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"A True Proteus"
Non-Being in Schelling's *Ages of the World*

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Abstract

In this essay, I give an analysis of the account of non-being in the *Weltalter*, focusing on the ways in which this account reflects Schelling's new ontology of revelation. I begin by discussing the connection between non-being and the fundamental distinction between the principles in God. I then turn to the relationship of non-being to being in the *Weltalter* and show how a new meaning of being allows Schelling to distinguish non-being from nothing. The new meaning of being also makes possible a distinction between essential non-being and *de facto* non-being; this distinction allows for the temporal sequence of revelation and the possibility of evil. I conclude by showing the implications of Schelling's theory of non-being for his understanding of creation.

Modern philosophers tend to think of being as 'all or nothing.' Either a thing exists or it does not—there is no middle ground. Kant, for example, writes that being "is merely the positing of a thing or a certain determination in itself" (KrV, A 598/B 626).[1] Positing is like an on-off switch: there are no degrees of being posited, and thus no degrees of being. Schelling is an exception to this 'bivalent' tendency in modern ontology. In all three of the *Weltalter* drafts (1811-1815), he develops an account of non-being (*das Nichtseyende*) that places it between being and nothingness. One could therefore say that Schelling is reviving a form of classical ontology—distinguishing degrees of reality within one "great chain of being."[2] This revival would seem to be confirmed by his references to Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch. But if the account of non-being in the *Weltalter* reflects a quasi-revival of classical ontology, it also reflects something original that goes beyond anything found in ancient philosophy: an ontology of revelation. Schelling's attempt to combine a chain of being with an ontology of revelation requires a theory of non-being of enormous complexity—one that can account for both lesser degrees of being and the process of manifestation.

Despite the originality and complexity of his account, Schelling sometimes gives the impression that he is not breaking new ground but merely correcting obvious mistakes about

[1] Cf. "*Das Dasein ist die absolute Position eines Dinges* […] Der Begriff der Position oder Setzung ist völlig einfach und mit dem vom Sein überhaupt einerlei" (AA 2, 73).

[2] It is noteworthy that Arthur Lovejoy ends his classic study of "the great chain of being" with Schelling. See Lovejoy 1936/1964, 317-326.

non-being—in particular, the mistake of confusing non-being with nothing. Among the Greeks, Parmenides had made this 'mistake' when he famously denied that non-being can be: "For never shall this prevail, that things that are not *are* [*εἶναι μὴ ἐόντα*]."[3] Schelling calls the confusion of non-being with nothing a "merely grammatical misunderstanding" (SW VIII, 221) and the result of a "false translation of the Greek" (WA II, 141). He even suggests that the traditional doctrine of "creation from nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*) arose out of this linguistic misunderstanding (SW VIII, 221; WA II, 141).[4] Moreover, confusing non-being with nothing is symptomatic of the "main affliction of all recent philosophy"—the lack of "intermediate concepts" (*mittlere Begriffe*), which stand between extremes (SW VIII, 286; WA I, 44-5). One mistakenly assumes that what is not *being* is nothing, forgetting that non-being lies between the two.

These passages might leave one with the impression that misunderstandings regarding non-being can be easily corrected and that its meaning is readily accessible—if not obvious. Schelling, however, stresses in the same texts the supreme difficulty of philosophizing about the subject. In the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) he writes: "Investigating the essence of non-being is genuinely what is difficult [*das Schwere*], the cross of all philosophy. We are forever grasping for it and incapable of holding it down" (SW VII, 436). And in the *Weltalter* he expresses the elusive character of non-being using a figure from Greek mythology: it is "a true Proteus"[5] that has misled in many ways (WA II, 140; SW VIII, 221). But why is non-being so misleading and difficult to grasp—especially if the distinction between non-being and nothing is supposed to be obvious? First, like the shape-shifting Proteus, non-being appears "in so many forms" (SW VIII, 221), and these forms have to be disentangled. "Non-being is said in many ways,"[6] writes Aristotle in a variation on his famous line about being. Second, it is the nature of non-being to withdraw and not reveal itself; it therefore remains largely inaccessible to our understanding. But underlying both these reasons is the highly original feature of Schelling's account mentioned above: the new meaning of being (*das Seyende*) that he introduces as part of an ontology of revelation. Thus, the difficulty of understanding non-being in large part reflects the difficulty in understanding the meaning of being itself.

In what follows, I will provide an analysis of the account of non-being in the *Weltalter*, concentrating on the ways in which this account reflects Schelling's new ontology of revelation.

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[3] Parmenides 1984, 62. Fragment 7, quoted in Plato's *Sophist*, 237a, 258d.
[4] Cf. SW VII, 436; Schelling 2016, 91.
[5] The designation seems to originate around the time of the second version of the *Weltalter*; it also appears in Schelling's *Tagebuch* at the end of 1813 (Tagebücher 1809-1813, 158). Like many elements in Schelling's account of non-being, the "Proteus" label recurs in later treatments of the same theme. Lanfranconi connects it to the process of development. See Lanfranconi 1992, 26-27.
[6] *τὸ μὴ ὂν λέγεται πλεοναχῶς*. *Metaphysics* XI 1067b25.

Previous treatments of non-being in Schelling mostly focus on the concept as it is developed in later works—in particular, the oft-cited distinction between μὴ ὄν and οὐκ ὄν.[7] Although Schelling does not distinguish these two Greek phrases in the *Weltalter*, the ontological framework for the distinction is first developed during this period, as I hope to show. More generally, the account of non-being in the *Weltalter* has echoes throughout Schelling's later texts, which often use some of the same language and references. Understanding the origins of this account can therefore shed light on these later developments. But above all, understanding non-being in the *Weltalter* is essential to understanding his thought within that work itself. At the end of his treatment of non-being in the 1813 draft, Schelling notes that the concepts of being and non-being are "of the highest importance for the entire sequence of science" (WA II, 143).

