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THE META-EVENT AND ONTOLOGICAL EKSTASIS: THE GENERATIVE LOGIC OF DIVINE DECISION IN SCHELLING'S PHILOSOPHY*

Abstract: Schelling's philosophy has long been fragmented by the "myth of rupture", with its stages (e.g., Philosophy of Nature, Philosophy of Freedom) deemed disconnected. This study argues for its inherent unity through the triadic "Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis" model rooted in Schelling's "Ungrund" — a primordial unity transcending being and non-being. "Latency" denotes unmanifested potency in the Ungrund; "Contraction" describes potency's self-limitation generating ontological difference; "Ekstasis" refers to domain-specific unfolding and return to unity. The model reenacts unconsciously in nature (magnetism, chemistry) and consciously in history, where "evil" emerges as an "ontological remainder" confirming divine decision. This reinterpretation dispels the rupture myth, supplements contemporary event ontology (Deleuze, Badiou), and revives freedom as "participation in being's generation".

Keywords : *Schelling, latency-contraction-ekstasis, Ungrund, divine decision, event ontology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling occupies a paradoxical position in the history of German Idealism. Sandwiched between Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762–1814) subjective idealism and G. W. F. Hegel's (1770–1831) absolute idealism, he was long dismissed as a "transitional figure" — a thinker who oscillated between conflicting systems without achieving the "logical rigor" of his contemporaries.¹ Hegel's critique in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* — framing Schelling's thought as a series of "irreconcilable ruptures (*Bruch*)" — solidified this narrative in 19th-century scholarship. Yet the 20th

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¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896), 542.

century witnessed a “Schelling renaissance”: Martin Heidegger’s 1936 lecture course *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom* rediscovered the ontological depth of the 1809 Freedom Essay; Gilles Deleuze drew on Schelling’s concept of “potencies (*Potenzen*)” to develop his philosophy of difference; and Slavoj Žižek (1949–) invoked the “*Ungrund* (Groundless)” to critique ideological totalitarianism.² This revival raises a pressing question: if Schelling’s philosophy is as fragmented as Hegel claimed, why does it continue to inspire contemporary thought?

The answer lies in the “myth of rupture” that has dominated Schelling scholarship. Early interpreters like Richard Kroner (1884–1974) divided Schelling’s work into four disjointed periods, arguing that the “Philosophy of Nature” (1795–1800) and “Late Philosophy of Revelation” (post-1815) addressed unrelated questions — matter’s self-organization versus divine disclosure.³ Even scholars who challenged this narrative, such as Walter Schulz (1912–2000) in *Die letzte Philosophie Schellings*, failed to provide a concrete conceptual model to unify Schelling’s domains.⁴ Dieter Henrich (1927–2022) correctly noted that Schelling’s thought revolves around a “single ontological question”, but he stopped short of explaining how this question unfolds across nature, history, and art.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by reconstructing Schelling’s philosophy through the triadic “Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis” model, rooted in the *Ungrund*. It addresses three core research questions: (1) Does a unified ontological logic underpin Schelling’s early (Nature) and late (Revelation) thought? (2) How does the “divine decision (*Selbstentscheidung*)” — as a meta-event — manifest unconsciously in nature and consciously in history? (3) What supplementary significance does this logic offer to contemporary event ontology (Deleuze, Badiou)?

Compared with previous studies (e.g., Dieter Henrich’s emphasis on a “single ontological question”), the innovation of this study lies in that the “Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis” model provides a concrete conceptual chain that can run through the fields of nature, history, and art — not just an abstract claim of “unity” — making the continuity of Schelling’s philosophy more intuitive and verifiable.

Methodologically, this paper focuses on Schelling’s mature works (1804–1815) — including *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), the 1813/1815 drafts of *The Ages of the World*, and the *Freedom Essay* — to avoid anachronistic readings. It combines close textual analysis with conceptual reconstruction: first, unpacking the *Ungrund* as the primordial source of potencies; second, tracing how these potencies unfold as

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 42.

³ Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921–1924), 390.

⁴ Walter Schulz, *Die letzte Philosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), 178.

Contraction-Ekstasis in nature and history; third, demonstrating how art and philosophy enable human participation in this divine dynamic.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: Chapter 2. critiques the “myth of rupture” and introduces the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model. Chapter 3. establishes the ontological foundation by analyzing the *Ungrund*, potencies, and divine contraction. Chapter 4. explores how this model reenacts unconsciously in nature (magnetism, chemistry, biology) and consciously in history (conflict, freedom, evil). Chapter 5. examines human freedom as “participatory imitation” through art and philosophy. Chapter 6. concludes by highlighting the model’s contributions to dispelling the rupture myth, supplementing event ontology, and reviving freedom’s practical significance.

