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Himself Nothing Beholds Nothing. On Schelling's Ontological Isomorphism

As Judith Norman states it quite clearly in the preface to her translation of (the second draft of) Schelling's *Weltalter* fragments, it will “undoubtedly strike the reader” that the methodological intent of the work is to interpret things “in terms of man”. She refers to the bulk of these cases as “Schelling's conscious anthropomorphisms” (Norman 1997: 112). And indeed, Schelling himself does not hide that he is taking the human being to represent a kind of “microcosm” that expresses the general structure of the universe. A “system of times” will unfold, as he writes, “of which the human system would be just a copy, a repetition within a narrower space” (Schelling 1997: 121). Sometimes, his adherence to this principle is even quite casually stated, as when he says that “according to Hippocrates [everything divine is human], and everything human is divine”, and if this is the case, “we can hope to approach the truth by relating everything to man” (*Ibid.*: 157). At other times, the familiar realm of human existence is offered like an excellent, and almost as if unexpected, solution to a great conundrum: How can we grasp the will that wills nothing, a nature that does not know itself?

Think! – have you ever enjoyed those rare moments of such blissful and perfect fulfillment, when the heart desires nothing, when you could wish these moments to remain eternally as they are, and when they actually are like an eternity to you? Think of this and try to remember how, in just such moments, a will is already at work producing itself, although unbeknownst to you and without your effort – indeed, you could not prevent this production. This will soon pulls you back to yourself; it tears you away, back into the activities of life. Remember this, and you will have an approximate picture of what we are presently undertaking to describe (*Ibid.*: 136).

We are looking for a way to handle the structure of God's becoming God, and almost coincidentally, it seems, we stumble upon the human being that miraculously fits the purpose perfectly. Making the case of anthropomorphism against Schelling could therefore seem like running in open doors. There are striking

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similarities between the structure of God, inorganic life, organic life, and human life, and sometimes Schelling simply cites a familiar example from human life as if it was an argument for the structure of God and the world in and of itself. If by “anthropomorphism”, however, is meant a projection of well known human qualities onto other forms of being, (like in some so called primitive religious mythology), then I would none the less maintain that the case is not so clear, and the main thrust of this paper will be to make a plausible case for another interpretation. A more precise term to describe the endeavour in *Weltalter*, I think, would be *ontological isomorphism*. The book is an attempt at thinking the structure of being as such, with the human being as one case among others, but the approach is not to project certain well known features onto for instance God (like in, say, “God also has a temper”), but much more to show how basic ontological features of the world can be found in human life in ways we might not have expected. Indeed, the entire enterprise of *Weltalter* in many ways is to uncover a knowledge that does not know itself, as it is almost literally called (*Ibid.*: 114-115), and thus a structure that is as *foreign* to the human being itself as to anything, it might “project it” onto. In other words: If anthropocentrism projects the well known unto the unknown, Schelling’s approach is the opposite. He projects the unknown onto (what we thought was) the well known. It is this priority of the unknown that makes *Weltalter* such a painful experience to read (as Žižek has rightly pointed out (Žižek 1997: 4)), since its challenge of the well known does not end up in a kind of hermeneutic sublation, where we reach a new kind of understanding after a little bit of *Verfremdung*. The unknown remains in the heart of the well known as something unrecognizable in a quite literal sense that we shall return to.

What Schelling does do, undoubtedly, is that he blatantly violates the Kantian prohibition against stipulating anything of the Thing-in-itself. If any concept would be worthy of this Kantian name, it would certainly be the “schlechthin Erste” that is God’s absolute indifference before creation. If you think that Kant represented a kind of “unvordenkliches” of modern philosophy, it is very difficult to read *Weltalter* without at least sometimes thinking that this amounts to some form of esoteric, pre-critical metaphysics. Nonetheless, this story as well can be told in another way. As Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek have showed at great length, one of the crucial features of both Hegel’s and Schelling’s philosophy is that they insisted on thinking contradiction in a way that moved it from being an epistemological problem to *the* problem of ontology. In *Science*

of Logic, for instance, Hegel praises Kant for elevating dialectics to a level that no one before him had granted it, and for having established contradiction as a necessary determination of thought, while the presentation of dialectics in the antinomies of reason, however, “deserve little praise” (Hegel 1999a: 40). And in *Weltalter*, Schelling has a similar point: “... contradiction is not only possible but in fact necessary”, and not only as the endpoint of dialectical logics in the Kantian sense, but much more as a starting point:

Although men – in both living and knowing – seem to shy away from nothing so much as contradiction, they still must confront it, because life itself is in contradiction (Schelling 1997: 124).