I will begin by discussing the connection between non-being and the fundamental distinction between the principles in God—in particular, the implications of the association of non-being with the real principle. In the second section, I will turn to the relationship of non-being to being or that-which-is (*das Seyende*) in the *Weltalter* and show how a new meaning of being allows Schelling to distinguish non-being from nothing. The new meaning of being also makes possible a distinction between essential non-being and *de facto* non-being, which I will treat in the third section; this distinction allows Schelling to account for the temporal sequence of revelation and the possibility of evil as a form of non-being. Finally, I will conclude by showing the implications of Schelling's theory of non-being for his understanding of creation, which forms the essential background of his account.

Before proceeding, I would like to make a brief remark about my use of the terms "being" and "non-being." Unfortunately, the English word "being" is a possible translation of both the German infinitive *Seyn* ("to be") and the participial noun *das Seyende* ("that which is"), just as the word "non-being" is a possible translation of both *Nichtseyn* ("to not be") and *das Nichtseyende* ("that which is not"). The problem of translation is further complicated by the fact that the distinction between *Seyn* and *das Seyende* is decisive for Schelling. For the most part, I will continue to use the word "being" for *das Seyende* and "non-being" for *das Nichtseyende*, citing the German when more precision or clarification is needed.[8]

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[7] Cf. SW X, 283-285; SW XI, 288-289. Manfred Frank applies Schelling's distinction between μὴ ὄν and οὐκ ὄν to Sartre, showing that consciousness for Sartre is "nothing" (*néant*) in the sense of μὴ ὄν. Frank 1992, 77-81. See also Frank 2018, 239-243. Hogrebe also treats the later account of non-being rather than the one in the *Weltalter*. Hogrebe 1989, 72. Leinkauf focuses on the account of non-being in the *Erlanger Vorlesungen*. Leinkauf 1998, 17-31. For other treatments of non-being in Schelling, see Deleuze 1994, 190-191; Wirth 2003, 184-185.

[8] For the sake of consistency, I will also use the older spellings of the German (e.g., *das Nichtseyende* rather than *das Nichtseiende*), since these are found in both the *Sämmtliche Werke* and the Schröter edition of the *Weltalter*.

1. Non-Being and Schelling's Fundamental Distinction

In order to understand Schelling's account of non-being, we first have to consider its connection to the fundamental distinction between the two principles in God. Indeed, this distinction, formulated in different ways, provides the ontological framework for almost every topic in Schelling's philosophy during this period. The connection of non-being to the distinction is already clear in the *Freiheitsschrift* and the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, the two major texts immediately preceding the *Weltalter* that contain the seeds of its account of non-being. In fact, the ultimate origin of the account is a footnote in the *Freiheitsschrift* (1809).[9] After citing Augustine on the doctrine of "creation from nothing," Schelling notes the problematic character of this *nothing*: it has long been "the cross of the understanding" (SW VII, 373n). He then adds that both creation from nothing and the non-being (*μὴ ὄν*) of the ancients are given positive meaning through the fundamental distinction between that-which-exists and the ground of existence.

But how does this distinction give non-being and *creatio ex nihilo* positive meaning? Schelling does not answer this question directly; however, his description of creation in the section preceding the footnote gives us a clue. Instead of referring to creation "from nothing" or "from non-being," Schelling describes the origins of creation "from the ground" (*aus dem Grunde*).[10] Thus the ground takes the place of "nothing" in the traditional doctrine of creation. In the footnote itself Schelling cites the language of scripture, according to which man is created "from that which is not" (*aus dem, das da nicht ist*). If we combine this with Schelling's own statement that man is created from the ground, we are left to conclude that the ground is "that which is not." Accordingly, the ground of existence, the second term of Schelling's fundamental distinction, is *das Nichtseyende* ("that which is not" or "non-being").

The connection of non-being to the fundamental distinction is even more explicit in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810). In these lectures Schelling again distinguishes two principles within God, and designates them in a number of ways. The ideal principle corresponds to that-which-exists in the *Freedom Essay*; the real principle corresponds to the ground of existence (cf. SW VII, 435). The ideal principle is that-which-is (*das Seyende*); the real principle

[9] In his edition of the *Freiheitsschrift*, Buchheim cites earlier passages on non-being in the 1806 *Aphorismen* (Buchheim 2011, 140 n.199). See SW VII, 165, 189-194, 197, 209. However, I would argue that this earlier account of non-being is very different from that which Schelling is beginning to develop in the *Freiheitsschrift*. In the *Aphorismen* the Platonic *μὴ ὄν* is identified with relation and what stands in relation; from the standpoint of the absolute, relation is nothing (SW VII, 194).

[10] Cf. "Because man originates from the ground [*aus dem Grunde*] (is creaturely), he has a principle within him that is independent relative to God" (SW VII, 363).

is Being (*Seyn*). Finally, Schelling defines the relationship between the two principles in terms of being and non-being: while the ideal principle is being or that-which-is (*das Seyende*), the real principle is non-being or that-which-is-not (*das Nichtseyende*). Non-being is one of Schelling's designations for the real principle in God.

Finally, when we turn to the *Weltalter*, we see that the context of the discussions of non-being confirms its connection to the real principle. This is especially true in the first two drafts, where the context is the characterization of the two principles or wills in God and their relationship to one another. For example, in the 1811 draft Schelling distinguishes (1) the will that wills nothing (the affirming force); and (2) the will that wills something (the negating force). The second will relates to the first as the "ground of its existence" and "a relative non-being" (*ein beziehungsweise Nichtseyendes*) (WA I, 20). Here too the ground of existence or real principle is identified with non-being.