2. THE “MYTH OF RUPTURE” IN SCHELLING SCHOLARSHIP AND THE NEED FOR A UNIFIED FRAMEWORK

The reception of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s (1775–1854) philosophy has long been dominated by the “myth of rupture”, a narrative originating from G. W. F. Hegel’s (1770–1831) critique in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Hegel argued that Schelling’s thought suffered from an “irreconcilable rupture (*Bruch*)” between its phases, lacking the “logical continuity” of his own *Science of Logic*.⁵ This critique has shaped 20th-century scholarship, with most scholars dividing Schelling’s work into four discrete periods: Philosophy of Nature (1795–1800), centered on *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), which posits “nature as visible spirit (*Natur ist sichtiger Geist*)” and explores the dynamic self-organization of matter;⁶ Philosophy of Identity (1801–1804), expounded in *System of the Philosophy of Identity* (1801) that emphasizes the “absolute identity” of spirit (*Geist*) and nature as the ultimate ground of being;⁷ Philosophy of Freedom (1809–1815), culminating in *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom* (1809, hereafter *Freedom Essay*) which reframes ontology around the question of “how freedom is possible in the

⁵ Hegel’s critique of Schelling centered on the latter’s “philosophy of identity”, which he deemed “formless” and lacking “logical development”. See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, 542.

⁶ Schelling’s *Philosophy of Nature* rejects the mechanistic view of nature as “dead matter”, instead framing it as a dynamic, self-organizing system. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

⁷ The “absolute identity” refers to the primordial unity of spirit and nature, which Schelling later refines into the “*Ungrund*”. See F. W. J. Schelling, “System of the Philosophy of Identity”, in *Schelling’s Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. F. Marti (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 110–135, 121.

ground of being”;⁸ and Late Philosophy of Revelation (post-1815), focused on *Philosophy of Revelation* (1841–1842) that turns to “divine revelation” as the key to resolving the tension between freedom and necessity.⁹

This periodization, however, obscures the core ontological question unifying all Schelling’s works: How does being emerge from itself, and how does freedom take root in this emergence? From the “self-organization of nature” in 1797 to the “eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)” in the 1815 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling’s answer consistently revolves around “divine self-decision (*Selbstentscheidung*)” — a “meta-event” permeating ontology, philosophy of nature, and philosophy of history, rather than a traditional theological “creation narrative”.¹⁰

Existing scholarship suffers from two critical gaps. First, most studies focus on isolated phases: Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom* (1936) centers on the Freedom Essay but neglects the *Philosophy of Nature*;¹¹ Gilles Deleuze’s (1925–1995) *Difference and Repetition* (1968) engages with Schelling’s potencies but ignores his late historical thought.¹² Second, while scholars like Dieter Henrich (1927–2022) have criticized the “myth of rupture”, they lack a concrete conceptual model to demonstrate continuity across Schelling’s domains.¹³

To address these gaps, this paper proposes the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis triadic model as a unified framework. Drawing on Schelling’s mature works (1804–1815), this model defines “Latency (*Latenz*)” as the state of undifferentiated, unmanifested potency tension in the “*Ungrund* (Groundless)” — the primordial source of all being;¹⁴

⁸ *The Freedom Essay* marks a shift from “identity” to “decision”, framing freedom as the “essence of being”. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936), 3.

⁹ Schelling’s late thought focuses on “revelation” as the means to resolve the tension between the finite and infinite. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation*, trans. J. D. White (London: A&C Black, 1986), 45.

¹⁰ The “meta-event” differs from traditional creation narratives in that it is perpetual, not one-time. See F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, ed. and trans. J. M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 78.

¹¹ Heidegger’s analysis of the *Freedom Essay* emphasizes the “ontological difference” between *Grund* and *Existenz* but neglects Schelling’s earlier natural philosophy. See Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.

¹² Deleuze draws on Schelling’s potencies to develop his “philosophy of difference” but ignores the historical dimension of the *Ungrund*. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 48.

¹³ Henrich argues that Schelling’s thought is continuous but does not provide a conceptual model to demonstrate this. See Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 289.

¹⁴ The *Ungrund* is not “nothingness” but a dynamic field of latent potencies. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, trans. P. W. Bowie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 62.

