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Friedrich Schlegel's Absolute Idealism

1. Philosophy, History, and Poetry

Along with Hölderlin and Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel is a central figure in the development of absolute idealism. Schlegel is best known as the leading aesthete of the romantic school. He was a founder of its journal *Athenäum*, and the father of its famous concepts of 'romantic poesy' and 'irony.' Yet Schlegel was even more a philosopher than Hölderlin and Novalis. His interests spanned every field of philosophy, but his main concerns were in metaphysics and epistemology. With some justification, he has been regarded as *the* philosopher of the romantic movement.¹ "Metaphysics," he wrote Jacobi in November 7, 1812, "has been for a long time, indeed from my youth (since 1790), the chief preoccupation of my life."² This inclination to metaphysics derived from the same source as Hölderlin and Novalis: Plato. "It is now thirty-nine years ago," he said in the preface to his 1827 *Philosophie des Lebens*, "that I read through the complete works of Plato in Greek with indescribable curiosity; and since then . . . this philosophical enquiry has always been my proper main concern" (X, 170–180).³

But Schlegel's philosophical stature is somewhat controversial. Because his best known works are in literary history, and because he rarely succeeded in systematizing and refining his profusion of ideas, he has been dismissed as a "philosophical dilettante."⁴ Such a judgment is understandable. There can be no doubt that Schlegel lacked rigor, precision, and organization, and that he failed to direct his energies sufficiently to produce a solid, lasting result. Most of Schlegel's philosophical remains are lectures, which are informal and loosely organized, or notebooks, which are fragmentary and chaotic. Nevertheless, such a judgment is also unfair. It ignores not only Schlegel's considerable philosophical output, but also his own statements

about the importance of his philosophical interests. Worst of all, it begs philosophical questions. For perfectly plausible reasons, Schlegel was very skeptical of much of the scholastic apparatus of definition, analysis, and proof that is part of the conventional picture of the philosopher. He saw this as a useful measure of intellectual technique, not as a secure method to attain truth. Hence the proper medium for philosophy was not the treatise but the fragment, or even a novel.

There is another reason why it is a serious mistake to underrate Schlegel's philosophical work. Some of his most important and influential aesthetic ideas, especially romantic poesy, irony, and the new mythology, have their source and foundation in his epistemological and metaphysical reflections in the 1790s. The origin and meaning of these ideas cannot be recaptured simply by considering their literary dimension, by examining how they continue with or depart from the historical use of such terms as 'romantic' and 'irony.' Schlegel's later romantic aesthetic took the form it did chiefly because of the antifoundationalist epistemology and absolute idealist metaphysics that he developed from 1796 to 1798.⁵

Nowhere are Schlegel's philosophical interests more in evidence than in his attempt to formulate an absolute idealism around 1796–1797. The same constellation of ideas that are found in Hölderlin, Schelling, and Novalis emerge in Schlegel: the synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza, the indifference point of the ideal and the real, the Platonic concept of the ideal, and the sovereignty of art as the means and criterion of absolute knowledge. Although Schlegel never went as far as Schelling in systematizing his absolute idealism, he did go further than Novalis and Hölderlin in giving explicit lectures on the subject. He was indeed the first to present the fundamental ideas of absolute idealism to a public audience.⁶

Like Novalis and Hölderlin, Schlegel came to his absolute idealism by critical reflection on Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. His reflections on Fichte were made only a little later than Hölderlin's and Novalis', in the winter of 1796–1797, but they seem to have been developed independently of them. Though Schlegel knew little of Hölderlin,⁷ he was the close friend of Hülsen, Novalis, and Schleiermacher; and until 1799, he was on at least good terms with Schelling.⁸ Although Schlegel had debts to his friends, he in turn was an important influence on them.⁹ Novalis gave eloquent witness to Schlegel's importance for him when he wrote him in June 1797:

You have been elected to protect the striving young thinker against Fichte's magic. I know from experience how bitter this understanding can be—I am

thankful to you for many hints, for many indications, in how to find one's way through this horrible labyrinth of abstractions, and for the idea of a free, critical spirit. (XXIII, 372)

What is distinctive of Schlegel's absolute idealism—if we compare it to that of Schelling, Novalis, and Hölderlin—is its *historicism*, that is, the central role it assigns to history.¹⁰ Usually, Hegel is given credit for creating an historicist absolute idealism, but Schlegel developed such a doctrine well before him. Like Hegel after him, Schlegel stressed that the absolute realizes itself only through human activity, and more specifically its actions in history. No less than Hegel, he emphasized that historical development is dialectical, a synthesis of externalizing and internalizing activities. It is indeed with Schlegel that we begin to see the first clear outlines of what Dilthey was later to call “the historical critique of reason.”¹¹