Kant did “confront contradiction” in his antinomies, but it would also be fair to say that he shied away from it again in their resolution, when he denied any further access to things-in-themselves and concluded that reason must proceed as if there were no contradiction, out of “Zärtlichkeit für die weltlichen Dinge”, as Hegel ironically said (Hegel 1999b: 84)¹. In other words: Kant’s concern for things was so great that he wouldn’t impose contradiction on them and therefore let it apply only to reason itself, as its own ultimate horizon from within. Contradiction remains an inevitable outcome of a speculative reason that seeks the limit of its own capacities (does the world have a beginning in time, or has it always been – we will never be able to figure that out), but whether or not things-in-themselves could also be in contradiction lies outside the scope of human reason to establish. Contradiction remains on “our side” of the divide. The transcendental ideas, accordingly, can never have a constitutive use, but they nonetheless have an eminent and indispensable regulative use by providing a focal point (“focus imaginarius”) to guide the use of the understanding, such that it avoids confronting contradiction in its normal proceedings. We must proceed as if the world was a meaningful and coherent whole, and as if each of our experiences makes sense within this whole. Without the regulative use of the transcendental ideas, we would, strictly speaking, become insane, for we would oscillate between contradictory definite answers to the questions of how things *really* are (see Kant 1974: B 672). The normal-neurotic workings of the under-

¹ I owe thanks to Søren Mads Mau for making me aware of this precise and quite wonderful formulation.

standing in its Kantian outlook could thus be described with a paraphrase of the well known prohibition from Fawlty Towers: “Don’t mention the contradiction!”

Faktum der Vernunft

There is thus an element of fetishist disavowal in the Kantian solution of the antinomies of reason: We know very well that we have reached a point of the highest interest to reason – one which may or may not relate to fundamental characteristics of the thing itself – but nonetheless we proceed as if this problem has been overcome.

Schelling draws the opposite consequence: There is something in reason, which contradicts reason itself – reason thus already contains something other than itself, or at least itself as its own other. The other of reason is not something “out there”, neither in the form of the so called “great outside”, which reason may or may not be able to depicture or represent, nor is it the “in itself” on the other side of reason, which could be termed the absolute; it is something “in here”, which is inherent to reason’s own most fundamental characteristics. Kant did identify this inherent otherness of reason to itself, but instead of pursuing it, he found ways to cover it up, if you will. (It pops up, almost in a ghostly fashion, when he refers to “depths of the human soul that we may never apprehend” (*Ibid.*: B 181-182) and of course to the “I or He or It, the Thing, which Thinks” in the paralogisms (*Ibid.*: B 404)).

We could call this Schelling’s version of the “Faktum der Vernunft”: The fact is that reason itself contains something other; something more real (almost real in the Lacanian sense) than its regulative or practical use. You can pretend that it isn’t there, but the fact remains. Kant’s original “Faktum of Vernunft” was the undeniable awareness of the moral law, which every human being possesses. The “fact” of reason is something that reason “has made” (from the Latin: *factum, facere*); it is the necessary effect of reason itself. The moral law is there, beyond dispute, everyone with reason has access to it, because it is reason’s own produce, and it unconditionally demands universalizable moral actions. Schelling’s version of the *Faktum der Vernunft* would be another: It would emphasize reason *itself* as something that “has been made”. The *Factum* of reason is that reason has a history that has made it possible and is still “within it”, as its ground or essence. Indeed, “the unfathomable, prehistoric age rests in this

essence" (Schelling 1997: 114), and even if we don't know of it or don't want to know of it, it "slumbers within" and contains a "presentiment of and longing for knowledge [...] in that unknowing itself." (*Ibid.*: 115).