“Contraction (*Kontraktion*)” as the self-limitation of potencies to generate ontological difference (*Grund/Existenz*), marking the transition from “potentiality” to “actuality”;¹⁵ and “Ekstasis” as the unfolding of this difference in nature (unconscious) and history (conscious), followed by a return to the original unity of potencies.¹⁶ This model not only proves that Schelling’s early and late thought are differentiated manifestations of the same ontological dynamic but also bridges classical German Idealism and contemporary event ontology. As Heidegger noted, Schelling’s inquiry into freedom touches on “the most fundamental question of Western philosophy: the co-belonging of being and freedom”.¹⁷ By reconstructing this dynamic, this paper aims to show that Schelling’s philosophy is not an “unfinished sketch” but a coherent system.

3. ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION: THE *UNGRUND*, POTENCIES, AND DIVINE CONTRACTION

To grasp the “meta-event” nature of divine decision, we must first examine Schelling’s subversion of traditional metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics — from Aristotle’s (384–322 BCE) “first substance” to Descartes’ (1596–1650) “res cogitans” — posits a static “ground of being” (*Grund des Seins*). For Aristotle, “substance” is the unchanging substrate that bears attributes (e.g., “man” as the substrate of “rationality” or “mortality”); its “ground” is a preordained essence that determines all subsequent properties.¹⁸ Descartes similarly anchors being in the “res cogitans” (“thinking thing”), whose existence is self-evident through the cogito (“I think, therefore I am”); the ground of being here is the certainty of subjective consciousness, guaranteed by God’s non-deception.¹⁹

Schelling rejects this static framework, instead positing the “*Ungrund*” as a primordial unity that transcends the opposition of being and non-being²⁰ — a concept whose connotation evolves across his works. In *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), the *Ungrund* emphasizes “the original indifference of potencies” (prior to all differentiation); in the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*, it integrates the

¹⁵ Contraction is the key step that transforms latency into actuality. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 89.

¹⁶ Ekstasis ensures that being does not remain in static difference but returns to unity. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 29.

¹⁷ Heidegger identifies Schelling’s inquiry into freedom as central to Western philosophy. See Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom*, 23.

¹⁸ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 1029a, 103.

¹⁹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

²⁰ Schelling rejects traditional metaphysics’ static “ground of being” in favor of the dynamic *Ungrund*. See Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 58.

dimension of “eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)” and becomes “the generative origin of perpetual becoming”. Crucially, the *Ungrund* is not “nothingness (*Nichts*)” — as critics like Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) mistakenly claimed — but a “dynamic field of latent potencies” that precedes all differentiation, with its core always pointing to “a dynamic ground beyond being and non-being”.²¹

In the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling describes it as “a centerless flame that longs to burn yet remains unformed” — a metaphor emphasizing its active, not passive, nature. It is the “source of all being” precisely because it is not bound by the “ground/grounded” binary of traditional metaphysics: “The *Ungrund* is not a ground of being, but the possibility for being to emerge.”²²

This distinction clarifies the “original indifference (*ursprüngliche Indifferenz*)” of the two potencies. Unlike Schlegel’s interpretation of potencies as “pre-existing opposites”, Schelling insists they are complementary modes of the same essence. He uses the analogy of a “unlit flame” to explain: “A flame before ignition contains both heat and light, but not as separate qualities—they exist in a state of indifference, waiting to be actualized.”²³ Similarly, the first potency (dark drive) and second potency (luminous force) are not rivals but collaborators: the first provides the “rooting impulse” for being to take hold, while the second guides it toward self-manifestation. Schelling emphasizes: “This is not a pre-existing opposition, but two possible modes of existence of the same essence — the silence of tension itself is the first driving force for being to move from Latency to Actuality.”²⁴

The term “*Ungrund*” (literally “without ground”) is often misinterpreted as “nothingness” (*Nichts*) or “chaos” (*Chaos*). However, Schelling explicitly defines it in *Philosophy and Religion* (1804) as an “original unity (*ursprüngliche Einheit*)” that “precedes all being and non-being”.²⁵ This unity is not static but a dynamic field of latent potencies — a “centerless flame that longs to burn yet remains unformed”, as described in the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*.²⁶ It contains all possibilities of being but has not yet unfolded into concrete forms. At the core of this unity lie two potencies (*Potenzen*) in “original indifference (*ursprüngliche Indifferenz*)” — a state of mutual dependence without opposition, analogous to the poles of an unactivated

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (1813 Draft), in Schelling: *The Ages of the World*, ed. and trans. J. M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 66.

²³ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The “original unity” of the *Ungrund* precedes all opposition. See Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 60.

