READING SCHELLING PSYCHOANALYTICALLY: ŽIŽEK ON THE FANTASY OF THE GROUND OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND LANGUAGE

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What are the origins of consciousness and language? Why are so many driven to see them as epiphenomenal to a metaphysically more primordial phenomenon when we have good reasons to think they are irreducible to such? Drawing on the work of the Slovenian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, and in particular his reading of the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling, I suggest a provocative but nuanced thesis: that at the basis of human subjectivity there is no rhyme or reason for its emergence and to protect ourselves from this insight we build various fantasy-constructions of its ground as defensive mechanisms.

Introduction: The Origins of Consciousness and Language

In contemporary philosophy and science, questions concerning the status of consciousness abound. Why do we, as biological creatures, display such a high degree of self-awareness when others do not? To what end, if any, could this serve as an evolutionary adaptation? Should we naturalize consciousness, or is it something more than mere brain matter? Given that matters of self-awareness are, for us linguistic entities, entangled with the words we use and the social horizon from which they cannot be isolated, it is even unclear if these questions have any significance without a prior tackling of the being of language. Is the latter a mere tool we have developed for delivering codes, a more sophisticated intersubjective practice of communication like those we witness in animals? Or does its role in establishing traditions, rituals, and ultimately laws point to an order that has a life properly of its own? If consciousness is indeed deeply imbricated with language qua inseparable from a self-standing cultural system, why would we be so continually driven by the attempt to find their ground in something radically other than themselves, namely, in nature?
It is precisely this constellation of interwoven problematics that constitutes the Slovenian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek’s guiding theoretical preoccupation and, in particular, allows us to address the philosophical relevance of his reading of the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling. Describing the primary task for us today to explain “the very rise of representation or appearing out of the flat stupidity of being” so as to avoid “a regression to a ‘naive’ ontology of spheres or levels,”¹ it is not surprising that Žižek would take Schelling as an interlocutor inasmuch as he, from his earliest sketches of a Naturphilosophie to his late Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation, is concerned with exactly this. But what intrigues Žižek is not so much the latter’s account of the emergence of human subjectivity out of nature as the unconscious poetry of spirit or its place in the theogonic drama of divine being seeking self-disclosure, a “materialist” and “theological” take on the origins of consciousness and language. Rather in the period in-between, encapsulated in the stillborn drafts of the Weltalter, Žižek sees something that indicates that “his thought—for a brief moment, as it were in a flash—renders visible something that was invisible and withdrew into invisibility thereafter.”² Ostensibly dealing with God’s creation of the universe, each version is unable to articulate the precise manner in which the Past is ‘repressed’ so as to make room for the Present. In this philosophical inability, however, Schelling intimates how the emergence of consciousness and language out of nature—or in Lacanian parlance: the Symbolic from the Real—is inexplicable because intrinsically contingent. And more drastically, his own defeat not merely suggests the inevitable failure of searching for their ground; it also explains why we need the fantasy of such a ground to save us from acknowledging the traumatic existential consequences of this impossibility. In this regard, although one of Žižek’s claims to fame is to be a modern day defender of G. W. F. Hegel’s dialectics and Schelling’s to be the latter’s great historical nemesis, there is a single point where their mutual conceptual terrains overlap such that posing them side by side proves exceptionally useful in rethinking why we may be drawn to but cannot answer such questions at all.

Disrupting the Primacy of Nature: Lacan on Consciousness and Language

A question poses itself: Why would Žižek so strongly zone in on the passage from the Past to the Present in the Weltalter drafts, elevating its uncertainty to the moment of greatest philosophical relevance for understanding the lasting kernel of Schelling’s thinking and outlining the true problematic underlying the search for the origins of consciousness and language? To fully grasp the matter at hand, we must first gloss Lacanian psychoanalysis, recognizing that the latter is, for Žižek, “ultimately a tool to reactualize, to render actual for today’s time, the legacy of German Idealism.”

Seeing a structural identity existing between their mutual theories of subjectivity, this allows them to productively inform one another.