The historicity of reason is to Schelling not a hermeneutic question of narrativity, where the meanings of words gradually change and must be interpreted in due respect of the context of their enunciation, (this would probably count as something like a trivial fact to Schelling, at the most), but much more a question of reason as such as something that has a history, in the sense of *having come into being* at a certain point, and still containing this historicity as a fundamental part of its structure.

Reason thus contains a kind of longing for the unveiling of that which was before itself. Epistemologically speaking, this prehistory of reason cannot be recognized (*erkannt*), but it is nonetheless somehow known (*gewusst*), using the definitions from the opening lines of *Weltalter*:

The past is known, the present is recognized, the future is divined (*Ibid.*: 113).

Maybe one could thus translate Kant's prohibition as a prohibition against claiming that something could be *recognized* about the thing-in-itself with the same means as those, we have at our disposal to recognize things from the "present", meaning that which can be a possible object of experience. According to Schelling, it is true that we cannot *erkennen*, what is the historically grounded otherness within us, but we nonetheless somehow *know* it. We have a knowledge of the otherness that we cannot recognize. This knowledge is a *Mit-Wissenschaft* (*Ibid.*: 114): a knowledge with something else or along something else or taking part in something else. Human being has a co-science of that in (human) itself, which is not itself, and it thereby has access to a structure of grounding that is a necessary dimension of everything that-is. It is in a way always already known, since the *Mit-Wissenschaft* co-constitutes the very way, we are and think as humans, but there are nonetheless different ways of (not) dealing with this knowledge. The Kantian way would be a form of disavowal, while Schelling's approach would be an attempt at acknowledging otherness as the only way of handling it and making it a potential creative force. Without dealing with this otherness, nothing ever really changes, and we continue to be led by the same, familiar structures that we pretend to have constructed by ourselves, as if out

of nowhere. (If the complaint against *Weltalter* is that it is “anthropocentric”, Schelling might therefore reply that it is on the contrary Kant, who is “xeno-phobic”). The “ontological isomorphism” thus regards a logic of everything there is, such that it stands in a relation to its own ground in a way that human has a *Mit-wissenschaft* about:

Drawn from the source of things and akin to it, what is eternal of the soul has a co-science/con-sciousness [*Mitt-Wissenschaft*] of creation (*Ibid.*: 114)².

The *Mit-Wissenschaft* is a co-knowledge of creation in the sense of the coming-into-being of something, where “something” means both anything in general and anything at all. (In Heideggerian: The human being has a pre-ontological sense of the question of why there is anything at all). The structure must fundamentally be “akin in all things”:

Even the smallest grain of sand must contain determinations within itself that we cannot exhaust until we have laid out the entire course of creative nature leading up to it (*Ibid.*: 121–122).

Everything that is has a history, in other words, and this goes even for the “primordial essence itself”: even for it, “something had to be posited as a past before the present time became possible” (*Ibid.*: 122). For everything that is, in as far as it is a present, it must have (had) a past, and so even for God to be, he too must have (had) a past. The solution to the problem of that in us, which is not ourselves, is therefore not simply that it is God. This is otherwise a familiar figure. Take Kierkegaard’s definition of the human being in *The Sickness Unto Death*, for example: Here, the self is defined as that which relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates to an other, or to “something else” (Kierkegaard 1989: 10). The self is “a derived self,” since it has not established itself, and that which has established it, at least in Anti-Climacus’ description, is unmistakably God (*Ibid.*: 13). Relating to one self means acknowledging an otherness in oneself, which is the conditioning force that is not oneself, and this force is God. God himself, however, is not having the same problem. The radicality of Schelling’s isomorphism is that not only is there something in us, which is

² “Co-science/con-sciousness” is Norman’s translation of *Mitwissenschaft*. I think especially the latter of the two is rather dubious, precisely because the knowledge of the past is not conscious in the sense of recognition.

not ourselves, but there is something in God himself, which is not God himself. In Schelling, much more explicitly than in Kierkegaard, who is otherwise the thinker of the Paradox, there is really no Other of the Other.

