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# The Temporality of Freedom: Retrogressive vs. Progressive Conceptions of Freedom between Schelling and Sartre

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**ABSTRACT:** Not only is freedom a shared concern of Sartre and Schelling, which would not be anything particularly unique, but for both philosophers, freedom must be articulated out of an ontological ground, or within the confines of an ontological system. A contradiction nevertheless appears to arise regarding the “orientation” of Sartre and Schelling’s respective “ontologies of freedom”: the freedom of Sartre, reflecting a contemporary stoic-inspired doctrine, is directed toward the future, while for Schelling, with affinities to the temporal logic of psychoanalysis, freedom is oriented toward the past. This article presents both Sartre and Schelling’s ontological reasoning out of which either a progressively oriented freedom (the freedom to negate the present in the name of future “possibles”) or a retrogressively oriented freedom (the freedom to determine the ground of the present out of an indefinite, a-temporal *becoming*), before attempting to resolve this contradiction in the temporality of freedom by examining the position and role of the negative (of negation, contradiction, or nothingness), as either secondary or primary, within the ontology of each respective philosopher.

**KEYWORDS:** Schelling, Sartre, freedom, ontology, temporality

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### Introduction: To Articulate the Future or Determine the Past

“Look to the future,” “what has happened has happened,” “the past is unchangeable, you must instead turn to the present and what can be changed down the road”—variations of such themes characterize a certain common sense wisdom that the avatars of a self-improvement and self-help mentality build upon. At its core, such a doctrine posits freedom to be a capacity that is oriented away from the independence of the past, toward the present and a possible future. A modernization, perhaps, of an avowal of the “possibilities of the present” over the “determinateness of the past,” which has been inherited from the type of freedom depicted in classical stoic philosophy. Stoicism could be considered the first philosophical tradition that makes a virtuous “guidance manual” for life out of, among other things, an unchangeable past that can only be moved on from. Life is, as Seneca writes, “divided into three periods—that which has been, that which is, that which will be. Of these the present time is short, the future is doubtful, the past is certain. For the last is the one over which Fortune has lost control, is the one which cannot be brought back under any man’s power” (Seneca [49] 2018, 19).

Perhaps the most accepted opposition to this everyday wisdom is the temporal logic of recollection and repetition presented by psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis does not merely insist upon the necessity of reflection upon the past for the sake of “accepting” certain contradictory narratives or impulses that conditioned an irrational self-deceit or neurotic displacement, but it in fact goes one step further: the fundamental insight provided by Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness or *après-coup*) is of an act of symbolic recollection that *precedes* the material that is recollected, a logically a priori, purely negative repression that itself formulates the repressed content, or a repetition that grounds the principle that is repeated. From Freud, through Lacan, and eventually with Laplanche, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* provides us with a new temporal logic of the everyday, as most clearly articulated in Laplanche’s 2006 seminar *L’Après-Coup*. Fundamentally, the pursuit of a repressed memory, of a core “scene,” responsible for a symbolic or pathological repetition is eventually inverted. What is revealed is not *the* key, or crucial, “moment” responsible for a slip of the tongue, a defense mechanism, or a neurosis, but rather an enigmatic lack of any stable point of reference in the past. The past appears, in its subjective register, indeterminate and only disjunctively, or negatively,

related to the present. The task is, in part, to retroactively *posit* a certain past formation or scene, in order for the instability of the past, and its dynamic reciprocal positioning in relation to the present, to eventually be avowed.

