendence is corrected by Hegel, for whom the dialectic of the ideal and the real is purely immanent. The Hegelian third (repeatedly