Lacanian metapsychology, like that of the Freudian variety, is concerned with the emergence of psychic structure out of the otherwise disordered state of neonatal existence. According to both, there is a primordial prematurity characteristic of our first months that not only makes us dependent upon caregivers. More drastically, it indicates that we lack given biological algorithms (instincts) by which we can alleviate bodily tensions, rendering our libidinal economy open to any object that may satisfy it (drives). For Freud, the impasse is first resolved with the development of the ego, a new intrapsychic agency that organizes the id’s energies. Lacan, however, is critical of the so-called structural model, pointing out how the ego is only ontogenetically possible insofar as the neonate, thanks to “a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of malaise and motor uncoordination,” is lured by images offering it the wholeness it does not naturally possess—as, for instance, in the ordered body perceived in the mirror. This has two extreme, but interrelated conse-

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4 Ibid.


quences. First, it means that the ego is not a hard kernel of conscious selfhood. It is more accurately a series of imaginary identifications that simply provide an external support for unity where biology fails. Second, if consciousness is primarily a set of such identifications with images that exist outside of and colonize the chaos of our libidinal economy, creating the false illusion of a centre, these must have a comprehensive substrate if they are to offer any degree of psychic structure.

Yet if neither nature nor consciousness can account for psychic structure, where does it come from? Lacanian metapsychology answers the question by shifting the emphasis from the personal to the social, describing the multitude of ways in which the imaginary order is constitutively overwritten by the complex of customs, institutions, and laws prior to our neonatal existence and into which we are thrown. The fact that parents often name a child before its biological birth is highly significant: it points to cultural and even political expectations that are always already made upon us as individuals and which, without us even knowing, guide the very identifications that construct our sense of being. Every aspect of awareness, identity, and selfhood is thus influenced by the Symbolic as the network that weaves these various expectations into a self-subsisting differential system—even affectively strong emotions or our ownmost desires, to which we can have no phenomenological distance, are to be traced back to ways in which certain logical elements of this system (“signifiers”) have come to determine/overdetermine our lives. This is one of the reasons why Lacan can shorten Freud’s “the unconscious is outside of time” to “the unconscious is outside”: the unconscious, qua effect of the symbolic order’s logical self-perpetuation, comes to represent how those larger-than-consciousness, “transindividual”\(^8\) structures in which we participate structure us against our imaginary selves. They regulate our biologically open-ended libidinal economy by dictating what is possible and impossible in terms of actions, thus making order out of the disarray of drives, but an order that follows its own rules. This is the price we may for having an identity at all—identity being a symbolic rather than phenomenological or biological function.

The theoretical issue that plagues Lacanian metapsychology is the Symbolic’s ground in the subject. As a differential system, the Symbolic is logically self-contained and self-justifying inasmuch as its

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rules constitute a “totality” or “universe.” Nevertheless, even if there is thus “no biological reason” for its existence—here encountering “the complete emergence of a new function”—and human being is characterized by a fundamental anti-naturalism (what Lacan calls \textit{antiphysis}), this is not enough to guarantee its efficacy in disciplining the drives. What is more, despite the fact there is a sense in which the latter is forced upon us—by having to learn to speak to articulate needs, these become mediated by its logical dynamics—this fact cannot explain how it could take hold in us in the first place. Consequently, if the Symbolic constitutes the main object of Lacanian psychoanalysis, without an enquiry into its origins it risks arbitrariness.

\textbf{Formalizing Theosophic Metapsychology: The Birth of the Symbolic from the Real of Drives}

Yet where can we find the resources necessary to think through the passage from the disordered pre-logical Real of neonatal existence to the psychic structure offered by the Symbolic? Some of Žižek’s most sophisticated reflections on this transition occur, perhaps surprisingly, in his commentary on Schelling’s \textit{Weltalter}. For those familiar with the latter, this cannot but strike one as odd if not paradoxical: Is not this work, in the tradition of Jakob Böhme and Franz Baader, an investigation into the cosmic birth of rationality and order out of primordial chaos, an examination that is intimately tied up with the self-begetting of God as a self-conscious person out of a pre-reflexive state of darkness? Although Žižek does not simply dismiss the arcane metaphysics Schelling here passionately sketches (IR, 8), what interests him the most is a possibility “to reformulate it so as to avoid the mystification of the theosophic mytho-poetic narrative.” (LN, 273) Given that Schelling himself draws a parallel between God’s act of \textit{causa sui} and the human being’s free self-positing, Žižek is able to suggest that we can draw from his reconstructions of the painful