Psychoanalysis presents us with a temporal logic that, clinically, breaks with the forward-orientation of a self-help-wisdom and emphasizes a certain retroaction of the present upon the past. These “doctrines of the everyday,” clinical or existential “guides,” such as self-help and psychoanalysis, appear to diverge with regards to their understanding of the temporality of freedom. To dismiss this opposition as mere irrationality would be a mistake, yet validating the question of the temporality of freedom is a task in itself, and it is this task that the present paper attempts to begin to approach. To do this, freedom is to be located in its ontological frame—that is, justified out of the necessity of its existence in the world. It is Schelling and Sartre who provide two of the most rigorous attempts at deriving freedom from an ontological system, and yet their respective conceptions of freedom are marked by a clear disparity: for Sartre, freedom is oriented toward the future, while for Schelling it is oriented toward the past. These two systems appear to reflect the opposed doctrines of stoic self-help versus psychoanalysis, while nevertheless situating them on the ontological level. To understand the paradox of the temporality of freedom, this article will therefore present the “ontologies of freedom” of Sartre and Schelling in detail, before suggesting a possible explanation for this contradiction in the time-orientation of freedom, namely the position of the “negative” for Sartre as opposed to Schelling. The negative (whether as nothingness, contradiction, negation) occupies a logically secondary position for Sartre, whereas it acts as the presupposed ground for substance and identity as such for Schelling, and from this asymmetry in the function of the negative two visions of freedom are deployed in radically opposed directions.

### **Sartre: A Progressive Ontology of Freedom**

The Sartre-Schelling pair makes a privileged nodal-point for a problematic of freedom because of their shared “method” of departure that nevertheless presents two distinctly opposed conclusions regarding the temporal directedness of said freedom. Both philosophers develop an image of freedom from the tenets of an ontological ground. To deduce the capacity of *being* to articulate itself as *existence*, to frame consciousness out of the

identity/in-itselfness of primary metaphysical categories, to make freedom radically dependent on the presuppositions of a concretely posited world, these are features shared by these philosophers who are nonetheless respectively displaced by over a century of thought. Where both Sartre and Schelling create an ontology of freedom (a depiction of freedom as faithful to the mode in which we think being and existence, nothingness and negation, or contradiction and substance), what is to be made of freedom's temporal disparity between them, where freedom for Sartre is directed toward the future, while for Schelling freedom in its ontological frame is directed toward the past? This *progressive vs retrogressive* ontology of freedom can be understood by a longer presentation of these philosophers' systems, beginning with freedom in the register of Sartre's phenomenological ontology.

Sartre's extensive social-political critique, concerned with collective projects for the "lateral totalisation" of freedom, as laid out in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), arguably has affinities with an ontological way of thinking, utilizing a logic of contradiction, totalization, singularization and the Otherness constitutive free social organization. However, one of the (many) cuts with his first major treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, is that *Being and Nothingness* presents a structured progression from the immanence of the ontological "mode" of being-in-itself toward the freedom of self-determination according to the "possibles" of projected subjective projects. It is therefore *Being and Nothingness* that will form the basis of this article—we are after all presently concerned with the temporal directedness of an ontologically grounded freedom rather than a Marxist-Hegelian critique of political ensembles, and it is precisely the former that Sartre's earlier treatise provides. The "movement" of three modes of expression of being marks the departure-point for Sartre's phenomenological ontology: the immediate self-identity of being-in-itself, the internally negating and disjunctively self-articulating consciousness of being-for-itself, and the de-centred Other-oriented narrative of being-for-others.

Sartre's project begins with certain necessary presuppositions. First, there are only phenomena: reality is what exists, and what exists presents itself as phenomenal structures that accord to our capacity to reason about them. "Appearance" and "reality" are categories, like Kant's thing-in-itself, that can be dismissed—there are only the appearances of phenomena, such that essence is a function conditioned by appearance itself. Nothing *is* beyond its own appearing. Things exist precisely because of their phenomenally

coherent form. “The phenomenon can be studied and described as itself, as it is absolutely indicative of itself” (Sartre 1943, 12).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, and following a Cartesian reasoning revived by Husserl, consciousness is expressive of being. Consciousness must be a consciousness *of* something, and consciousness is indissolubly bound to the reflective being of what is conscious. All consciousness is an immediate and encompassing positionality of consciousness *toward* an object, which in turn posits the being of the consciousness engaged with its isolated object—“consciousness is a conscious being insofar as it *is* and not insofar as it is known” (Sartre 1943, 14). Being conscious of something encompasses the being of the conscious subject, a totalization in which any consciously known thing is a consciousness of existing.