2. The Break with Fichte

Fichte was a major philosophical influence on Schlegel, just as he had been for Novalis and Hölderlin. Schlegel's first opinions about Fichte were deeply flattering, revealing all the hyperbole and enthusiasm of youth. He wrote his brother August Wilhelm from Dresden in August 1795 that Fichte was “the greatest metaphysical thinker now living,” and that he was the kind of intellectual Hamlet had sought in vain because “every trait of his public life seemed to cry out: here is a man” (XVIII, 242). Such, indeed, was the young Schlegel's admiration for Fichte that he placed him as a thinker above Kant and Spinoza, and as a popular writer above Rousseau.¹² It is noteworthy that Schlegel had formed these opinions of Fichte before he met him, and apparently independently of his friend Novalis, who had already encountered Fichte in the spring of 1795.¹³

The reasons for Schlegel's admiration for Fichte were complex. They were in part philosophical. Like many in the 1790s, Schlegel saw Fichte as the first thinker to complete Kant's Copernican Revolution. It was Fichte who had finally discovered the foundation of the critical philosophy, and who had created a complete and consistent system of idealism.¹⁴ While Schlegel would soon voice his doubts about Fichte's idealism, he never ceased to regard it as an achievement of the greatest cultural significance. He wrote in a famous aphorism that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*—along with the French Revolution and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*—was one of the greatest tendencies of the age.¹⁵ Fichte's idealism had become “the central point and foun-

dation of the new German literature,” he wrote in 1802, because it expressed the spirit of freedom characteristic of the modern age, the spirit that was the heart and soul of the new romantic literature.¹⁶

There were not only philosophical but also political motives behind Schlegel’s admiration for Fichte. Since 1793 Schlegel had supported the cause of the Revolution in France, and his political interests became so strong that they eventually began to overshadow and displace his classical studies.¹⁷ In 1796 he published an essay, ‘Über den Begriff des Republikanismus,’ which defends a left-wing interpretation of republican principles, and which criticizes Kant for both restricting the franchise and denying the right of revolution.¹⁸ It is not surprising, then, that Schlegel came to admire Fichte, who was notorious as one of the most outspoken champions of the Revolution. It is indeed telling that when Schlegel praises Fichte so highly in his August 1795 letter he refers to *Beiträge zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution*, Fichte’s radical defense of the course of the Revolution. No doubt, Schlegel came to regard Fichte as his ally in the philosophical and political struggle against the *ancien régime*.

If Schlegel were ever a disciple of Fichte, it was only for a short period, probably only a year, from the summer of 1795 to the summer of 1796. During this period some of Schlegel’s writings show that he accepted Fichte’s foundationalist program of beginning philosophy with self-evident first principles.¹⁹ In his *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie*, which he had completed by December 1795, he had praised Fichte for discovering the foundation of the critical philosophy, which would now provide the basis for an objective aesthetics (I, 357). Then, in his early 1796 essay ‘Von der Schönheit der Dichtkunst’ he reaffirmed his faith in an objective aesthetics, which would be based on the fundamental principles of practical philosophy, whose foundation had been established by Fichte (XVI, 5, 17–18, 22). Finally, Schlegel endorsed not only Fichte’s foundationalist program but even its first principle, for, in his ‘Über den Begriff des Republikanismus,’ he attempts to derive republican ideals from the Fichtean principle ‘The ego ought to be’ (VII, 15–16).

It was most probably in the summer of 1796 that Schlegel began to have his first doubts about Fichte’s philosophy. In late July he visited his friend Novalis, who might well have imparted to him some of his own reservations about Fichte’s idealism; and in early August he went to Jena where he associated with the Niethammer circle, whose antifoundationalism seemed to rub off on him.²⁰ Some of the notebooks entries from the autumn of 1786

indicate a growing skepticism and disillusionment with foundationalism. Thus Schlegel now wrote of skepticism: "There is still no consistent $\sigma\kappa$ [skepticism]; it is surely worthwhile to establish one. $\sigma\kappa$ [skepticism] = permanent insurrection" (no. 94; XVIII, 12).²¹ And he complained about Reinhold's foundationalist program: "Reinhold, the first among the Kantian sophists, has organized Kantianism and created misunderstanding.—He is a seeker after foundations (*Grundsucher*)." (no. 5; XVIII, 19). Schlegel also began to distance himself from the Kantians who swore by the spirit of his philosophy (no. 191; XVIII, 36); he referred to "the regressive tendency of the hypercritics" (no. 4; XVIII 19), which could be an allusion to Fichte and Schelling.²²