... people have appealed long enough to the idea that God is the ground of his own existence. Is this notion of “ground” just an empty word, or does it denote something real? If it is just a word, then let us be more accurate and not allow ourselves to use senseless words. [On the other hand, if the ground is something real,] then people must themselves acknowledge that there was something before the existing God *as such* that did not itself exist because it is only the ground of existence (Schelling 1997: 149).

God himself has a past, and it is this past that in a few more steps will bring us to the subject of nothingness. There is, namely, another way of saying how Schelling respects the impossibility of speaking of the thing in itself. If God has a past, this past is inexpressible. The coming to be of God himself must have relied on some repressed origin, which cannot be grasped (recognized) in the language of the present: “We can therefore see that in the very moment when the Highest is supposed to express itself, it becomes the inexpressible” (*Ibid.*: 170). To Schelling, the question of ancestry, which is much debated these days, could maybe be termed as one of the ground that the human being (and like it all isomorphically similar beings, like God) carries with it or within it, but the ground itself cannot be put into words on the same conditions as what-is (*das Seyende*). The analytical language of “propositional content” therefore entirely fails to handle the question of the ground in Schelling’s vision. His critique of the “form” of philosophy in his time is of course directed at Kantian philosophy, but reminds strikingly of the even more rigid form of contemporary Anglo-Saxon linguistic philosophy:

Why was it, or has it been, impossible until now that philosophy – which is history with respect to its name and content – be history with respect to its form as well? (*Ibid.*: 114).

The form of a philosophy that takes its relation to history in the Schellingian sense seriously must in some way transmute into forms of evoking, indicating or isomorphically exemplifying that which has become inexpressible through its expression of the expressible. There is, in other words, a difference between how to express that, which can be stated in the language of the present, and that,

which cannot. In order to approach the question of the past, philosophy must reconsider the relation between that which can be said (in the language of the present) and the preconditions of its being said. *Weltalter* has its own theory of enunciation, which is in fact, I believe, not that different from a more contemporary structuralist one: The expressing (*das Aussprechende*) is that which expresses, but has itself thereby become inexpressible (the position of enunciation); the expressible (*das Aussprechliche*) is that which *can* be expressed; and the expressed (*das Ausgesprochene*) is that which has been expressed (the enunciated). What has been expressed is, for instance, what we are, but the expressing of our way of being expressed cannot itself be expressed. Or even more pointedly: The expressing (*das Aussprechende*) is posited as the expressing only *through expression*. Thereby, the only approach we have to the expressing (the position of enunciation) is as that which *has been made* (our) past through expression.

As Žižek has shown, this model fits quite nicely with the Lacanian conception of the structure of enunciation in its most basic form: "... the speaking agency is the Spirit qua \$, the substanceless void of non-Nature, the distance of Nature toward itself" (Žižek 1997: 44). The "speaking agency" here refers to Schelling's "das Aussprechende", the expressing, which must be posited as the barred subject of the enunciation, in order for there to be enunciated: "... when I contract myself outside myself, I deprive myself of my substantial content" (*Ibid.*: 39). The expressing of myself as a human being with such and such qualities, abilities, values and interests, happens by way of an expressing that posits a subject, which is then represented by a signifier (for another signifier). But the subject itself is the pure enunciation and not a thing that-is (*ein Seiendes*). The price for becoming a subject is to be alienated in language.

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Similarly with God: The "Highest" is bigger than God or it is before God, in the sense that it is God in his expressing of himself. If God is his own ground, as it was claimed, then it means that he, "the really existing God" (as in "really existing socialism"), is the expression of something that he is not (anymore): "Wisdom was by the Lord. But who is the *Lord*? Indisputably, he is that will which rests *within* being [*Seyn*, HJB] and what-is [*Seyende*, HJB], the will through which alone being can actually be being and what-is can actually be what-is: the will that previously willed nothing" (Schelling 1997: 166). Being and what-is, in their pure form, are the expressible (*das Aussprechliche*), and in their expression the expressing becomes their past.