From these presuppositions are reconstructed the “modes” of phenomenological ontology, necessary for a conception of Sartrean freedom. Being-in-itself is the preconscious, prereflective mode of existence of things. The in-itself is a phenomenon unperturbed by the internal distortions of conscious self-positing and is thus nothing but its own phenomenal presentation. It is identical to its immediate reality. An object of our perception is a being-in-itself; there is no discrepancy in its relation to itself, no doubt or disharmony. In short, an object that falls under the category of in-itselfness, such as a pen, a chair, a stone etc., is something of which we can say that “*it is what it is*”: thinking the object will never not accord with the object’s existence. The same is not true for conscious subjects, where thinking oneself rather entails a lack of immediate identity to the being reflected upon. The conscious subject reflecting on itself instead takes on the form of a doubt, a non-identity, or a nothingness. For Sartre, the utterance “*I am what I am*” entails an immediate paradox at the level of the for-itself (i.e., at the level of the self-reflective conscious subject).

Being-for-itself is a being in which its being is itself placed into question—the for-itself is a moment of internal suspension of the possibility of being where being doubts the possibility of its own ground. The pure self-identity of being-in-itself is disturbed by the ontological act of subjectively reflecting upon the impersonal facticity (“thereness”) of one’s own being (which nevertheless personally and internally recognizes itself as such). The for-itself is a moment of inarticulable internal disparity, the “being of consciousness does not coincide with itself in an absolute equivalence” (Sartre 1943, 110). There is an irreconcilable kernel of self-alienation, of non-identity and incongruence which the subjective

conscious mode of existence introduces. For the being of consciousness “it is effectively impossible to describe it as coinciding with itself” (Sartre 1943). Yet it is nothing more than nothingness that separates the phenomenal self-identity of the in-itself from the self-reflective internal disparity of the for-itself. The questioning of being by itself introduces an ineradicable self-propelled distance between being and the act of thinking this being. “The being of consciousness, as consciousness, is to exist at a distance from itself as presence to itself (*presence à soi*), and this null distance that being carries in its being, is Nothingness” (Sartre 1943, 114). The internal disjunction of self-positing takes the form of a simple negation, a nothingness implanted between being and itself—the irreducibility of this being to itself is a gap that can only be formulated as a self-reflective nothingness. Nothingness is the mark of being-in-itself’s realization of *itself* that places it into a questioning relationship to itself. “Nothingness is this hole in being, this fall of the in-itself towards itself through which is constituted the for-itself” (Sartre 1943, 115). Thus, the for-itself cannot state that “it is what it is”—this utterance is nullified by the nothingness installed between a being reflecting upon the possibility of its own being. There is only identity where there is no nothingness separating being from itself. It is precisely from such a lack at the condition of the for-itself that the existentialist category of “possibles” emerges: the positing of possible future projects along which the subject determines itself by a series of external engagements constantly measured in relation to the subject’s self-reflected image and (negative) accordance to its own future possible. “The possible emerges from the ground of the nihilation of the for-itself” (Sartre 1943, 133).

Being-for-others is a decentred positioning of being as internally oriented *toward* otherness. The Other is a hypothetical zone of exclusion that by its alienation further structures being’s relation to itself, it is the impersonal registration of the anonymous intimacy of sociality, of otherness, in everyday life. This experience of Otherness reformulates being-for-itself into a being-for-others—an object as much as subject of social experience. Otherness thus renders the subject constitutively decentred, no longer the point of reference for an external world, but one of multiple objects of which it simultaneously engages with while forming a part of for the obscure and inaccessible zone of the Other. The immanence of Otherness, its decentring opacity nested in the intimacy of everyday life, is contained in the idea of the impersonal gaze (*le regard*) penetrating our conscious self-awareness, demonstrated by Sartre in the example of someone’s sense