Whatever the source of Schlegel's doubts, his enthusiasm for Fichte's philosophy was certainly short lived. He first met Fichte in August 1796, and saw him often after that. His first impressions were very positive, since he found Fichte even better in conversation than on paper and lectern. A friendship grew, which only strengthened over the years. Still, friendship is one thing, philosophy another. Sure enough, Schlegel's doubts about Fichte's philosophy only intensified soon after meeting him. Thus he complained to C. G. Körner in September 1796 about his disappointment with his last conversation with Fichte.²³ It is remarkable, he confided to Körner, that Fichte has so little idea of things that do not directly concern him, and that he is especially weak in every science that has an object. Schlegel was puzzled that physics and history simply did not interest Fichte. He then went on to make an astonishing revelation: Fichte told him he would rather count peas than study history! These misgivings proved to be decisive, for one of the main reasons for Schlegel's later break with Fichte came down to the lack of realism and history in his system. Schelling would later break with Fichte for almost the same reasons.

Schlegel began an intensive study of Fichte's philosophy sometime in the winter of 1796. He began to write down some of his criticisms, which he hoped to publish in the form of an essay provisionally entitled 'The Spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.'²⁴ The result of his investigations, he told Körner January 30, 1797, is that he had not only become clear about some fundamental points, but that he had also "decisively separated himself from the *Wissenschaftslehre*" (XVIII, 343). Though the essay was never written, the notes for it remain, revealing many of Schlegel's early reservations about Fichte's philosophy.

Many of his doubts concern the form and method of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Schlegel is especially critical of Fichte's foundationalism, casting scorn on Fichte's claims to have a complete system and irrefutable first principles. It is easy simply to deny some of his fundamental first principles (no. 126; XVIII, 31), which themselves stand in need of proof. Why not say, for example, that the *non*-ego posits itself absolutely? (no. 51; XVIII, 510) It is futile to think, however, that these principles could be proven because there is never an end to deduction, given that any proposition can be proven in myriads of ways (no. 129; XVIII, 30; nos. 9, 12; XVIII, 518). Furthermore, Fichte's system is far too mathematical and abstract, leaving out the positive reality of experience; all his deductions can at best only derive abstractions, not individual facts of experience (no. 141; XVIII, 152). Given such doubts about Fichte's foundationalism, it is not surprising to find Schlegel treating the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a work of literature rather than philosophy. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is Fichte's *Werther* (no. 220; XVIII, 38), and as rhetorical as Fichte himself, "a Fichtean exposition of the Fichtean spirit in Fichtean letters" (no. 144; XVIII, 33). All Fichte's bluster and seriousness makes him a comic figure: he is like the drunk who tirelessly climbs up on his horse and, "transcending it," falls off again (no. 138; XVIII, 32).

Schlegel's other doubts about Fichte's philosophy concern more the content than the form of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Significantly, they are especially focused on its idealism. Schlegel saw the Fichtean obstacle or check as very problematic—"An seinem Anstoß bin ich immer angestossen" (no. 140; XVIII, 32)—because it is not only a relapse into the Kantian thing-in-itself (no. 83; XVIII, 25), but also the source of an insurmountable dualism in a philosophy that should be completely idealist. Schlegel's main objection to Fichte's idealism is that Fichte is "not enough of an absolute idealist" and "not realist enough in every sense and respect" (no. 134; XVIII, 31). What Schlegel means by this becomes clearer from a later fragment when he complains that Fichte has established only "the ideality of the real" but not "the reality of the ideal" (no. 209; XVIII, 38). Fichte does not grant sufficient reality to the ideal because he limits it to the sphere of appearances and the finite subject.²⁵

Besides his notes for the 'Geist der Wissenschaftslehre', Schlegel had several other collections of fragments in his notebooks that also focused on Fichte.²⁶ These too show how much Schlegel had completely broken with Fichte's philosophy. One central theme of these collections is that Fichte is a mystic, and that like all mystics he begins his philosophy by postulating something absolute (no. 2; XVIII, 3). This makes everything too easy, how-

ever, because once we postulate the absolute we can explain everything; but the real question is what gives us the right to postulate it in the first place (no. 71; XVIII, 512). Schlegel thinks that in relying on a mystical experience—he has in mind intellectual intuition—Fichte has forfeited the demands of criticism, which do not allow us to appeal to some infallible experience (nos. 52, 93; XVIII, 8–9, 12). Another basic theme of these notes is that Fichte has ignored the whole realm of history, which is vital to show the necessity of his own system. To justify the *Wissenschaftslehre* we should see how it arose, why it was necessary to solve the problems of its historical context; but that means we cannot separate the *Wissenschaftslehre* from the history of philosophy itself (no. 20; XVIII, 520). Although it is indeed necessary to distinguish between the transcendental and empirical ego (no. 135; XVIII, 31), Fichte's philosophy is still guilty of a kind of "empirical egoism," Schlegel argues, because it limits the experience of the subject down to the eternal present, ignoring the historical dimension of self-consciousness that links us to the past and the future (no. 31; XVIII, 508).