\footnotesize{10} \textit{Ibid.}


process of God’s emergence as an autonomous subject important lessons concerning how we ourselves came to be part and parcel of the symbolic order from out of the Real. This allows us to read the Weltalter as a mere “metapsychological work” (IR, 9), whereby its attempt to grasp how God, liberating Himself from that part of His being that Schelling revealingly refers to as nature13, could establish His self-identity through the creation of a world of logos, becomes an allegory for the relationship that obtains between our own pre-subjective, material ground and the self-standing cultural system in which we must make a life for ourselves. After all, as both Lacan and Freud are aware, “the need for the form of mythical narrative arises when one endeavours to break the circle of the symbolic order and to give an account of its genesis (‘origins’).” (IR, 9)

Schelling’s divine epic is peculiar because of its fascination with, as Žižek puts it, the “the problem of the Beginning itself.” (IR, 8) Schelling inverts the classical question of why there is something rather than nothing to that of how the world could have gotten entrapped in the nexus of causality at all, a move that displaces the question’s emphasis from that of a necessary explanatory reason to a descriptive narration of a contingent happening. Whatever creation may be, for the Weltalter it simply cannot be, as many traditional philosophers have thought, a Fall from eternity, an emanation from a realm of perfect forms, or an arbitrary act performed by an already fully existent deity. Schelling’s audacity is to say that it is thinkable at all only insofar as we postulate some prior conflict of which it is the resolution (IR, 55), with the reminder that a conflict can be genuine if and only if its outcome is uncertain. Creation is thereby not a descent, but a triumph, which also entails that “the true Beginning is not at the beginning: there is something that precedes the Beginning itself,” something “broken, in a gesture analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, by the Beginning proper.” (IR, 8)

Prior to the relatively harmonious arrangement of the universe we see around us, the Weltalter places a tumult of forces that must be labelled pre-ontological inasmuch as it is unable to give rise to stable structure. There is a mere oscillation between the ‘contractive’ and the ‘expansive,’ the ‘dark’ energy that holds an entity together and the ‘light’ principle that engenders a system of articulated relations, where every attempt to bring them together fails as the former collapses any lawful rule that emerges. All things fall back into the vortex aborted—it is as if creation has fallen dead in its tracks, short-circuited from the inside through a failed beginning. Yet if there can

13 Ibid., 237.
be nothing outside of God and this cosmic fury thus coincides with His being, how could this agonizing annular rotation be broken so that stability could take root? Here, Schelling adds another layer, complicating the tale he is telling: this pre-ontological chaos, albeit the hidden ground of creation insofar as creation is the resolution of its underlying antagonism, “is itself not the primordial, unsurpassable fact.” (IR, 14) There must be something else that is logically and metaphysically anterior, an X that, itself, somehow contracts this play of proto-cosmic powers like a disease which it must get rid of. In this way, the Weltalter divides the problem of the beginning of the world into three distinct stages:

(1) In the absolute beginning there is, stricto sensu, nothing because nothing determinate can exist. However, this nothing is not a nihil privatium, but rather a pure Seinkönnen (the unadulterated possibility of anything at all). If God wants to really be this nothing, it—for God is not yet a He—must actualize the plentitude of being implicitly contained within it.