of being watched as they themselves look through a keyhole. When looking through a keyhole, by jealousy or interest, the subject engages with a possible reality behind the door of which the subject becomes the immediate existence, fully engaged with its act of spying. There is no reflective determination of the conscious *I* that engages in this secretive behavior—there is simply the unreflective *being* of listening and spying. However, if the subject comes to believe that it hears footsteps along the corridor, the situation is completely reformulated. Suddenly there is a reflective determination of an *I* that engages with, from a distance, this project of looking through the door. The secretiveness is reinstalled as a moment of disparity between the immediacy of spying and a self-reflection upon the subject's own action, driven by the imposing quality of Otherness now implicated in the subject's clandestine act. Even where there is in fact no person in the corridor, the Otherness implicit in the situation, the hypothetical gaze that the subject directs toward itself, comes to formulate a certain supplementary positing of the subject by itself, which reframes the actions of the situation and the capacity to determine this situation in regard to the subject's own reflected being. Otherness, in other words, conditions a parallax shift, a new set of presuppositions, for the subject's observation of itself.

With *being* articulated in its ineluctable constitution in the Other, as being-for-others, we reach the crucial presupposition for the free self-determination characteristic of Sartre's early existentialism: subjectivity can reflect upon its own hypothetical future manifestations. Subjectivity's disparity to itself, mediated by the social sphere in which it acts, presents to it certain "possibles," certain future-oriented exclusive self-perceptions from which the freedom of affirmation of a *single* future becomes possible. In other words, the freedom of choice, of seeing oneself in a determined, possible future, here emerges. Freedom is, of course, a defining topic of Sartre's philosophy. Presently it is not freedom in its totality, but the ground of its forward-directed temporality, which is of interest. The movement of freedom is constituted by a negation, a negation of the facticity of the world (its *données*, the concreteness of its factual determinations) in the name of a selection of a possible future to be installed in a present posited as insufficient.

Importantly, action itself is contingent upon a presupposed freedom: "to act is to modify the *face* of the world, it is to dispose of means for the sake of an end" (487). Freedom is a necessary requirement for conscious beings to articulate *themselves* in their *actions*. The conscious intentionality

of the act lies in the positing of future reflections of oneself or the world in the consequences of a certain act in the name of a certain end. Freedom is a negation of the fullness of facticity (the in-itself), the insertion of insufficiency in the world that colors the present by what it is not (and what it might be): “It [facticity] is the pure contingency which freedom seeks to negate in making a choice for itself, it is the plenitude of being which freedom colours with insufficiency and negativity [*négativité*] in illuminating it with the light of an end which does not exist” (Sartre 1943, 543–44). Freedom installs a temporally secondary incompleteness in the factual world. Freedom is the freedom to negate, to posit as incomplete what is initially present and total, and freedom is thus posited in the contingency of the secondariness (the future-directedness) of a subjective negation. Thus, freedom is the possibility to exist toward an indeterminate future, a thesis with which *Being and Nothingness* appears to substantiate the dismissal, in *Existentialism is a Humanism* ([1946] 1996), of both a popular Hegelianism of history and the optimism of utopian Marxism regarding the future determinateness of a communist succession of capitalist production. Freedom lies in the openness and indeterminacy of the future, in our inability to predict determinate forms of a future-present without consciously acting toward its possibility, and Sartre’s ontology reconstructs the movement of a self-identical being-in-itself toward the being-for-others that is capable of precisely such a free positing of itself and the world in terms of what it is *not* at present. The construction of a separation is where Sartre’s ontology makes possible his existential freedom, and this negation of facticity, the positing of a disparity whereby future possibles emerge, is a freedom that is entirely oriented toward the future, toward what is missing in the present and indifferent to an unalterable past.

### **Schelling: A Retrogressive Ontology of Freedom**

With Schelling, we are concerned as much with an “ontology of freedom” as with a “freedom of ontology”—it is the capacity to *think* being and its ground which for Schelling in itself constitutes an original division grounded in freedom. In his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Schelling’s most well-known treatise on freedom, freedom is articulated as possible only through the reciprocal construction of good and evil. Light and Darkness form primary moments of *ground and*



*existence* from which good and evil, and eventually freedom is possible by an act of determination of Man (and God, conceived of as the moments of Man in the form of universalised experience) inside of his own possible existence. Freedom is in 1809 therefore a question of reciprocally grounded yet mutually exclusive dualities. Freedom is for Schelling an articulation of *Grund* (the ground of the origin of existence [*Wesen* or *Existenz*]), it is an articulation which determines the ground of existence according to the exigencies of the present. This conception of freedom will be framed according to the *Philosophical Investigations*, before turning to *Die Weltalter* (Ages of the World) to provide a more rigorous ontological frame out of which is seen the retrogressive function of freedom as oriented toward determining the past.