Thus we have a first key to understanding non-being in the *Weltalter*: it is one of the designations for the real principle. Indeed, this arises from what Hermanni calls Schelling's "terminological plurality."[11] Schelling never settles on a consistent terminology for the two principles in God, despite the structural importance of the distinction between principles for his philosophy throughout this period. The real principle is the ground of existence, the irrational principle, the negating or contracting force, Being (*Seyn*), non-being (*das Nichtseyende*).

In any case, recognizing that non-being is a designation for the real principle is both illuminating and potentially misleading. First, it is illuminating because it allows us to see the universality of non-being. Although Schelling initially frames his fundamental distinction in terms of the two principles in God, he notes in the *Freiheitsschrift* that "both principles are in all things" (SW VII, 363).[12] Indeed, the two principles form a fundamental ontological structure that is present at every level of reality. For this reason, Schelling's reflections on non-being are not restricted to a part of his system; they apply wherever the ideal principle (that-which-is) is distinguished from the real principle (that-which-is-not)—that is, practically everywhere. Schelling perhaps has this universality of non-being in mind when he calls the investigation of non-being not just the "cross of philosophy" but the "cross of all philosophy" (SW VII, 436).

Second, recognizing that non-being is a designation for the real principle (B) allows us to see the connection of the account of non-being with the *Potenzenlehre* that Schelling had

[11] Hermanni 1994, 85.
[12] Cf. "That which in each thing is genuinely Being [*das eigentliche Seyn*] […] is by its nature non-being [*das nicht Seyende*]" (SW VIII, 222). In the 1813 draft Schelling notes that it is necessary to think the two principles "in everything that is" (WA II, 122).

developed years earlier in his *Identitätsphilosophie*. In particular, we can identify two aspects of the *Potenzenlehre* that shed light on Schelling's account of non-being:

(a) *No potency is ideal or real absolutely or in itself, but only ideal or real in relation to another potency* (cf. SW IV, 137-138). The potencies within nature form a scale or ladder from those that are more real to those that are more ideal: a particular potency *x* is real or objective in relation to those potencies above it, but ideal or subjective in relation to those below it. Schelling says the very same thing in the *Weltalter*, using the language of being and non-being: "All being [*Alles Seyende*] of a lesser degree relates to a higher being as a non-being, and the same A that is a being in relation to another can appear as a non-being in relation to the A of a higher order" (SW VIII, 222).[13] As a result, non-being is always *relative*—that is, in relation to something higher on the chain of being. It follows that in itself, or outside of all relation, there is no non-being. Moreover, this scheme presupposes a meaning of being that admits of degrees: non-being is a being "of a lesser degree." I will return to this point in the next section.

(b) *No potency is only ideal (A) or only real (B), but contains both ideal and real (A=B) in different balances* (cf. SW IV, 136-137). This means that pure non-being (the real) cannot exist by itself; there must be a being (*ein Seyendes*) within it (cf. SW VIII, 222). Sheer non-being (B) would be dead, but relative non-being (A=B) is living—although not as living as what is above it. In the 1811 draft of the *Weltalter*, Schelling cites two works of art to illustrate this point. Raphael's painting *The Vision of Ezekiel* depicts God in majesty supported by winged animals. Similarly, Phidias' legendary statue of Zeus at Olympia featured a footstool with images of the battles against the Amazons. In both cases, a divine being (*das Seyende*) is supported by something of a lesser order (*das Nichtseyende*) that teems with life nonetheless (WA I, 21; cf. SW VII, 437-8; SW IX, 75).

I have mentioned ways in which understanding non-being as the real principle (B) can be illuminating, but there are also two ways in which it can be misleading. First, there is the danger that one simply regards non-being as another name for the real principle, thus failing to ask what is true of non-being *qua* non-being. This is certainly a temptation: as we have seen in considering the connection to the potencies, much of what Schelling says about non-being can be understood if one substitutes some other designation for the real principle in place of "non-being." Along similar lines, one should be careful not to attribute to non-being some characteristic of the real principle that has nothing to do with non-being as such. To use an analogy: the queen of England is Elizabeth II, but there are many things that are true of Elizabeth that have nothing to do with

[13] One can note that Schelling uses the symbolism of the potencies (A and B) in this passage.

her role as queen. Similarly, there may be things true of the real principle—for example, its status as ground of existence—that are not true of the real principle *qua* non-being.

Second, understanding non-being as the real principle can be misleading because the real principle is not always non-being. To be sure, the real principle *should* be non-being, since this accords with its nature, but this does not mean that the real principle is non-being *in fact*. The distinction between essential and *de facto* non-being is the subject of the third section.

2. Non-Being and the Meaning of Being

One of the peculiar features of Schelling's account of non-being is that he identifies non-being (*das Nichtseyende*) and Being (*Seyn*). Both are designations for the real principle, as we have seen. As strange as it sounds to say that Being is that-which-is-not, Schelling regards this as a logical consequence of what we might call his *ontological distinction*—the distinction between that-which-is (*das Seyende*) and Being *(Seyn*). In the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* Schelling first introduces this distinction as a way of naming the two principles in God. He then adds that the two relate as that-which-is (*das Seyende*) and that-which-is-not (*das Nichtseyende*) as a consequence of the ontological distinction (SW VII, 436).