(2) After this fateful contraction of material being, the only basis from which something may become actual, we have what Žižek calls “Schelling’s grandiose ‘Wagnerian’ vision of God.” (IR, 24) This is so ‘terrifying’ because, instead of the calm joy of infinitely pure possibility, we have a God who, becoming real for the first time, finds Himself like an animal trapped in a snare unable to get out. (IR, 23)

(3) Finally, we have God who is able to speak the Word, overcoming the deadlock of a failed creation in which He became implicated. Finding the solution like one finds the answer to a puzzle, the pre-ontological chaos becomes regulated and falls into a never-retrievable, eternal Past. There is a new age of the world governed by logos and at the same instant God becomes a self-conscious person.

But how could such an elaborate theosophy serve as the description of the emergence of psychic structure? If we are warranted in reading the Weltalter metapsychologically insofar as the human subject repeats the process undergone by the absolute itself, we must proclaim that at the level of the former the intermediate stage between the Past and the Present perfectly describes “the basic anti-

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Darwinian lesson of psychoanalysis repeatedly emphasized by Lacan: man’s radical and fundamental dis-adaptation, mal-adaptation, to his environs.”16 Rather than encountering a being capable of autonomously developing itself according to a pre-set algorithm of ‘contractive’ and ‘expansive’ vital forces, we here encounter a short-circuit in the Real of nature insofar as their play in matter, which ought to be the ontological foundation for life, continually backfires. In the ‘madness’ of God before creation we see nothing other than what it means for instincts, when they become drives, to lack the inner structuration necessary to guarantee the stable organization of libidinal economy—there is a painful, failed logic, from which the subject liberates itself by a free act of speaking the Word, that is, by bringing forth within it a symbolic universe that gives the structure biology on its own could not.

Now a striking dilemma emerges: Doesn’t this description itself exhibit a profound psychoanalytically-identifiable theoretical limitation? Do we not insert ourselves as a pure gaze into the pre-symbolic Real, seeing ourselves miraculously present at our own birth just as if we were to imagine ourselves as spectators in our funerals? (IR, 14) This danger can be avoided by a careful formalization of the painful process of God’s self-begeting so as to avoid the time-loop of fantasy in its retroactive reconstruction. The point to underline is that we cannot speak of God as a self-conscious person being present throughout His self-caused birth. The movement from unbalanced proto-cosmic powers to a world of logos is something that merely happens. Although the movement does display an act-structure, it is in point of fact an unconscious positing that creates the condition of the possibility of consciousness and is therefore entirely anonymous. The paradox is that God, although fully autonomous, is not personally responsible for creation or His own self-identity although He must take responsibility for it. There is a moment of blindness in divine life such that when God finally comes on the scene he can only acknowledge and accept that in which He played no part (IR, 37) (similar to the Freudian choice of neurosis). As such, we can say that “this is what Schelling aims at and, also, what psychoanalysis is about: the psychoanalytic cure is effectively over when the subject ... freely assumes their nonexistence.” (IR, 80 n.12)

These mediations allow us to reformulate the three stages of Schelling’s divine epic to bring out more explicitly their metapsychological import. Since the crucial stage is the transition from the Real of drives, we shall begin there:

(2) There is an ontological short-circuit that upsets an otherwise smooth nature, making it run amok. This failure creates an antagonism that knows no inner resolution.

(3) Speaking the Word—a signifier that inscribes its place in a symbolic universe—the subject enters a realm of proscriptions that regulate the instinctual chaos of its libidinal economy.

But this entails that there is an insurmountable gap between the Real and the Symbolic. With the passage into the latter we are dealing with “the miracle of an act which is ‘its own beginning,’ grounded only in itself” (IR, 35)—with something that equally well \textit{could not have happened} since there is no rhyme or reason for occurrence from the side of the Real. The necessity of Schelling’s very return to myth lies in his recognition that the freedom at the heart of subjectivity, albeit dependent upon materiality, cannot be deduced from its fold. Consequently, we should rethink stage one:

(1) The Real is metaphysically not-all. There are things that, only arising \textit{ex nihilo} and usurping that out of which they have arisen, force us to retroactively write rationally unpredictable possibilities into it.