Freedom as the determination of the ground of nature is therefore firstly the *freedom of God*, God being a phenomenological as well as ontological method of reasoning for Schelling about a conceptual subjectivity and ideal principle to which the moments of the *Naturphilosophie* (substance, freedom, ethics, reason, etc.) owe their existence. The beginning is conceived as the freedom of God to recognize Himself in the possibility of his existence, in terms of a primary indefinite confrontation between good and evil.

Evil can never become real and serves only as ground so that the good, developing out of the ground of his own strength, may be through its ground independent and separate from God who has and recognizes himself in this good which, as such (as independent), is in *him*. (Schelling [1809] 2007, 44)

God determines and recognizes himself in what is independently within Him—this internally disjunctive moment is a ground that is nevertheless posited by God as constitutive of himself by the fact of its (the ground of good's) independence. It is precisely from this retroactive determination by God of what may be his ground as a dislodged ground of the good—the evil-good momentum from which the primacy of God is constituted—that “free action” can be deduced as a function of its self-positing essence. It is here that the *essence* compared to the *being* contingent to freedom, as mentioned above, are central for Schelling's deduction of the (backwards temporality of) freedom. Free action must be determined “in itself,” yet this stability is achieved only by its positing of the essence or nature that is necessary for its existence, a temporal logic crucial for freedom to be possible.

In order to be able to determine itself, it [free action] would already have to be determined in itself, admittedly not from outside, which contradicts its nature, also not from inside through some sort of merely contingent or empirical necessity since all this . . . is subordinate to it; but rather it would have to be its determination of itself as its essence, that is, as its own nature. (Sartre 1943, 50)

The free action of nature can determine itself (i.e., *be free*) only by being already determined in-itself (i.e., constituted prior to its act). However, there is an internal contradiction central to this: it cannot be determined in itself from the outside (in which case it would not be free), nor from the inside as a type of chronological progression toward freedom. The free act is instead a radical separation, it is identical to the very form of its determination. How it is *posited* or *grounded* and what it *is* cannot be separated. In the very moment of its singularly contradictory appearance, it furnishes its own essence or determines the nature to which freedom accords.

Freedom is, as we see here, the furnishing of the very capacity for freedom. Freedom acts toward the possibility of its own existence, it is oriented toward the nature of its own conditions. Freedom retroactively posits its own ground, however as Schelling continues to consider, such a directedness of freedom toward the initial indeterminacy of its ground can only be framed according to a much longer project of the *Naturphilosophie*: the opposition of identity to difference: “action can follow from within only in accordance with the law of identity and with absolute necessity which alone is also absolute freedom” (Sartre 1943). Freedom is determined in the registers of identity—its auto-positing, or determination of the ground of its own expression, is therefore to be pursued along the philosophy of identity that Schelling was dedicated to throughout his career. It is in *The Ages of the World* that the stage is set for the self-grounding, retroactive orientation of freedom according to an ontological deduction of identity-in-itself (as preceding difference).

Half a decade after the *Philosophical Investigations*, Schelling is primarily concerned in *The Ages of the World* with the existence of the past, or the function of the present as a perspective that articulates to itself a past existence. This past is not merely the past of the lived everyday, but the past of an ontological presence (the past of existence as such). Schelling is concerned with deducing the primary abstraction of the category of “past” from which the internal identity of nature and substance can be derived. This

past is a metaphysical past, and it is one that allows for nature to be accessible to reason. The connection between reason and nature lies in identity: in the identity, for example, of the proposition  $A=A$ , where  $A$  is not the focus of the formula, but the abstract identity-in-itself from which  $A$ 's identity to itself becomes possible (an identity that precedes both "A as subject or as predicate of the proposition"). This is the principle of an identity-in-itself which makes *identical things* possible, and it is this abstracted identity that is a crucial component to Schelling's philosophy.