If we were to summarize the positive recommendations deriving from Schlegel's critique, then it would be that philosophy must become completely regulative and nonfoundationalist. The only dimension of Fichte's philosophy that Schlegel wants to maintain are the doctrines that the ego consists in activity, and more specifically the activity of infinite striving. It is with striving, he insists, that philosophy should begin and end (nos. 18, 101; XVIII, 5, 13). Although Schlegel is skeptical of mysticism, he insists that it should be permitted, though again only on a regulative basis where the mystic's intuitions become an ideal for practice or enquiry (no. 23; XVIII, 507). In the same manner, he reads Fichte's first principle 'The ego posits itself absolutely' as an imperative: 'The ego *ought* to be absolute' (no. 187; XVIII, 36). But there was another less critical and more speculative result of Schlegel's critique, which emerges in some later collections of fragments. This is Schlegel's insistence that "absolute idealism" must also be an "absolute realism" (no. 606; XVIII, 80). The growing realism in Schlegel's thinking becomes especially apparent from the remarks in his notebooks about Spinoza, who now virtually displaces Fichte as his philosophical mentor. There is in Spinoza's writings, he comments, "the fragrance of infinity," "an infinite persuasiveness," "a majesty of thought" (no. 567; XVIII, 75). Since Spinoza, philosophy has only gone backward in its attempt to find the basis of all knowledge (no. 234; XVIII, 40–41), because his philosophy provides the model for the synthesis of the ideal and the real (no. 252; XVIII, 43).

Spinoza alone has formed a coherent system of the universe (nos. 724, 727; XVIII, 90), and no other moral philosophy is more in tune with the dignity of reason (no. 775; XVIII, 94). The growing importance of Spinoza for Schlegel is most probably due to the influence of Schleiermacher, whom he had met in the summer of 1797.²⁷

It should be clear that Schlegel's absolute realism is not only an *empirical* realism in the Kantian sense, because it does much more than postulate the independent reality of the external world *within* a transcendental framework. Rather, it is a form of *transcendental* realism because it maintains that the realm of nature exists apart from and prior to any subject, whether that subject is empirical or transcendental. It is important to add, however, that this transcendental realism will not affirm the existence of the thing-in-itself in the Kantian sense, which exists apart from all subjectivity. Rather, it postulates the existence of a single reality within nature, which is both subjective and objective, ideal and real, because it manifests itself equally in both.

Why had Schlegel become so dissatisfied with the lack of realism in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*? What made him break with Fichte's subjective idealism? It is tempting to see it as the result of external influences, whether they came from Hülsen, Schleiermacher, Schelling, or Novalis. The temptation grows when we consider that these thinkers had been moving in a more realistic direction before Schlegel, and that he knew all of them intimately. He had been a close friend of Hardenberg since January 1792, and he greatly admired Schelling, whom he placed alongside Fichte on his Parnassus.²⁸ He had read virtually all of Schelling's early writings, and he especially liked his *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus*, which sketches the rudiments of an absolute idealist position. The evidence indeed suggests that he read the *Briefe* around the winter of 1796–1797, just when he was settling his accounts with Fichte.²⁹

Still, it is not possible to explain Schlegel's growing realism from external influences alone. Whatever impetus Schlegel received from Novalis in the summer of 1796, he had been out of touch with Novalis for over a year when he wrote his notes on Fichte. Furthermore, the influence also went in the other direction, because Schlegel sent his notes to Novalis, who later thanked him for freeing him from Fichte's influence.³⁰ While Schlegel might well have derived some impetus from Schelling's *Briefe*, it is clear that this could have taken him only so far, given that Schelling was still a loyal Fichtean and had been very tentative in suggesting absolute idealism.³¹

Though Schleiermacher had probably reinforced his implicit realism, it would be wrong to trace the source of Schlegel's realism to Schleiermacher alone, for the critique of Fichte's subjective idealism is already clear before his first meeting with Schleiermacher.³² Schlegel's friendship with Hülsen most probably began in the winter of 1797, and he had already read his most important writings, which show a realistic tendency; yet Schlegel's notebooks show him to be confused or critical about the direction of Hülsen's thought.³³ All in all, then, the evidence seems to suggest that Schlegel came to his conclusions about Fichte largely, though not entirely, on his own initiative.