**Between Materialism and Idealism: Schelling on the Non-Ground of the Symbolic**

For Žižek, Schelling’s \textit{Weltalter} project is of such pivotal importance because it sketches for the first time a new option for understanding the relationship between consciousness, language, and their ground—an option that uncannily resonates with us today. Are consciousness and language ultimately epiphenomena of natural processes to which they can be reduced without remainder? Or do they point to some higher, non-natural realm? Attempting to describe the conditions for the emergence of a rationality and order, Schelling is led in a first moment to perform the materialist move of grounding, concluding that the latter cannot be simply self-contained and self-justifying \textit{qua} totality or universe of inner rules; any such system necessarily belies its ‘parasitic’ dependence upon a prelogical space that carves up its ontological possibility. \textit{Pace} Idealism, he proclaims that higher-order structure originates in an archaic realm of comparative disorder (a ‘lower potency’) to which it is a resolution of an underlying antagonism:
idealism posits an ideal Event which cannot be accounted for in terms of its material (pre)conditions, while the materialist wager is that we can get “behind” the event and explore how Event explodes out of the gap in/of the order of Being. The first to formulate this task was Schelling, who, in his Weltalter fragments, outlined the dark territory of the “prehistory of Logos,” of what had to occur in pre-ontological proto-reality so that the openness of Logos and temporality could take place.17

Nevertheless the nuance of Schelling is to not simply reduce the Ideal to the Real, advocating that the Ideal itself is somehow secondary to the latter’s pulsations. Although Schelling clearly heralds forth the “post-Hegelian universe of finitude-contingency-temporality” (IR, 7–8), he refuses to make this additional step. The vortex of drives is not the ultimate ground in front of which the supremacy of rationality and order is an illusion—even if it constitutes their obscure origins there is a sense in which it is ‘less’ than fully constituted reality. (IR, 62) Schelling remains an idealist in his extremely materialist gesture. However, this double adherence comes at a cost. If the Ideal is to remain free from the matter out of which it is born, there must be no reason for its upsurge. Central to the Weltalter is the thesis that the Real, though providing the necessary conditions for the former, cannot supply its sufficient conditions: to explicate the passage requires the positing of a self-begetting act that out of nowhere represses the Past and creates the Present (LN, 231), thereby creating a new age of the world. As such, it cannot be understood in terms of the ground that serves as its past inasmuch as it institutes a “gap which makes impossible any account of the rise of the new in terms of a continuous narrative.” (LN, 273) In face of the radical contingency involved, there can be no eliminativist reduction. In this regard, both materialism and Idealism are correct, only with important qualifications: we do have to assume a pre-history of the Ideal, but this never will get us to the event at its founding gesture; and although Idealism recognizes the truth of the irreducibility of the Ideal, it alone fails to grasp what this groundlessness actually entails, namely, that it stands above a rational abyss.

In this precise sense, what Schelling intuited was the properly psychoanalytical insight that there is no ground of the Symbolic in the sense of a firm soil in which it can take hold or explanatory reason that could account for its arising. There may indeed be certain ontogenetic elements that incite their growth in the disordered

17 Ibid., 166.
state of neonatal existence, yet paradoxically we can only have recourse to them *post festum*. As such, for Žižek Schelling was one of the first to recognize that the Real of drives is *not*, like Freud believed, the unconscious proper—this cauldron of seething excitement can only appear as the seat of the psyche once the act that institutes the Symbolic in human being has taken place. Any presentation of it as an ultimate reality is simply an illusion, a lure designed to save us from the manner in which the Symbolic, due to some rationally non-deducible act, inexplicably installs itself in our ontogenesis. (LN, 275) Insofar as subjectivity itself is part and parcel of the symbolic order, we are thus left with a paradoxical situation, a situation that is the repressed truth of Idealism *tout court*: “the subject is not at its own origin, is secondary, dependent upon its substantial presuppositions; but these presuppositions do not have a substantial consistency of their own and are always retroactively posited.”18 It is therefore no exaggeration to say “the subject is an effect that entirely posits its cause.”19