Identity is, put briefly, an unconditional *sine qua non* of reason in its existence toward the nature of the world that reason exists in order to observe, understand, etc. In order to understand the ontology of freedom, and its retrogressive orientation, we must therefore begin with the efforts of Schelling to express the priority of identity (the essence of identical things) over difference (the essence of differing things). Schelling's problem repeats the Platonic/Parmenidean one: how is the "one" to be separated from the "many," does the "same" precede or follow from the "different"? Identity must precede difference in order for the postulates of reason to be possible, and in order for nature to exist as it does according to its essence. However, it is quickly clear to Schelling that identity inevitably presupposes difference, and that the conception of difference itself presupposes something that is identical. Identity is, as Schelling describes it, caught between the necessity of its precedence and the impossibility of its priority over difference. This tension between necessity and impossibility is the culmination of a concern with the "unconditioned"—that which exists without prior cause, and conditions all that is—that begins in 1799, with *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, and it is a tension that requires the introduction of freedom within its logical impasse, as a self-determining moment of metaphysical construction.

*Something* must posit the priority of identity over difference. A decisive and radical moment is forced to intervene and interrupt the impasse that marks any differentiation of identity and difference, as constitutive moments of Schelling's system of philosophy. That which makes the priority of identity possible is a moment that by its radical disjunction is retroactively constructed as irreducible to the logic of identity and difference itself. What concerns reason is no longer the specific proposition  $A=A$ , but the essential possibility of identity *in itself* to be articulated before any singular *thing* or *existence* that is judged as identical (to itself or to something else). In this break from which identity is installed, it is not identity that comes to

precede difference, but identity that precedes itself: the essence of identity that is indistinguishable from any given proposition of identity (e.g.,  $A=A$ ) must be posited as a take-off point for identity itself, despite identity's constitutive entanglement *with that which is identical*.

This inarticulable separation (between identity and what is identical) that posits the priority of identity over difference is made possible through what Schelling calls a "blind act or choice," phrased in relation to the *one* and the *many*. This enigmatic act constitutes the pure beginning of a break, a moment of the unutterable immanence of a free, spontaneous action that makes possible the logical priority of identity as its own essence, as preceding that which is identical, and as thus ultimately preceding difference in the eyes of reason. The blind act that is irreducible to reason's articulation of identity or difference, of the one and the many, determines identity-in-itself as the *first moment*, as preceding all that there is, and thus freely determines that which precedes itself as grounded in the priority of identity.

But just in order that one begin, that one be the first, a decision must ensue, which, to be sure, cannot happen consciously, by deliberation, but only in the pressure between the necessity and the impossibility of being, by a violence blindly breaking the unity. That alone in which a determinative ground for the priority of the one and the consequence of the other can be sought, however, is the particular nature of each one of the principles, a nature which is distinguished from their common nature, which consists in this, that each is equally original, equally independent, and each has the same claim to be that which is. Not that one of the principles would have to be absolutely the one which precedes or which follows, but only that, permitted by its special nature, the possibility is given to it to be the first, the second, or the third. Now it is evident that what is posited for a beginning is precisely that which is subordinated in the sequel. The beginning is only beginning inasmuch as it is not what really should be, not that which is veritably and unto itself. If there is a decision, then only that can be posited for a beginning which distinctively inclines most to the nature of what is not. (Schelling [1815] 1942, 106–7)