God himself, the really existing, is only the expressed of that which he *previously* was. There is something in him, therefore, which is bigger and higher than himself, namely the will that willed nothing: The “immovable will that wills nothing is the Highest” (*Ibid.*: 134), and “this very will is above God” (*Ibid.*: 135). Maybe we could call this the ultimate prototype of the position of enunciation: the no-longer-actual and inexpressible will that wills nothing. This will does “rest within him”, but as that which previously willed nothing. It has expressed, and therefore has been moved out of its pure state of absolute indifference, but it remains within that which has been expressed as its history.

The absolute indifference is “das schlechthin Erste”. It is the past of the world, where there is no subject and object, no grammar and no enunciated content of anything. Schelling’s myth of creation now says that everything that is (expressed) came into existence initially because of the transition from the will that wills nothing to a will that unconsciously *wanted to remain* in this state of blissful indifference. In other words, the will that wills nothing becomes the will that wills nothingness itself as such. This is what he calls contraction: “If we could say that the resting will is the First, then we can also say that an unconscious, tranquil, self-seeking will is the Second” (*Ibid.*: 137). This unconscious longing produces itself *in* eternity, in other words there is an almost unnoticeable slide from the will that wills nothing to willing nothingness as such. It is a minimal difference, but of immense consequences. If there is something in Schelling that could be called “less than nothing”, it must be this: the will that wills nothing contracts into something less than itself and thus creates the necessity of an outwards expansion³. Schelling’s illustration of this passage was quoted in the introduction, but it is worth repeating in this context. Imagine for instance lying on a green lawn on a beautiful summer’s day, with no care or concern:

[T]ry to remember how, in just such moments, a will is already at work producing itself, although unbeknownst to you and without your effort – indeed, you could not prevent this production. This will soon pulls you back to yourself; it tears you away, back into the activities of life. Remember this, and you will have an approximate picture of what we are presently undertaking to describe.

³ American comedian Louis C.K. has provided another version of less than nothing: When he discovered that his bank account was in minus, he realized that he couldn't even afford things that are for free. Maybe taking away something from someone who has nothing is the first moment of a revolution.

Wanting to stay in the condition of blissful indifference effectively is a negation of this condition. It is like when two people are lying together in perfect harmony, and one of them says: “Isn’t this just wonderful?” At that precise moment, the harmony is ruined, and you might as well get up and get started. The next step is therefore also already inscribed into the first: “One and the same will is activated as the will that wills nothing and is also activated as the will that wills something (life and actuality)” (*Ibid.*: 177). The secret longing for itself that was the unconscious negation of the will that willed nothing thus turns into a will that wants itself as something. It first contracts and then expands – in one moment. This is what Schelling calls the “highest contradiction” (*Ibid.*: 169): “... one and the same will = x is two wills: one determinately negating and the other affirming” (*Ibid.*) Without this highest contradiction, there is no creation and no freedom, for it is only through it that the possibility exists to effectively change a situation and make one’s condition different. To Schelling, this means to create oneself a past. The principles of contraction and expansion together form the precondition of becoming something else than one was.

The man who cannot separate himself from himself, who cannot break loose from everything that happens to him and actively oppose it – such a man has no past, or more likely he never emerges from it, but lives in it continually (*Ibid.*: 120).

Real deeds “which make a man genuinely himself” (*Ibid.*: 181) are moments of both contraction and expansion. Without this double negation (the negation of indifference and the negation of the contraction into its opposite) nothing ever begins – and this goes even for decisions in human life: a real decision does not consist in weighing the arguments for and against, but in the moment of rupture of what ultimately counts as for and against. The first moment is the contraction (“all life begins with contraction” (*Ibid.*: 179)), and the second is expansion (“a positively negating will... that does not will nothing but rather wills something” (*Ibid.*: 169)) but the two can only be analytically discerned, they are not separate engulfed events that proceed one after another: “... did you honestly take factors into consideration, engage in deliberation and reach a decision, when you grasped yourself for the first time and expressed yourself as who you are?” (*Ibid.*: 175).