**From the Metaphysical Limits of Origin Narratives to Theoretical Fantasy-Constructions**

For Žižek, reading Schelling psychoanalytically is exceptionally fruitful because it demonstrates how any investigation into the origins of consciousness and language, inasmuch as these are necessarily tied up with those of the Symbolic, has insurmountable upper limits. But rather than these limits being a subjective fault of a given thinker, they are metaphysically written into the very object of inquiry. From a Lacanian perspective, what Schelling powerfully testifies to is the fact that, despite what Lacan appears to state, we can have knowledge of the Real as it was “before” the Symbolic. Just as the meaningless formulae of quantum physics directly capture the Real of nature20, Schelling’s *Weltalter* project describes the vortex of the Real of drives that precedes and lies at the paradoxical basis of consciousness and language since it, thanks to myth, operates at a level outside of the metonymic/metaphoric sliding of the signified in the imaginary-symbolic universe of meaning. What it cannot explain, however, is how the “symbolic invocation” creates in each of us “a

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new order of being,” for this is constitutively inexplicable. As Žižek succinctly puts it, “what escapes our grasp is not the way things were before the arrival of the New, but the very birth of the New, the New as it was ‘in itself,’ from the perspective of the Old, before it managed to ‘posit its presuppositions.’” (LN, 274)

Yet because the Symbolic presents us with an object of inquiry that largely coincides with us, these metaphysical reflections can never be detached from their existential implications. To the extent that our entry into the Symbolic from the Real occurs without rhyme or reason, its contingency is more than a point of theoretical curiosity. It simultaneously points to all the ways in which this transition is never guaranteed to be smooth. For me, and for you, for our loved ones and for our friends, it very well could not have happened: the many possible ways in which this transition can go wrong (neurosis, perversion, psychosis) could have been our fate, if, indeed, it is not already. The necessary upper limit of any metapsychological ontogenesis of the Symbolic thus demonstrates why us parlêtres are so tantalized by questions concerning the ground of consciousness and language: whenever such a ground is reached, either in a material, idealist, or theological vein, we protect ourselves from the piercing recognition of the groundlessness of the symbolic order in which we are thrown and must make a life for ourselves. Furthermore, that the necessity of the social logos is sustained by a contingent act itself proclaims that there is no explanation for why the Symbolic is the way it is as a regulatory force of drives and not otherwise. This in turn declares its always possible inconsistency, the only answer for which is a phantasmatic support that renders this trauma bearable, an inconsistency that, for psychoanalysis, is already hinted at in the interstices of everyday quotidian reality.

If the Weltalter project is a premonition of the radical non-ground of the Symbolic, we can thus understand why Schelling does not simply accept its penetrating insight and develop it in full. When taken alongside other works from this period and afterwards, its various drafts suggest that Schelling revolves around the unpredictable and hence ungroundable transition from the Past to the Present like a traumatic kernel that cannot be properly assimilated. (IR, 37) In the Stuttgart Seminars, for instance, Schelling entirely removes the mad rotation of drives: the moment of decision now coincides with the contraction of being so that there is no sense in which God has to endure the uncertainty of their antagonism. Similarly, in the third

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version of the *Weltalter* God is no longer Himself implicated in the process of creation as a means through which He attains self-identity—He has His existence in advance and arbitrarily creates the World. This approach is then further developed in the *Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation*, according to which it is impossible to account for the brute existence of God and the universe, thus “regressing” to a form of pre-modern essentialism. It is as if we see a progressive deepening of a fantasy-construction attempting to cover up the contingency of rationality and order. This is why Schelling’s inability to complete the passage from the Past to the Present is so rich in conceptual meaning for Žižek and for us. “The repeated failure of his *Weltalter* drafts signals precisely Schelling’s honesty as a thinker—the fact that he was radical enough to acknowledge the impossibility of grounding the act or decision” (LN, 274), a recognition from which we can only save ourselves through equally radical defensive mechanisms. Just like Schelling, that great thinker who historically came closest to the repressed origins of human subjectivity, proves unable to keep up with this possibility, perhaps we too are all too quick to fall prey to the fantasy of a ground of consciousness and language.

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