²⁶ The “centerless flame” metaphor captures the *Ungrund*’s dynamic, unformed nature. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 65.

magnet.²⁷ The first potency (*erste Potenz*), the “dark drive (*dunkle Trieb*)”, is an inwardly contracting force providing the “rooting impulse” of being; it is not negative but the primordial condition for being to “take hold”, much like a seed’s roots contracting into soil to grow, anchoring being in the *Ungrund*. The second potency (*zweite Potenz*), the “luminous force (*helle Kraft*)”, is an outwardly ekstatic force driving being toward self-manifestation; it is not an external form but the direction of being’s “appearance”, similar to a seed’s shoot ekstasizing toward light to grow, guiding being into visibility. The *Ungrund* cannot remain in perpetual indifference; the tension between potencies compels a “decision” — divine contraction — that transforms latency into actuality.²⁸

“Contraction (*Kontraktion*)” is the hinge of the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model. Contrary to interpretations framing it as a “split in the divine essence” (e.g., F. W. J. Schelling’s early critic Friedrich Schlegel), contraction is a self-limitation (*Selbstbegrenzung*) for the sake of manifestation — but this process inherently contains a negative dimension. As Schelling argues in the *Freedom Essay* (1809), when the first potency (dark drive) becomes overly solidified during contraction and fails to be guided toward Ekstasis by the second potency (luminous force), it generates an “unintegrated ontological remainder” — this is the ontological origin of “the possibility of evil” in Schelling’s context. Through “self-concentration”, the *Ungrund*’s latent potencies are transformed into perceivable ontological difference: “The divine essence must contract itself to manifest itself — just as light must be concentrated into a beam to be seen.”²⁹ This self-limitation generates two inseparable dimensions: “*Grund* (Ground)” and “*Existenz* (Existence)”. *Grund*, the “dark foundation” embodying the first potency, is the incompletely manifested aspect of the divine essence, forming the internal basis for being to “root”; gravity in nature, for instance, is the manifestation of *Grund*, contracting matter into solid entities and enabling motion. *Existenz*, the “luminous manifestation” embodying the second potency, is the divine will’s active decision to step beyond itself, forming the external form of being; light in nature, for example, is the manifestation of *Existenz*, making matter visible and enabling cognition. The relationship between *Grund* and *Existenz* is dialectical: “*Grund* is the internal ground of *Existenz*, and *Existenz* is the external manifestation of *Grund*.”³⁰ They are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same divine life — analogous to a tree’s roots (*Grund*) and branches (*Existenz*), both

²⁷ The “original indifference” of potencies means they are not opposed but complementary. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 15.

²⁸ This argument echoes Schelling’s core view on the driving role of potency tension, as cited earlier (see note 23).

²⁹ Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 65.

³⁰ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 92.

essential to its existence. This dynamic breaks with traditional metaphysics' "substance-attribute" framework: being is not a static "substance with attributes" but a process of mutual generation between *Grund* and *Existenz*.

Divine contraction not only generates ontological difference but also endows the model with temporality. Schelling calls this decision the "eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)" — a concept subverting linear time. Unlike Augustine's (354–430 CE) view of the past as "vanished" or Hegel's view of history as "progress toward a telos", the eternal past is a "perpetually flowing source" that "generates the present and continues to generate within the present".³¹ In the 1815 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling explains: "The eternal past is not a static beginning outside time, but the origin of genesis (*Ursprung der Genesis*) — it is the force that makes being become."³² This means the divine decision is not a "one-time event" (e.g., the "Big Bang" in modern cosmology) but a perpetual process: it lays the foundation for all being while being reshaped by being's evolution. Human history, for example, is not a "sequence of events" but the "eternal past's traumatic return in time" — every historical moment reenacts the original contraction. This dynamism (rooted in the *Ungrund* and divine contraction) is not an abstract ontological principle — it manifests as a concrete generative force in specific domains through Ekstasis. Specifically, this reenactment appears as an unconscious process in nature (via physical, chemical, and biological phenomena) and a conscious process in history (via conflict, freedom, and evil). The following chapter will analyze how the "Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis" model unfolds in these two domains, further verifying the unity of Schelling's thought. This contingency frees being from "logical fate" and grants it "open possibility" — a key insight for contemporary event ontology.³³

4. DOMAIN-SPECIFIC UNFOLDING: CONTRACTION-EKSTASIS IN NATURE AND HISTORY

The divine decision is not an isolated ontological event but a generative force reenacted across domains through Ekstasis. In nature, this reenactment is unconscious, with potencies unfolding as physical, chemical, and biological processes; in history, it is conscious, with potencies manifesting as conflict, freedom, and evil. Both domains are expressions of the same Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic.

³¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961), 263.

³² The eternal past is the "origin of genesis" — it generates being continuously. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 103.

³³ Badiou's "event" draws on Schelling's contingency but neglects the unity of the *Ungrund*. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 12.

Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) argues that "nature is visible spirit" — its laws are the objectified reenactment of divine Contraction-Ekstasis. From specific natural phenomena, magnetism emerges as the "most primitive expression of ontological difference in nature":³⁴ the South Pole's "centripetal force" objectifies the first potency (dark drive), contracting the magnetic field inward to form a stable foundation, while the North Pole's "centrifugal force" objectifies the second potency (luminous force), expanding the magnetic field outward to enable interaction with the environment. The magnetic field's unity mirrors the divine essence's transition from Latency to Actuality: "A magnet is a microcosm of the *Ungrund* — it contains the full tension of being in a visible form."³⁵

Beyond magnetism, electricity (as an extended interpretation based on Schelling's core proposition) further illustrates the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic in nature. It should be noted that Schelling himself did not explicitly use electricity to explain potencies in *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797); however, based on his proposition that "nature is the visible manifestation of spirit", the negative pole of an electrical circuit can be seen as embodying the first potency (Contraction): it accumulates electrons through "inward contraction", generating a charge differential that forms the "ground (*Grund*)" of electrical flow. Without this contraction — this concentration of electrons — the circuit would lack the tension needed to produce energy.³⁶ The positive pole, by contrast, embodies the second potency (Ekstasis): it attracts electrons, prompting them to "transcend" their concentrated state in the negative pole and flow through the circuit. This flow — visible as a spark or current — represents the "existence (*Existenz*)" of electricity: the ground's manifestation as a perceivable phenomenon.³⁷

Schelling would note that electricity's duality mirrors the *Ungrund*'s tension: the negative pole's contraction is not "opposed" to the positive pole's ekstasis, but necessary for it. A battery, for instance, ceases to function if either pole is removed — just as being cannot exist without both *Grund* and *Existenz*.

Beyond magnetism, chemistry in Schelling's view is "the dialectic of nature", reenacting Contraction-Ekstasis through combination and decomposition. Combination occurs when elements like oxygen and hydrogen form water — a process of "contractive unity" where elements contract into a new substance (water) with qualities distinct from its components (e.g., liquidity vs. gaseousness), embodying Contraction as the generation of new being from latent potencies.

³⁴ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ Michael Faraday, *Experimental Researches in Electricity* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1839), 142.

³⁷ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 56.

Decomposition, by contrast, happens when water is electrolyzed, a process of “ekstatic differentiation” where the new substance (water) breaks down into its original components (oxygen and hydrogen), representing Ekstasis as the return of being to its latent state, preparing for future contraction.

In biological life, the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic grows more complex with the integration of “self-preservation (*Selbsterhaltung*)”. For plants, geotropism (root contraction) manifests the first potency — roots contract into soil to absorb nutrients, anchoring the plant (Contraction) — while phototropism (leaf ekstasis) manifests the second potency — leaves ekstasize toward light to perform photosynthesis, manifesting the plant as a “living organism” (Ekstasis). For animals, instinctive drives (e.g., foraging, reproduction) manifest the first potency, contracting animals into their survival needs (Contraction), and perceptual capacities (e.g., vision, hearing) manifest the second potency, allowing animals to ekstasize beyond themselves and interact with the environment (Ekstasis). Schelling rejects external teleology (e.g., Paley’s “watchmaker God”): “Nature’s purpose is not imposed from outside but emerges from the internal divine decision — it is the slow unfolding of the *Ungrund*’s potencies.”³⁸

In biological life, embryonic development enacts the full Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis cycle. The zygote begins in a state of Latency: it contains the organism’s entire genome, but its cells are undifferentiated — representing the “indifference of potencies” in the *Ungrund*.³⁹ Contraction occurs during gastrulation, when the zygote splits into three germ layers (ectoderm, mesoderm, endoderm); each layer “limits” itself to developing specific tissues (e.g., ectoderm forms skin and nerves), generating ontological difference. This self-limitation is not a “loss” but a “gain”: it allows the embryo to move from “potential life” to “actual life”.⁴⁰

Ekstasis follows as these tissues differentiate into organs (e.g., the heart, brain) that perform specialized functions. The organism, now fully formed, transcends its latent state — but the cycle continues: through reproduction, it passes its genetic potential (Latency) to offspring, who repeat the Contraction-Ekstasis process. This perpetual cycle confirms Schelling’s claim that nature is “visible spirit” — the *Ungrund*’s dynamic made flesh.