But why should distinguishing *das Seyende* and *Seyn* lead to an identification of *Seyn* with *das Nichtseyende*? Schelling makes the connection clearer in the *Weltalter*: "According to its concept, Being [*das Seyn*] cannot be the same as that-which-is [*dem Seyenden*], and is by its nature (because of its opposition) that-which-is-not [*das Nichtseyende*]" (WA II, 141; cf. SW VIII, 222). *Seyn* is *das Nichtseyende* because it is distinguished from *das Seyende* and thus is not *das Seyende*.[14] Non-being is not an expression of non-existence but an expression of *otherness*—it is other than that-which-is.[15]

There is an interesting parallel here with Plato's *Sophist*, a text that gives great weight to the category of otherness or difference in its account of non-being. Schelling briefly refers to the dialogue in the *Weltalter*, praising Plato's insight that non-being must somehow be, but without engaging the details of Plato's text (SW VIII, 222).[16] However, Schelling also cites a distinction

[14] I suspect that Schelling had this line of reasoning in mind already in the *Freiheitsschrift* when he implicitly connects non-being with the ground of existence. The ground is not *das Existirende* and thus *das Nichtexistirende*.
[15] Schelling makes an interesting orthographical change in the SW version of the *Weltalter*. Instead of writing *das Nichtseyende* (as he does in WA I and II) he writes *das nicht Seyende*. See SW VIII, 221-3. The change may be motivated by a desire to express otherness from *das Seyende*, which the change (subtly) suggests by placing more emphasis on the word "Seyende." The same change is found in the fragments. See Schelling 2002, 179-182.
[16] As Leinkauf notes, the *Sophist* increases in importance for Schelling, beginning with the *Weltalter*. See Leinkauf 1998, 17-18.

from the middle-Platonist philosopher Plutarch (SW VIII, 221),[17] and this distinction is closely related to the material developed in the *Sophist*. In his *Reply to Colotes*, Plutarch is answering the objection that Plato dismisses the existence of finite things. He responds by distinguishing two Greek phrases: *μὴ εἶναι* (utter non-Being or *nothing*) and *μὴ Ὄν εἶναι* (not being that-which-*is*). While *μὴ εἶναι* is a complete denial of being, *μὴ Ὄν εἶναι* expresses *otherness* or not-being-*x*. To use Plutarch's example, the statement "moonlight is not sunshine" expresses a kind of non-being, but it is not a denial of the existence of moonlight. Instead the statement affirms its otherness, its not-being-sunshine.[18] Similarly, Schelling interprets the phrase *das Nichtseyende* to mean not-being-*das-Seyende*.

However, both Plutarch and Schelling interpret non-being as expressing something more than otherness in general. If it were simply a general expression of otherness, the object of otherness would be left undetermined. *x* could be sunshine (not-being-sunshine) or Socrates (not-being-Socrates). But for Plutarch and Schelling the object of otherness is always the same: *τὸ ὄν*, *das Seyende*. Non-being is "that which is not *das Seyende*" or "that which is not that which is." Despite its clumsiness, this phrase reveals something important about Schelling's account. The word "is" appears twice, but the second "is" must have a special meaning, if the phrase is not simply a convoluted expression of non-existence.[19] Indeed, the point of the distinction in Plutarch is precisely to distinguish non-being from non-existence or nothingness. Something that exists can only *not be* that-which-is if "that-which-is" (*das Seyende*) has a special meaning that goes beyond existing at all.

And this is indeed the case for Schelling.[20] As I noted at the beginning of the essay, he presupposes a new understanding of being in the *Weltalter* as part of his ontology of revelation. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of non-being in the *Weltalter*, we have to understand this new meaning of being. Naturally, this is a vast and complex topic, so it is impossible to give a full account here. I will instead provide a brief sketch of some of the core features of *das Seyende*, drawing out the implications for understanding non-being. However, we should note that the methodological challenges mentioned at the end of the last section apply here as well. As we have seen, *das Seyende* is one of Schelling's designations for the ideal principle; one therefore has to be careful not to define *das Seyende* in terms of characteristics of the ideal principle that have nothing to do with *being* as such. With that in mind, we can identify three

[17] See also Schelling 2002, 180.
[18] Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes*, 1115d-1116c. Cf. Plato's *Sophist*, 258a-e
[19] Cf. the phrase "nicht das Seyende seyend" (WA II, 139).
[20] It is also the case for Plutarch, for whom the *ὄν* in *μὴ ὄν* refers to *ὄντως ὄν*–that which really is, the unchanging being in which transitory being participates. See *Reply to Colotes*, 1115d-e (Plutarch 1967, 238-239). This goes beyond the discussion in Plato's *Sophist*, in which non-being is a more general expression of otherness (cf. 258c-e).

closely related features of *das Seyende*. To *be* means (1) to be active, (2) to be revealed, and (3) to be a subject.

(1) *To be means to be active*. Being active or operative (*wirkend*) is the trait most easily associated with being (*seyend*) in the *Weltalter*, because Schelling often uses the words in apposition. For example, he writes that the affirming principle is posited "as not active, i.e., not being" (SW VIII, 221). Here there is an obvious etymological connection to "actuality" (*Wirklichkeit*). But in what way is that-which-is active? Primarily by working upon non-being, which therefore provides the material for its actualization.[21] If to *be* is to be active, non-being would be inactive or inoperative. However, there seems to be a problem with characterizing non-being in this way, since Schelling also attributes activity to non-being: "For it is not non-being on account of a complete lack of light and essence [*Wesen*] but rather on account of active enclosure [*thätiger Verschließung*] of the essence, thus through operative [*wirkende*] force" (SW VIII, 223). There are two ways of reconciling this activity of non-being with the active character of being. First, as we will see below, being and non-being are relational terms. Non-being is inactive in relation to a (higher) being, even if it is active—and thus a being—in other respects.[22] Second, the character of the activity is different for being and non-being. As the cited passage indicates, non-being involves active concealment.[23] Being, by contrast, involves active revealing. This brings us to the second essential characteristic of being:

(2) *To be means to be revealed*. Schelling also uses the word "revealed" (*offenbar*) in apposition to being: in the original negation, God is "not the one who is (not revealed)" (SW VIII, 223). This feature of being is essentially connected to the first one. Through its activity, what *is* reveals itself *as* what it is. Indeed, Schelling even identifies activity and revelation: "To reveal oneself is acting [*Wirken*], just as all acting is self-revealing" (SW VIII, 306). This is in continuity with the *Freiheitsschrift*, where revelation requires acting against some opposing force (SW VII, 373-374; cf. 424). If to *be* is to be revealed, non-being would be unrevealed, non-manifest, hidden.

(3) *To be means to be a subject*. Schelling notes that for most people being a *Seyendes* "or subject" is the highest (SW VIII, 234). And in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* Schelling explains why non-being is not nothing by saying that it is "only what is non-subjective," thus implying subjectivity is the defining characteristic of being (SW VII, 436; cf. SW II, 142). But

[21] Cf. "*Spirit* in us *proves* itself *as* that-which-is, i.e., is actually [*actu*] that-which-is, by acting on our non-being—on that which is relatively lower and baser in us." F.W.J. Schelling an Georgii, 18. Juli 1810, Plitt II, 220.
[22] Schelling says as much in the same passage: non-being is an active force, which is "as such also a being."
[23] For a discussion of the active withdrawal (*Entzug*) of non-being in Schelling's *Weltalter* with a view to parallels in Heidegger's thought, see Höfele 2016, 278-284.

what does Schelling mean by subject in this context?[24] In light of the above characteristics, we can certainly say that *das Seyende* is a subject of action. But we should not forget that it is also a grammatical and logical subject. In the simple sentence "*x* is," the subject (*x*) is *das Seyende*. Being (*Seyn*) is predicated of it (cf. SW VII, 436).[25] In the 1813 *Weltalter* Schelling cites an "old rule": that which does not actively exist (*thätig existirt*) cannot have predicates attributed to it (WA II, 137). If to *be* is to be a subject, non-being would be what is not a subject or what is not subjective.

Even though I have distinguished three features of *das Seyende*, these features essentially belong together: that-which-is reveals itself by acting as a subject. Indeed, we can sum up all three senses by saying that being is the act of "self-revelation" (*Selbstoffenbarung*). But why would Schelling understand being in this way? Certainly we can say that he is defining what it means to *be* in a preeminent or "emphatic" sense, but that does not explain why precisely these attributes would define a preeminent sense of being. The key to answering the question is to recognize that the language of being in the *Weltalter* (largely) replaces the language of existence in the *Freiheitsschrift* and serves the same function. Schelling commentators have long noted the significance of the etymology of "existence": the Latin verb *exsistere*, from which the word derives, literally means "to stand out," "to emerge," and thus "to come to appearance." Indeed, the meaning of existence in the *Freiheitsschrift* is fundamentally revelation. As that-which-exists, God comes to be revealed and fully actualized through creation, working to divide forces within the ground and to raise up what was hidden. Although the language of existence is less prevalent in the *Weltalter*, Schelling does occasionally use the term as a synonym for being.[26] In one passage, he refers to God's existence and adds for clarification: "that is, according to our use of language, external revelation" (SW VIII, 316).

In light of this account of the meaning of being, what can we say about non-being? If the core meaning of being is self-revealing, then non-being is what does not reveal itself: Schelling's account of non-being is an account of non-revelation. This, of course, allows us to see clearly why non-being is not nothing. It still exists, but in a state of hiddenness. However, things are a bit more complicated than that formulation would suggest. Up to this point, we have been

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[24] I want to thank Marcela García for posing this question when I presented an earlier version of this essay in Mexico City in 2017.

[25] For this reason, I find Hogrebe's account of predication in the *Weltalter* problematic. Hogrebe places the ideal principle (*das Seyende*) in the predicate position (as "predicative being") and places the real principle (*das Seyn*) in the subject position (as "pronominal being"). See Hogrebe 1989, 83-85. It is true that the real principle is a subject or *subjectum* in the sense of a *ὑποκείμενον* that underlies and provides the ground for the existence of the ideal principle (cf. VIII, 240). However, this does not mean it is the subject of predication.

[26] Cf. "Wenn Gott als das ewige Nein wirkend, seyend ist (existirt), so kann er nicht als das ewige Ja auch wirkend seyn" (SW VIII, 301).

considering the meaning of *what is negated* in the expression "non-being"—*das Seyende*. But we also have to consider *the kind of negation* that is involved. According to Schelling, the negation in "non-being" is relative and not absolute: it is a "relative non-being" (*beziehungsweise Nichtseyendes*) (WA I, 20).

There are two ways of understanding this. The first would be to interpret relative non-being as simply a lesser degree of being. All of the features of *das Seyende* identified above admit of degrees: a thing can be more or less active, more or less revealed, more or less subjective. This would fit nicely with the *Potenzenlehre* and the traditional conception of a "great chain of being," which increases in being as one moves up the scale. But there is a more specific sense in which non-being is relative: it is non-being in *relation* to a particular being (*Seyendes*). Schelling notes that something is capable of giving up being that-which-is only "in relation to something higher" (*gegen ein Höheres*) (SW VIII, 233). Similarly, something is *das Seyende* in relation to something lower (non-being), which serves as its Being (*Seyn*). As a result, being and non-being are correlative—each implies a relation to the other. And in the context of this relation, being is understood bivalently: it does not admit of degrees but is more like an on-off switch that gets turned on or off depending on whether a thing is related to something higher (off) or lower (on). This means that non-being is not active and not revealed in its relation to a particular being (*Seyendes*); however, outside of this relation—considered in itself—it is still active and revealed, even if at a lower level than what is above it (cf. SW VIII, 222). In this way, Schelling combines a bivalent understanding of being (in the context of a being/non-being relation) with degrees of being (on the larger "chain of being" or scale of potencies). The bivalent understanding of being and non-being will play a greater role in the next section.