Creation is the moment where the will that wills nothing is made into the past of that which is expressed. The two contradictory forces of contraction and ex-

pansion must, however, somehow be kept in balance, if creation is not going to propel directly and immediately into its own destruction. Take cancer as an example: here, the principle of expansion that is behind all life and activity (in biological life as the production and division of cells) runs amok and starts producing cells beyond any viable measure and purpose and soon threatens to terminate life as such, if it is not kept in check. Or take revolution: If it doesn't find a new *modus vivendi* after overthrowing power, it will degenerate into chaos (expansion) or maybe create some paranoid normalcy which more and more closes in on itself and "eats its own children" (contraction). The two forces must balance each other, and the name of this balance is spirit: "... when two conflicting wills are present – one affirming and one negating – spirit is already called for as well" (*Ibid.*: 169). Wolfram Högbe has illustrated this balance as the right speed of a film reel in a movie theatre: If the reel goes too fast, we just see a blur of colours; if it goes too slow, we see only isolated images without any sensible connection (Högbe 1989: 100).

The externalization or expression of the will that wills nothing thus leads to a contractive-expansion, which must again be balanced by spirit. It is almost as if creation is God's losing control of himself, and the history of the world as spirit is his cleaning up after the mess that he had produced. Spirit is thus the real, unifying force that relates the expressed to the expressing; it takes part in eternity by engendering the kinds of balance that keep the different and differentiating forces in check:

This entire life, after all, originated in the first place out of the longing of eternity for itself. In searching for itself and yet not being able to find itself, the will produced itself in an urgent manner, desiring eternity and seeking contact with it. Through progressive increase, this will has now constructed a series of steps by which it can ascend to eternity. For spirit – or the highest unity produced through its desire – is by nature one with indifference or eternity. For this reason spirit is not only the unity of the opposites, as was assumed until now; it is at the same time the link between eternity and the life built up from below, a life that already presents itself ever more clearly as the instrument of eternity (Schelling 1997: 146-147).

The will that wills nothing is our past, but in a spiritual effort we nonetheless partake in it, when we succeed in balancing the contradictory forces of nature in a way that allows a kind of tranquil contemplation. In times of unrest and

threats, spirit could be the serene overview that allows one to remain calm and make the right decisions. “To be as if one were not, to have as if one had not; that is in man, that is in God, the Highest of all” (*Ibid.*: 133).

To Schelling, there is an ascension in the spiritual development of the world, which mirrors the eternal being, by restoring the kind of “blissful balance”, if you will, which could not be maintained in creation: “Now that the spirit of nature wants to be the link between eternity and nature, it strives to express actually in matter – as material that is subordinated to it – what is contained only as possibility in eternal being” (*Ibid.*: 154). Another way of saying this could be that spirit is coming to itself through the gradual sublation of the relation between ground and existence. (And to push the point: In an eschatological reading of the entire project of the *Weltalter*, the future could be seen as the sublation of the world as such; spirit as the premonition of this sublation).

A mind of winter

Before I close with some remarks on the issuing concepts of nothing, I would like to preempt some of the main points via Wallace Stevens’ 1923 poem “The Snow Man” (Stevens 2001) – which has also provided the title of this paper. Stevens here, in my suggestion, could be seen as Schelling’s allied in the cause of ontological isomorphism, and he gives a rather refined approach to the concept of nothingness which will allow us to distinguish between two overall conceptions of nothingness in *Weltalter*.

The Snow Man

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One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
 And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter
 Of the January sun;
 and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place
 For the listener,
 who listens in the snow,
 And,
 nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

One must have a mind of winter and have been cold a long time in order to really grasp the junipers shagged with ice; and it is an effort not to think of any misery in the sound of the cold wind that is blowing in the same bare place. One must in a way tune in on the isomorph structures of other forms of being (*Seyendes*), in order to do them justice and contemplate their participance in creation. The listener is himself nothing – he is not a humanistic self-relying, non-alienated subject, and (in virtue of that) he beholds nothing that is not there, which could mean that he does not make up fictions of angels or unicorns in order to describe what-is or to generate some emotional response to the icy wind in the same bare place. In order, precisely, to *avoid anthropomorphism*, one must be strictly precise and describe nothing that is not there.