This blind act, by the simultaneous contingency and necessity of its logic, leads to a sudden placing into question of any form of primacy

of identity over difference or difference over identity. The act appears to ground “what is posited in the sequel,” where any logical priority of identity is as such only insofar as it is sequential to the spontaneous and inarticulable *freedom* of an immaterial act. This blind act therefore appears to posit its own ground, to determine the logical forms that made it possible. Schelling’s search for a philosophy of identity and concern for the essence of freedom culminate here in a combined moment. Identity is, by its own definition, caught at the impasse of being indissociable from the difference according to which it is defined and the necessity of a system of reason impossibly caught in a reciprocal determination of identity and difference, of identity and “the identical.” This necessity of an impossible identity makes appeal to an event-like paradoxical instance, an irreducible act of spontaneity that grounds the priority of identity. Put simply, a blind act retroactively furnishes the instance of identity as *the first principle* of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*. This is the retroaction of freedom as positing its own system, a positing of freedom’s own essence that was depicted in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The ontology of freedom is, therefore, at the same time the freedom of ontology to posit its own ground.

Like with Sartre, freedom is an ontological moment, a crucial instance within an ontological system. The gap that nevertheless separates Sartre from Schelling is the fundamental difference in the orientation of freedom with regards to its ontological context: freedom for Sartre is progressive, oriented toward the determination of future “possibles,” while Schelling’s freedom is retrogressive, oriented toward determining the ground and essence, or past, of its own system. Where these two philosophers frame freedom according to the necessities of their ontological ground, what accounts for the directly opposed temporality of their respective conceptions of freedom? While there are many differences in the systems of Sartre and Schelling, their historical separation notwithstanding, an important difference that lies at the ground of their differing conceptions of freedom is the positioning or situating of the negative (of negation, contradiction, nothingness etc.) in the development of their philosophies. For both philosophers, freedom requires a type of avowal of the negative (an a priori moment of contradiction for Schelling, and an introduction of nothingness within the in-itself of the present for Sartre), yet this negative is situated as either primary or secondary (as always-before or always-after the present), and from this is deduced the ontological ground for the temporality of freedom.

### Situating the Negative between Idealism and Phenomenology

Ontology, freedom, and the determinations of the negative: these are crucial inter-related concepts for Sartre and Schelling. For Sartre, we begin with the unproblematic self-identity of being-in-itself. The phenomenal objectivity of the in-itself *is what it is* and finds no disparity in relation to itself. Of a pen, for example, we can say that its in-itselfness means that the pen is nothing other than what it immediately is. Nothingness is introduced where the internal non-identity of being-for-itself emerges—the conscious being-for-itself is located across the ineradicable gap of a nothingness that disturbs the self-identity of the in-itself. Nothingness acts as the negative moment from which being posits itself from a theoretical distance. Consciousness is possible only by the fragmentary discrepancy of a self-installed nothingness. This determining function of the negative thus returns where freedom is concerned (freedom being a quality only of being-for-itself, or more accurately of the decentered consciousness of being-for-others). Freedom where Sartre is concerned is the freedom to articulate an insufficiency in the facticity of the world (in its present “wholeness”), and to determine oneself according to the future ends that insufficiency necessitates through conscious deliberation. Freedom is therefore on the individual subjective level and orients itself entirely to the future for the amelioration of the present.

For Schelling, as we saw, freedom is an impersonal, primitive moment (or act) allowing for the first postulates of an ontological system of nature. Freedom is oriented toward a prior point by the contradictory moment of a spontaneous, irreducible action that grounds the identity and difference of nature. However, the absolute primacy of contradiction or of the negative, which grounds freedom’s orientation toward the past, can be further understood by a second look at *The Ages of the World*. With this second look, the temporal directedness that separates Schelling’s freedom and Sartre’s freedom can begin to be explained.

The principal concern of *The Ages of the World* is of our capacity to posit an indeterminate past from the perspective of a freely acting present that is nevertheless bound by the identity-difference logic of reason. In this determining of the past, Schelling returns to his use of God as the constitutive moment of totalizing self-experience that makes possible nature, and he deduces the necessity for this conception of God to be able to establish a relation to His own past. God must have the courage to negate an