3. Essential vs. *de facto* Non-Being

Up to this point non-being has been static and without movement. However, one of the innovative features of Schelling's account of non-being in the *Weltalter* is its connection to the *process* of revelation. Of course, philosophers since antiquity have tied non-being to becoming: any change presupposes a movement from being to non-being or vice versa. What is unique about Schelling's account is that he understands this movement in terms of the ontology of revelation. God is revealed as the potencies within him are gradually raised from non-being into being. Of course, revelation requires a prior state of hiddenness: "All development presupposes

envelopment" (SW VIII, 311; WA II, 181). This means that what will be *das Seyende* is not *das Seyende* at the beginning. At the beginning, it is in a state of non-being.

Here we can see the inadequacy of simply identifying *das Seyende* with the ideal principle and *das Nichtseyende* with the real. What is ideal is not always *das Seyende*: it only becomes *das Seyende* as a result of the process. To address this difficulty, Schelling introduces a key distinction:

> [I]t does not always follow that that which by its concept [is that-which-is, M.T.] comports itself as that-which-is [*das Seyende*] in fact; for in the case of inverted order, or where there is not yet any order, reflection, and structure, [that which is, M.T.] in itself or essentially that-which-is can become non-being in relation to what really by its essence is non-being. (SW VIII, 222)

In this passage Schelling distinguishes between (1) that-which-is essentially (*das wesentlich Seyende*) and (2) that-which-is in fact (*das der That nach Seyende*). Corresponding to this distinction is a distinction between (1) that which by its essence is not (*das seinem Wesen nach Nichtseyende*) and (2) that which *de facto* is not (*das der That nach Nichtseyende*).

These distinctions allow us to relate more precisely the accounts of being and non-being in the first two sections of this essay. As we saw in the first section, Schelling identifies *das Seyende* with the ideal principle and *das Nichtseyende* with the real principle. We can now be more exact: the ideal principle is that which *by its nature* is *das Seyende* (essential being), while the real principle is that which *by its nature* is *das Nichtseyende* (essential non-being). As we saw in the second section, to be *das Seyende* is to be active and revealed. Although the ideal principle (as an expansive force) is naturally more suited to be active and revealed, under certain circumstances it is inactive and hidden—and thus *de facto* non-being. Similarly, although the real principle (as a contractive force) is naturally more suited to be inactive and hidden, under certain circumstances it is active and revealed—and thus *de facto* being.

When does this happen? Schelling cites two cases: when there is inverted order, and when there is not yet order. The first case refers to evil; the second refers to the state of affairs before the ordering of creation. In the case of evil, essential being is *de facto* non-being because the true order of principles is inverted; in the second case, essential being is *de facto* non-being because the ideal has not yet been raised to actuality. I would like to consider further aspects of each of these cases, beginning with the second.

I. Non-Being and the Temporal Unfolding of Revelation

By distinguishing essential and *de facto* being/non-being, Schelling is able to account for the process of coming-to-be through revelation. Only at the end of this process is all that should be *das Seyende* actually *das Seyende*. At the beginning, on the other hand, what *actually* is *das Seyende* is what is most inclined not to be by its nature: "The beginning is only beginning to the extent that it is not that which really should be—what is truly and in itself *das Seyende*" (SW VIII, 220; cf. 221).[27] Thus there is a gradual revealing of what was previously hidden—beginning with what is most essentially non-being and ending with what is most essentially being.

Naturally, this process unfolds over time. Indeed, one of the other innovative features of Schelling's ontology of revelation is the way in which it temporalizes being and non-being. Time is what allows everything to be that can be —even things that are contradictory or mutually exclusive. According to the principle of non-contradiction, A and not-A cannot both be true *at the same time*, but this does not prevent them both from being true at different times. Schelling applies this to the unfolding of what is in God. Only one principle can be *das Seyende* at a particular time, since the being of one principle excludes the being of others. But the other principles can be *das Seyende* at other times (cf. SW VIII, 302, 309). Each waits its turn to be.

This has consequences for the account of non-being. What is posited as not-being is only posited as not-being for the present time. But anything that is posited as not-being either has been in the past or will be in the future. Non-being is always either *no-longer-being* or *not-yet-being*. Thus Schelling notes that the negating force excludes the will of love and the will of spirit from the present, but then adds: "It posits them as not *being* [*nicht seyend*], thus in no way as totally non-existent [*nichtseyend*], but as future [*zukünftig*] and, as such, [they are posited] as also being (only in what is hidden)" (SW VIII, 315). In the same way, when a potency ceases to be *das Seyende* and is posited as not-being, it is nonetheless posited as being as well—but in the past (cf. WA I, 87).