But maybe the “nothing that is not there” could also strike the chord of the problem of the ultimate status of the will that wills nothing. If this will is the past of creation, a state of blissful indifference that nonetheless contains the propensity towards an unconscious longing for itself that turns into contraction-expansion, it is in fact, I believe, difficult not to see it as what Žižek has called “a positively charged void” – the “schlechthin erste” that contains being and what-is as the expressible, but is now, within the history of the world, itself *not there* (anymore). The spiritual effort of the beholder, in this reading, makes this void nonetheless “there to behold”, as something “known” [*gewusst*], rather than something recognized [*erkannt*]. The word “behold” could be rendered in this way also – it derives from the Old English *behealdan*, that can also mean “to hold, have, occupy, possess, guard”, etc. (and not just “to see”). Spirit is the beholding, guarding of the void of the past. This interpretation threatens to take Schelling in the direction of a mysticist and conservative version of the void – but it is one, which I think one must admit that there are ample justifications of

in the *Weltalter*. Behold the nothing which is not there: Be aware of the past that resides in every present being.

A second version of the “nothing which is not there” would, however, appear from asking Schelling a question, which would take the interpretation in another direction: What if spirit is all there is, or what if the nothing, which is not there, is not a prehistoric *condition*, but a retroactive positing of the beginning? This version would insist on the purely formal aspect of the relation between the expressing and the expressed. The expressing would be nothing but the empty point of enunciation (a nothing which is not there), seen from the perspective of spirit that contemplates the contractive and expansive forces of nature in itself and in everything else that exists. The “schlechthin erste” would in this sense only be there retroactively, and spirit would be alone, without a positive void to refer to in its endeavor to balance the forces of the world. On the bright side, the will that wills nothing would then be spirit’s own accomplishment – it would not “partake” in something *higher*, when contemplating the world, but simply represent an unfolding of history as such. This interpretation would risk taking Schelling too much in the direction of Hegel, and Schelling might reproach it with the words from early on in the *Weltalter*: “All science must pass through dialectic. But is there *never* a point at which it becomes free and alive, as when a historian, representing an image of past times, no longer thinks of his investigations?” (Schelling 1997: 118).

Finally, neither of these two interpretations excludes the thinking of contradiction as real and as pertaining to everything there is. Everything carries its own past within it, and everything there is, is the result of a beginning, as well as a kind of balanced equilibrium, that remains an expression of both contraction and expansion. “The highest contradiction” concerned the two wills that are both opposites and the same: the negating will and the affirming. These two remain, regardless of the interpretation of the status of the will that wills nothing, and they resonate in the principles of being (*Seyn*) and what-is (*Seyende*) that are also, like contraction and expansion, described as two contrary principles that one and the same thing might be at the same time.

So, one last round with the snowman: He beholds, besides the nothing that is not there, the nothing which *is there*, which might be interpreted along the lines of Schelling’s description of the what-is-not (*das Nichtseyende*), which is “un-

graspable only insofar as and to the extent *that* it is not; to the extent that, as what-is-not, it nonetheless *is*, to that extent it is indeed graspable and comprehensible" (*Ibid.*: 142-3). The what-is-not is certainly not "the nothing" pure and simple (*das Nichts*), Schelling emphasizes (*Ibid.*: 141), but rather, in fact, Being (*Seyn*). Being is what-is-not, but nonetheless something that can be beholden in relation to what-is. It is as the negative "only latent in what-is, while what-is, or the positive principle, is revealed and active" (*Ibid.*: 142). I risk this interpretation: What-is-not can be grasped and comprehended to the extent that it is the what-is-not of something what-is. Take for instance a lecture room with chairs and boards and various types of equipment: The what-is-not for it is that which allows it to be what-is. The room is not filled with water or one massive bloc of impenetrable being. In its condition of being what-is, it is granted its being by what-is-not. A table, for example, is something that is, only to the extent that it is being granted by that which is not, otherwise it wouldn't have any limits or shape. Being grants that-which-is its existence by withholding itself. And this what-is-not (*das Nichtseyende* of the table, which allows it to be a table) can be called the nothing which *is there*. This is graspable, although you only see it as that which is *not* in relation to a what-is.