When potencies enter the “domain of human freedom”, Contraction-Ekstasis evolves into history’s core rhythm: Contraction manifests as conflict and darkness (war, oppression), Ekstasis as freedom’s transcendence (revolution, moral progress), and “evil” as the necessary remainder of this dynamic. Schelling sharply criticizes

³⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 38.

³⁹ Caspar Friedrich Wolff, *Theoria Generationis*, trans. Charles T. Druery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 78.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 46.

Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* (1837), which reduces history to a "necessary process of rational self-realization".⁴¹ For Hegel, evil is a "temporary instrument of progress" driving reason toward its telos (e.g., the "universal state"), but Schelling rejects this: "History is not a triumphal march of reason but the eternal past's return in time — it is the conscious reenactment of the *Ungrund*'s tension."⁴² For Schelling, evil is not an "ethical failure" but an "ontological remainder (*ontologischer Rest*)" — the unintegrated residue of the first potency after divine contraction, like "ashes left after a flame burns": inevitable, but not a "stain" on being. This residue manifests in humans as "egoism (Egoismus)" — the tendency to absolutize the first potency (self-interest) and refuse to ekstasize toward the second (reason, love).

Evil's possibility is precisely what confirms freedom's authenticity. Schelling writes: "Without the choice of evil, goodness becomes forced obedience — not free decision. Light cannot be perceived without shadow; evil is the condition for goodness to manifest."⁴³ He uses "Judas' betrayal" to illustrate this: Judas' evil is not an "accidental fall" but an "extreme manifestation of the ontological remainder" — he absolutized his egoism, becoming a "negative witness to divine decision".⁴⁴ The Contraction-Ekstasis cycle is equally visible in ancient history, such as the conflict between Athens and Sparta in 5th-century BCE Greece. Sparta's social structure embodied Contraction: it centralized power in a military oligarchy, limiting citizenship to a small elite and enslaving the helot population. This "self-limitation" was intended to preserve stability — but it also generated a rigid "ground (*Grund*)" that resisted change.⁴⁵ Athens, by contrast, initially enacted Ekstasis: its democratic system expanded political participation beyond the elite, allowing citizens to "transcend" narrow tribal loyalties and engage in collective governance. Yet Athens later descended into Contraction: its imperial ambitions (e.g., the Delian League) led it to impose its will on other city-states, replicating Sparta's rigidity.⁴⁶

The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) was the culmination of this tension: two systems, each trapped in their own contraction, clashed. Plato's *Republic* — written in the war's aftermath — represented an attempt at Ekstasis: it proposed a "philosopher-king" who would transcend tribal and class divisions, reuniting the city-

⁴¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 23.

⁴² Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 105.

⁴³ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 52.

⁴⁴ Judas' betrayal is an extreme manifestation of the ontological remainder. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 56.

⁴⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 45.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 376e, 38.

state's fragmented ground. Yet this negativity is necessary: "Without Judas' betrayal, there would be no Christ's sacrifice and redemption — evil makes freedom visible."⁴⁷

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation offers another example of historical Contraction-Ekstasis. The medieval Catholic Church embodied Contraction: it centralized religious authority in the papacy and clergy, framing itself as the sole "ground (*Grund*)" of access to God. This hierarchy limited lay believers' direct engagement with scripture, creating a rigid structure that prioritized institutional power over spiritual experience.⁴⁸ Martin Luther's (1483–1546) *95 Theses* (1517) enacted Ekstasis: his doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) rejected the Church's mediating role, arguing that believers could access God directly through faith. This "transcendence" of clerical authority opened new possibilities for religious freedom.⁴⁹

Yet the Reformation soon entered a new phase of Contraction: Protestant denominations (Lutheranism, Calvinism) developed their own rigid doctrines, and conflicts between Catholics and Protestants (e.g., the Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648) became new sources of historical tension. This cycle — contraction leading to conflict, followed by attempted transcendence — confirms Schelling's view that history is "God's autobiography" in perpetual draft.

For Schelling, history is an open cycle of Contraction-Ekstasis: it begins with Contraction (e.g., the oppression of the French Old Regime), transitions to Ekstasis (e.g., the French Revolution's demand for "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*"), and returns to Latency as new conflicts emerge from the ontological remainder, repeating the cycle. Schelling calls history "God's autobiography", and humans its "unfinished chapter:" "Every human decision continues the divine movement from Latency to Actuality — we are co-constitutors of being, not mere spectators."⁵⁰

5. HUMAN FREEDOM: PARTICIPATORY IMITATION THROUGH ART AND PHILOSOPHY

Humans are unique in embodying both potencies — the first (natural drives) and the second (rational will) — making us the "nexus (*Schnittstelle*) of nature and spirit" — a "microcosm" containing the full tension of being.⁵¹ Through "participatory imitation (*teilnehmende Nachahmung*)", we become co-constitutors of the divine decision via two paths: art (sensible intuition) and philosophy (intellectual intuition).