This allows Schelling to infer something rather peculiar: nothing ever ceases to be. One might think that when the real principle (B) is no longer *das Seyende*, it stops being *das Seyende* completely. But Schelling insists that this is not the case: "[I]t always and necessarily remains that-which-is *of its time*" (SW VIII, 302). It keeps on being—but at a different time. This presupposes a certain understanding of the relationship between time and eternity. From an

[27] The word "should" here (*sollen*) is not used in a moral sense. Instead, it is to be understood teleologically: what should be is the end or the goal of the process. It can also be understood in terms of essence: what should be is what accords with the essence of things (the ideal should be *das Seyende* because it is by its essence *das Seyende*). Of course, that-which-should-not-be (*das Nichtseynsollende*) can also include evil, which is the subject of the next subsection.

eternal perspective, the different times are simultaneous (*zumal*), even though they are still distinguished in terms of their order as past, present, and future. And from this eternal perspective, everything is *das Seyende* of a particular time. Although Schelling does not say so, one might draw a similar inference about non-being. Even though something remains forever *das Seyende* of a particular time, it also remains forever *das Nichtseyende* of other times.

I would like to make two observations about this account of the temporal unfolding of being. First, it seems to presuppose a bivalent understanding of being and non-being: either *x* is *das Seyende* of a particular time or it is not. This is confirmed by the language of positing (*setzen*), which does not admit of degrees.[28] As I mentioned at the beginning of the essay, Kant also defines being in terms of a bivalent positing.[29] Following the remarks at the end of the last section, we might say that Schelling is combining the modern bivalent understanding of being with the more classical "chain of being" of the *Potenzenlehre*. However, Schelling's account is decisively different from other bivalent accounts in one respect: the two 'values' of the 'on-off switch' are not (1) *being at all* or (2) not *being at all*; instead, they are (1) *being revealed* or (2) not *being revealed*. Thus we can say that Schelling develops a two-tiered ontology of revelation. On the first tier are things that exist but in a state of hiddenness or concealment (non-being). On the second tier are things that are manifest or revealed (being).

This allows us to see how the ontology that Schelling develops in the *Weltalter* provides the framework for his later distinction between *μὴ ὄν* and *οὐκ ὄν*, which has been the focus of much of the treatment of non-being in Schelling. As he notes in the *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* (1836),[30] the Greek particle *οὐκ* negates both the actuality and the possibility of what it negates. Thus *οὐκ ὄν* is utter non-being or nothing.[31] The particle *μή*, on the other hand, negates only the actuality and allows for the possibility of what it negates. Thus *μὴ ὄν* is not actually a being but has the potential to be and is therefore not nothing. But what does it mean for something to have the potential to be? We can understand this in terms of the two-

[28] Cf. "Einleuchtend ist nun, daß das, was zum Anfang gesetzt wird, eben dasselbe ist, das in der Folge untergeordnet wird." (SW VIII, 220) "Sie setzt diese als nicht *seyend*" (SW VIII, 315).
[29] KrV, A 598/B 626
[30] Cf. SW X, 283-285. Schelling acknowledges that philologists are not all in agreement about the difference between the two particles (SW X, 283). May notes that in imperial Greek *μὴ* became more prevalent and was preferred for participles. He also lists philosophical passages where *μὴ ὄν* refers to absolute non-being (May 1978, 17-18).
[31] As noted above, Schelling does not make this distinction in the *Weltalter*. In fact, in both the 1813 draft and the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* he uses *οὐκ ὄν* in contexts where he would otherwise use *μὴ ὄν* as a designation for relative non-being (as opposed to absolute non-being or nothing). See WA II, 141; SW VII, 436.

tiered ontology outlined above: what is on the first tier exists in a hidden state and thus has the potential to rise to the second tier as it fully comes to be.[32]

II. Non-Being and Evil

The other case where essential being can become *de facto* non-being is when there is "inverted order" (*verkehrte Ordnung*) (SW VIII, 222). Here Schelling is drawing on the account of evil first developed in the *Freiheitsschrift*, according to which moral evil consists in the inversion of the proper relation of the two principles in the human being. The particular will (real principle) should serve as ground or foundation for the universal will (ideal principle). However, in evil the principles are separated and the real principle raises itself above the ideal principle (SW VII, 365-6). We can express this in terms of the ontology of the *Weltalter*: what should be subordinate or non-being (the real principle) assumes the superior, active position and becomes *de facto* being; conversely, what should be being (the ideal principle) becomes *de facto* non-being.

The connection between evil and non-being returns in a later section of the third draft of the *Weltalter* devoted to the "heightened concept" (*gesteigerter Begriff*) of non-being. Moreover, there is an unresolved tension in this account, which corresponds to a tension in the account of evil in the *Freiheitsschrift*. How does the heightened form of non-being arise? After non-being is subordinated to being, there remains the possibility "that this current non-being can emerge from this potential state and strive to raise itself again to being" (SW VIII, 267). Schelling therefore defines heightened non-being as "what is not, and should not be, but strives to be." In addition to evil, he gives sickness and error as examples of this phenomenon which "we are often enough compelled to recognize in nature and life."

The tension in the account comes from Schelling's use of the word "strive" (*trachten*). He defines evil, sickness, and error as forms of non-being *striving* to be, but he does not say that they accomplish what they are striving for and actually come to be. And yet, in the ensuing discussion, he does give examples of things coming to appearance (and thus being) that should remain hidden (as non-being). When evil enters the human heart, "dreadful thoughts come forth that should remain buried eternally in night and darkness" (SW VIII, 268). Interestingly, a similar tension appears in the *Freiheitsschrift*. On the one hand, Schelling calls evil what might more precisely be called "potential evil"—the activated selfhood (real principle) that strives

[32] In at least one passage in the *Weltalter* Schelling formulates non-being in terms of possibility. What is posited as not-being still *is*, but "only in a state of possibility" (SW VIII, 315).

against the good (cf. SW VII, 378). On the other hand, actual evil only occurs when this activated selfhood is successful in subjugating the universal will.[33] In any case, Schelling in the *Weltalter* conceives of this heightened form of non-being in terms of revelation—the potential revelation of what should remain hidden. Once again, the ontology of revelation is essential to understanding non-being.