Back to the ground

So, what is the ground of existence – and in which way(s) does it regard the void? I think *Weltalter* offers at least a couple of different interpretations of this, which might be summarized as in the following, on the face of it going in each their own direction.

The ground is being. A book, like any other object, contains two principles that are somehow held in check; the *Seyende*, the what-is, as its positive, confirming moment, and *Seyn*, the what-is-not, as its negative, contrary moment. One might emphasize simply the what-is-not as the ground of that which-is; the necessary flipside of things that are, which is nothing "in itself", but can nonetheless be beholden as the what-is-not of what-is. The nothing that is is the ground, meaning the what-is-not as the precondition of that which is. (Against this interpretation speaks the understanding of the expansive force, in for instance cancer, as itself part of the ground).

The ground is the contradiction of contraction and expansion latent in a spiritual balance of what we perceive as objects. One might instead see both of these contradictory forces, contractive and expansive, as the ground and the book itself as a kind of spiritual miracle that keeps these two forces in check. The existing things, objects, like a book, would thus be said to contain within them two contradictory principles as their ground, and both of them could potentially “run amok”, either annihilating the existing thing in a contractive movement or exploding it in an expansive movement. (Against this interpretation speaks the questionable status of that which is: If that which we call a book is not the positive, expansive principle kept in check by its contractive counterweight, then what is it? Is it a Kantian *Erscheinung* with two inherent, contradictory principles that apply to it only when considered as a thing-in-itself?).

The ground is the will that wills nothing as the past of that which has been expressed, i.e. even of the contradictory forces of contraction and expansion themselves. Finally, one might emphasize the will that wills nothing as still resting within both being and what-is as part of the ground or maybe even the ground of the ground, or the *Ungrund*, as it is later called. God as his own ground would mean that the past of God is his ground; that which is prior to both contraction and expansion is the ground even of these.

In the first version, the ground is, so to say, merely the flip side of existing things. In the second, it is a more fundamental characteristic of things that are – they contain some contradictory forces “underneath” the surface, which sometimes burst out. And in the third, there is a pre-historic grounding of everything, pure and simple, including any forces inherent in actually existing things.

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Without claiming to be able to resolve this tension, I think it is at least possible to read these three options as more closely related than presented above, and thereby hopefully tie some of the discussions in this article a bit together.

Everything that is, is and is not. A book relies on both its expansive and contractive dimension in order to appear, and sustain itself, as a book. It is both. In other words, the two dimensions co-exist in things. Their contradictory nature means that they simultaneously apply to the same thing, through which they are being expressed. Even though the what-is of a thing can thus be described as

its “positive”, expansive side, it is nonetheless the what-is *of a thing* that is thus described, and similarly with its “negative” side.

It is clearly impossible for what-is, as such, ever to be being, as such, and vice versa; it is also impossible for opposites as such to be one. We do not need to insist on these points, since to claim the opposite would be to do away with common sense, with the possibility of expressing oneself, and indeed, with the contradiction itself. Yet it is surely possible that *one and the same* thing be both what-is and being, affirming and negating, light and darkness, good and evil. (*Ibid.*: 130).

The book, furthermore, relies on its own emergence as a book in the combined expression of the contraction-expansion that was its creation. In other words, it has a past. In its absolute sense, this past evades description. It must be posited as the mere expressing of everything that is, or it must be thought as the will that previously willed nothing. If spirit partakes in this will (or if there is only spirit, and the will that wills nothing is a retroactive presupposition of spirit) then we may conclude that there are two forms of nothing in Schelling's *Weltalter*: a nothing that is and a nothing that isn't. The first is the contractive force of everything that is, in its grounding relation to a counterforce of expansion, both of which are not beings, but the fundamental, contradictory forces of all beings (and could probably be compared to the void and the atom), and the second is the original precondition of the spiritual force that upholds this balance, in as far as it is sustained; itself related to a nothing that is not there, but which nonetheless exerts its effect.

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