indeterminate, indefinite becoming, by retroactively positing the past from which He in turn derives. God posits His past out of the impasse of an indefinite beginning, a movement of contraction and expansion that finds its moment of origin only by freely constructing it. This is the past, in other words, of God as an eternally creative and necessary producer of a series of self-reflected contractions and expansions from which spirit and material, liberty and necessity, can come to be posited as constitutive of the world. This begins with an emphasis on the infinite regression ‘into itself’ of a contractive singularity resolved to the dark obscurity of a definitive *No*. This absolute *No* is posited in the very same moment as an act of pure will of the for-itself, a break with the internal repetition of an eternal beginning; an affirmation in which the past must be reconciled with the very idea of beginning, and through which God’s freedom allows for a distinction to be made between an initially indeterminate past-present distortion and the freedom of a retroactive determination that breaks with this ceaseless and paradoxical beginning-without-end.

This contradiction of the past between the indefinite recurrence of a beginning in the form of a contraction and the free principle of creation by which the spirit of the world can freely posit a relation to itself as constructed from a prior point—this is a recurrent theme of the negativity that grounds freedom for Schelling. Toward the end of this work, we see Schelling’s emphasis on the primacy of contradiction. Any system of life can be present only by passing through contradiction, a contradiction that is negated as a first point through the determination of its prior point.

There is therefore no stable life here, but rather an incessant alternance of contraction and expansion, and the higher-designated unity (the totality of this moment) is nothing less than the first pulsation, the heart, so to say, of the divinity, which, in an incessant systole and diastole, seeks repose and does not find it. A new involuntary movement is therefore produced, which incessantly repeats itself and which cannot interrupt itself. We therefore understand that, in this moment, existence (*l’étant*) forms with its being (*être*) the most contradictory Being (*Être*) there is. We understand that the first existence is contradiction itself and that inversely, the first effectivity can only maintain itself within this contradiction of which some nevertheless say that it can never be effective. All life must pass by the fire of contradiction; contradiction is the mechanism which puts life in

movement, it is what life keeps most intimate. (Schelling, [1815] 2012, 191–92, author’s translation)

Life, a supreme achievement in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*—the breaking of God beyond the confines of his repeated internally directed contraction—is grounded with the contradiction internal to its Being, a contradiction between its being and its existence. One of Schelling’s first arguments in the beginning of *The Ages of the World* is of existence comprising a movement toward non-being in its self-development—grounding our thought of the past requires an appreciation of the becoming of what exists as a break with the immediacy of being; the obfuscation of being by existence. The progression of life in Schelling’s system—life as a structuring principle of the system itself—is internally contradictory, the negative moment between what is presupposed and what comes to be. The first existence is in fact, and necessarily, the very form of contradiction, the first impulse toward the drives of life is a contradictory impulse, a breaking point in which contraction and expansion become the same, and through which contradiction, or the negative, resolves itself by its own negation, by constructing a determinate past out of a contradictory a-temporality.

This freedom of God’s retroactive determination of the past from an initial moment of negative a-temporality emphasizes two important points: 1) as we have seen, that freedom for Schelling is retrogressively oriented, and 2) that this retrogression is conditioned by the *priority* of the negative. In other words, the moment of departure for Schelling is interminable contradiction, a negative that must be determined as “past” by a backwards act of negation. For Sartre, the negative, as the nothingness of the conscious being-for-itself and as the negation of the present in-itself in the name of a free movement toward the future, is a secondary moment, supplemented onto an a priori positive moment of the in-itself. The secondariness of the negative in Sartre appears to account for the secondariness, or progressive movement away from a determined point of origin, of freedom. For Schelling on the other hand, identity as such is only possible by the avenues of an initial negativity. The negative, contradiction, appears prior to the positive of identity (which is then in turn prior to the logic of difference, or of differing self-identical things), and freedom is thus grounded upon the capacity of the past to be retroactively posited out of an indiscriminate, self-negating becoming.



To summarize, freedom is for both Sartre and Schelling grounded in an ontological system, yet appears to have an opposed temporality in each respective system. While seemingly paradoxical, a possible resolution appears to be locatable in the position of the negative (as either primary or secondary) in relation to identity or substance in these ontological systems.

## NOTE

1. All quotations of Sartre in this article are from the original French and are my own translation.

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