4. Conclusion: Creation from Non-Being

I would like to conclude by considering the implications of the account of non-being for Schelling's understanding of creation. In fact, the connection to creation is already evident in the above-mentioned footnote in the *Freiheitsschrift*, which contains the seeds of the account of non-being in the *Weltalter*. Schelling claims in the footnote that *creatio ex nihilo* and the *μὴ ὄν* of the ancients first receive positive meaning through his distinction between ground and that-which-exists (SW VII, 373n). This is because the ground takes the place of the "nothing" in the traditional doctrine—instead of a creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), Schelling affirms a creation "from the ground." In the second and third draft of the *Weltalter* Schelling also mentions *creatio ex nihilo* in the context of non-being, but he is much more dismissive: he suggests that the doctrine arose from a "false translation" (WA II, 141) or a "merely grammatical misunderstanding" (SW VIII, 221; cf. SW VII, 436). The church fathers evidently confused non-being (*μὴ ὄν*) with nothing when developing the doctrine. Schelling, of course, avoids this 'confusion': creation is not from *nothing*, but "from non-being" (*aus dem Nichtseyenden*) (cf. SW VIII, 323).[34] Unfortunately, this quick dismissal of *creatio ex nihilo* on philological grounds skips over the profound philosophical issues at stake in the traditional doctrine and in Schelling's departure from it. By substituting his concept of non-being for "nothing," Schelling gives creation a radically different meaning.

What, then, does "creation from non-being" mean? And how is this different from *creatio ex nihilo*? Naturally, the process of creation in all its details is enormously complicated, and Schelling leaves much of its description incomplete in the *Weltalter*.[35] Nevertheless, it is possible to characterize the process schematically, especially since its basic conception remains largely the same from the *Freiheitsschrift* through the *Weltalter*. At the most general level, "creation from non-being" is the process of revealing what was already there before but was hidden. As we

[33] On these different senses of evil in the *Freiheitsschrift*, see Hermanni 1994, 226-9, 244.
[34] This language is even more prevalent in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*. See especially SW VII, 457.
[35] As Lanfranconi notes, the process of creation was to be the subject of the second book of the *Weltalter*, the one dedicated to the "Present." See Lanfranconi 1992, 174-5.

have seen, non-being exists in some way, but in a state of concealment. Bringing things into being means allowing them to step forth from this state of concealment and appear. More specifically, we can characterize the act of "creating from non-being" in terms of two verbs: "to divide" (*scheiden*) and "to raise" (*erheben*). Like the footstool of Zeus at Olympia (WA I, 21), non-being has living forces within it—potential beings in a state of non-being. These forces are not only hidden; they are undifferentiated, like the contents of a seed. Creation "out of non-being" is the gradual process of (1) dividing these forces and (2) raising them into existence.

It cannot be emphasized enough how much this departs from the traditional Christian understanding of creation as a *creatio ex nihilo*. The traditional doctrine developed in the first three centuries in explicit opposition to the Platonic theory of the formation of the world out of pre-existing matter.[36] In contrast, the Christian understanding of creation would reject anything pre-existing the act of creation; creating presupposes nothing—it is *ex nihilo*. This doctrine was motivated by two considerations. First, anything presupposed by creation falls outside the scope of creation. But if God is the creator of all that is, there can be nothing that he does not create. Second, anything presupposed by creation limits the freedom of God to create based on his will alone. God may be free to create or not to create, but *what* he creates is to some degree restricted, if creation has any presuppositions. Indeed, in the later *Darstellung des philosophischen Empirismus* (1836) Schelling himself acknowledges that a completely free creation cannot presuppose anything—not even a *μὴ ὄν* or non-being (SW X, 284).[37]

In contrast to the traditional doctrine, Schelling's creation from non-being introduces a presupposition (or a "ground") of creation: uncreated non-being. It is true that Schelling distances himself from the Platonic notion of a pre-existing "eternal matter": the "original material" (*Urstoff*) for creation is itself the result of a movement in which nature becomes ground (SW VIII, 242). Nevertheless, the forces within it are uncreated—they have been there in some form from the beginning. As a result, creation from non-being is not the positing of something radically new, but the revelation of what was *already there before*.

Thus Schelling's understanding of non-being and his understanding of creation are essentially linked. Both reflect a new ontology of revelation in which to *be* is to be revealed. If we take a step back, we can place this ontology in the context of the full movement of the *Weltalter*, as Schelling formulates it in one of the fragments: "It is a great and necessary thought that all that has happened is a single event [*Ein Geschehen*], that everything that is and takes

[36] See May 1978, vii-ix, 1-5, 26.
[37] In the same text Schelling rejects his previous claim that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* arose from a misunderstanding of the Greek: the relevant scriptural passage uses *οὐκ ὄν* rather than *μὴ ὄν* (presumably 2 Maccabees 7:28), and the concept itself has merit independent of its linguistic origins (SW X, 284).

place belongs to one great movement; and thus that it is only one highest being that wishes to actualize and reveal itself in everything—God" (WA III, 226). The process of creation is not just the revealing of individual beings, but the revealing of God himself: it is the coming-to-be of God. And this coming-to-be presupposes a state of not-yet-being. Of course, Schelling is careful to distinguish the pre-existing God from other forms of non-being: the latter (μὴ ὄν) are below being, while the pre-existing God is above being (ὑπερόν) (WA II, 141). But there is an essential connection nonetheless. Both involve a state of concealment and the potential to *be*. As various forms of non-being come to be revealed, God himself is revealed—all in one great movement from non-being to being.

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