⁴⁷ Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 78.

⁴⁸ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), 98.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, *95 Theses*, trans. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), Thesis 27.

⁵⁰ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 115.

⁵¹ Humans embody both potencies, making us the "nexus of nature and spirit". See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 60.

In *Philosophy of Art* (1802–1803), Schelling argues that “art is the only decipherable cipher (*Chiffre*) of philosophy”.⁵² Art — especially “sublime art” (tragedy, epic, symphony) — allows finite humans to intuit the *Ungrund*’s truth. The sublime arises when “the finite encounters the infinite”: in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the conflict between divine law (Antigone’s duty to bury her brother) and human law (Creon’s edict) reenacts the Contraction tension of the *Ungrund*;⁵³ in Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the transition from the “Ode to Joy”’s suffering to transcendence reenacts Ekstasis. Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* (1824) deepens this connection between art and the *Ungrund*, particularly in its fourth movement. The movement opens with a “growl” from the double basses and cellos — a low, dissonant melody that embodies Contraction (first potency). This passage mimics the “dark drive” of the *Ungrund*: it is tense, unresolved, and seemingly formless, representing the “ground (*Grund*)” of the symphony’s emotional power.⁵⁴ As the movement progresses, the “Ode to Joy” theme emerges — first in the clarinet, then in the full orchestra. This theme is Ekstasis (second potency): it transcends the opening dissonance, transforming tension into triumph. The chorus’s entry — singing “*Freude, schöner Götterfunken* (Joy, beautiful spark of God)” — is the climax of this ekstasis: it makes the *Ungrund*’s “infinite tension” visible in finite sound.⁵⁵

Schelling would argue that this transition — from darkness to light — lets listeners intuit the divine decision: being’s emergence from latency into actuality. Schelling calls artists “second creators”: “Through imagination, they reenact the divine’s generation of being from the *Ungrund*. A work of art is the visible trace of this reenactment.”⁵⁶ Michelangelo’s David, for example, embodies both Contraction (marble’s material limits, first potency) and Ekstasis (David’s spiritual power, second potency); by contracting the marble’s constraints, Michelangelo lets David’s freedom “ekstasize”, allowing viewers to touch the infinite within the finite.

Rembrandt van Rijn’s *The Night Watch* (1642) similarly enacts the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic in painting. The left side of the canvas is dominated by shadow — Contraction (first potency). Here, figures are partially obscured: their faces are dim, their clothing blends into the background, representing the “ground (*Grund*)” of the scene — the unmanifested tension of the militia company preparing for action. This

⁵² Art is the “cipher” that reveals the *Ungrund*’s truth. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, trans. D. W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 32.

⁵³ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 45–50.

⁵⁴ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125* (score), ed. Jonathan Del Mar (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1996), Movement IV, 192.

⁵⁵ Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

shadow is not “empty” but charged with potential: it hints at the figures’ hidden identities and motivations.⁵⁷

The right side of the canvas, by contrast, is illuminated — Ekstasis (second potency). The central figure, Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, stands in bright light, his uniform vivid and his posture confident. This light “transcends” the shadow, making the company’s purpose (defending the city) visible. Rembrandt’s use of *chiaroscuro* — light against dark — mirrors the *Ungrund*’s duality: the shadow (*Grund*) is necessary for the light (*Existenz*) to have meaning. Viewers, in turn, intuit the divine dynamic: being’s movement from hiddenness to revelation.

Philosophy, by contrast, is “rational participation” in the divine decision. Its highest task is to grasp the *Ungrund* through “intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*)” — not to cognize it as an object, but to “reenact” the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis process through speculation. This is not Hegel’s “closed conceptual system” but a “defense of being’s openness”: by asking “Why does being exist?” or “How is freedom possible?” philosophers return to the divine decision’s original fissure. Schelling emphasizes: “Reason cannot exhaust the *Ungrund*’s mystery, but it can participate in its generation. Tracing the *Ungrund* is like following a river to its source — we may never reach the end, but we understand the logic of being’s flow.”⁵⁸ His analysis of “freedom and necessity”, for instance, reenacts the model: necessity is the Contraction of potencies (being’s rooting), freedom is their Ekstasis (being’s manifestation), and together they form the “dynamic unity of being”.

6. CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF SCHELLING’S EVENT ONTOLOGY

The Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model reveals three key contributions of Schelling’s philosophy. First, it dispels the “myth of rupture”: Schelling’s early Philosophy of Nature and late Philosophy of History are not disconnected but differentiated manifestations of the same dynamic, with magnetism in nature and revolution in history both reenacting the *Ungrund*’s tension — proving the unity of his thought.

Second, it supplements contemporary event ontology by addressing unresolved tensions in Gilles Deleuze’s and Alain Badiou’s frameworks. For Deleuze, event ontology revolves around the “priority of difference”⁵⁹: he defines the event as the “unfolding of potencies into actuality” but rejects any transcendent or immanent unity that could ground this differentiation. Instead, Deleuze frames potencies as inherently “disjunctive” — their interaction generates difference without a prior unifying field.

⁵⁷ Anthony Blunt, *Rembrandt* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 112.

⁵⁸ Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 82.

⁵⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 48.

This leads to a gap: if potencies are purely differential, how do they cohere into coherent events (e.g., natural processes or historical transformations) rather than chaotic fragmentation? Schelling's model fills this gap with the Latency phase (rooted in the *Ungrund*). The *Ungrund* is not a static "unity" but a "dynamic field of latent potency tension"⁶⁰ — a pre-differentiated unity where potencies exist in "original indifference" (not disjunction). For example, Deleuze's account of "potency → actuality" cannot explain why a seed's roots (contraction) and shoots (ekstasis) act in concert; Schelling's Latency phase clarifies this: the seed's genetic potential (Latency) is the *Ungrund*'s potency tension made concrete, ensuring differentiation (Contraction-Ekstasis) remains cohesive.

For Badiou, by contrast, event ontology centers on the "priority of rupture": events are "irruptions of the infinite into the finite" — radical breaks with the existing "state of the situation" (e.g., a scientific discovery or political revolution) that require subjective "fidelity" to become truths. Badiou explicitly rejects "cyclical becoming", framing events as one-time, irreversible ruptures.⁶¹ This creates a dualism: events are either "rupture" or "stasis", with no middle ground of continuous generation. Schelling's model resolves this via the Contraction-Ekstasis cycle. Unlike Badiou's discrete events, Schelling's "meta-event" (divine decision) is a perpetual process: Contraction generates ontological difference (analogous to Badiou's rupture) but does not end in stasis — Ekstasis returns this difference to the *Ungrund*'s unity, preparing for new Contraction. Historical examples illustrate this: the French Revolution (Ekstasis, a rupture with the Old Regime) did not exist in isolation; it emerged from the "ontological remainder" of the Old Regime's Contraction (oppression) and sowed the seeds for new Contraction (post-revolutionary authoritarianism). This cycle supplements Badiou's framework by showing that "rupture" is not an anomaly but part of being's continuous generation — events are both "disruptive" (Contraction) and "integrative" (Ekstasis), not purely one or the other. Deleuze's "priority of difference" neglects the *Ungrund*'s unifying foundation, while Badiou's "priority of rupture" neglects the continuity of becoming; Schelling's model bridges these gaps by affirming difference (Contraction) while preserving unity (Latency/Ekstasis), and framing rupture as part of a perpetual cycle of becoming. It also supports Heidegger's "*Dasein*'s existential decision" (human participation in being) and Levinas' "transcendence of the Other" (freedom's ethical dimension).

Third, it activates freedom's practical significance. Freedom is not abstract "choice" but "participation in the generation of being": every human decision — whether artistic, philosophical, or moral — shapes the *Ungrund*'s unfolding. As

⁶⁰ Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 61.

⁶¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 12.

Schelling writes: “Human freedom is the unfinished chapter of God’s story. Our choices are the final step of the divine movement from Latency to Actuality.”⁶²

Schelling’s *The Ages of the World* reminds us: “Eternity is not a static present but an ever-becoming event — the essence of being is freedom in eternal decision.”⁶³ This insight continues to challenge our understanding of being and freedom, confirming Schelling’s status as a bridge between classical Idealism and contemporary philosophy.

For contemporary society, this insight also provides a response to the dilemma of “alienated freedom”: freedom is not the abstract “choice without constraints” in modern individualism, but the “participation in the generation of being” — whether through artistic creation, philosophical reflection, or moral practice, humans are not passive spectators of existence but co-constitutors of the divine decision. This redefines freedom as a “practical participation in being” rather than an abstract concept, which has important implications for resolving the sense of alienation in the technological age.

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⁶² Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 65.

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