But, even if Schlegel had been influenced by Schelling, Novalis, Schleiermacher, or Hülsen, the question remains: What *predisposed* him to be so? What strands of realism were already inherent in his thinking prior to his encounter with the *Wissenschaftslehre*? Here it is important to recognize that Schlegel had been subject from his earliest years to some of the same influences as Novalis, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hölderlin: Plato, Hemsterhuis, and Spinoza. Plato's eternal forms, Hemsterhuis' longing for the infinite, and Spinoza's one and all had already imparted a deep and ineradicable realism to his thinking. Schlegel himself recognized this tendency within himself when he wrote of his "longing for the infinite," "his fondness for the absolute," or his "loyalty to the universe."³⁴ So deep was this passion for the one and all that he admitted to being "absurdly in love, and indeed infatuated" with it. This metaphysical strand of his early thought is especially apparent from his August 28, 1793 letter to his brother where he defends the Platonic conception of the ideal against August Wilhelm's anti-rationalism:

The source of the ideal is the hot thirst for eternity, the longing for God, and so it is the most noble of our nature . . . Enthusiasm is the mother of the idea and the concept its father.—What is then our dignity other than the power and the decision to be like God, to have infinity constantly before our eyes?—The restless striving after activity, the highest criterion of judgment, does not exclude all the virtues of receptivity but can only exist with them. (XXIII, 130)³⁵

Given such such predispositions, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Schlegel to accept Fichte's idealism, which threatened to reduce the entire objective world down to the level of appearances. Was it any accident, then, that he regarded Fichte's *proton pseudos* to be his attempt to derive the reality

of the objective world from the self?³⁶ Yet, as we shall soon see (3.3.6), the Platonic influence upon Schlegel would soon lead him to develop his own form of objective or absolute idealism. The infinite would soon be identified with the archetypical and ideal.

3. An Antifoundationalist Epistemology

In the course of his reflections on Fichte's philosophy in the winter of 1796, Schlegel developed the outlines of an antifoundationalist epistemology, which appears in his notebooks and the later *Kritische* and *Athenäums Fragmente*. Like Novalis and Hölderlin, Schlegel seems to have imbibed some of the skepticism about the foundationalist methodology of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* that was prevalent in the Niethammer circle; but he developed this skepticism in much greater detail than his contemporaries. This skepticism is crucial for an understanding of Schlegel's absolute idealism and his romantic aesthetic, especially his ideas of irony and romantic poesy.

There are several respects in which Schlegel breaks with foundationalism.

First Principles

Schlegel criticized the classical foundationalist doctrine, reaffirmed by Reinhold and Fichte, that philosophy must begin with a self-evident first principle and then derive all other beliefs in a chain of deduction from it. Schlegel made two objections against this doctrine. First, that any proposition, even the apparently self-evident, can be doubted; it too must be demonstrated, so that there is an infinite regress of justification. Second, that there is an infinite number of ways of proving any proposition, such that we can continue to perfect our proofs *ad infinitum*.³⁷ For these reasons, Schlegel concluded: "There are no first principles that are universally efficient companions and guides to truth" (no. 13; XVIII, 518).

Schlegel's skepticism about first principles is also apparent in his attitude toward the geometric method, which had for so long been the model for foundationalist epistemology. In his *Athenäumsfragment* no. 82 he laughed at its pretensions, claiming that defining and demonstrating a proposition is pointless. There are an infinite number of real definitions for any individual, and any proposition can be demonstrated in all kinds of ways. The main point is to have something interesting to say and then just to say it, follow-

ing the “thetical method” where we set down “the pure facts of reflection without concealment, adulteration, or artificial distortion” (II, 178).

Critique

Schlegel accepts the fundamental demand of the critical philosophy: that *all* beliefs submit to criticism. However, he insists on applying this demand to the critical philosophy itself, so that it becomes *meta-critical*. This demand for a meta-critical philosophy appears throughout the notebooks where Schlegel calls for a “philosophy of philosophy.” The same theme emerges in the *Athenäums Fragmente*: “Now that philosophy criticizes everything that comes before it, a critique of philosophy would be nothing better than a justified reprisal” (no. 56; II, 173). The radicalization of criticism into meta-criticism involves skepticism, of course, but Schlegel does not shirk from this conclusion, insisting upon the value of a real skepticism that “begins and ends with an infinite number of contradictions” (no. 400; II, 240–241).

Schlegel rejects the premise behind the critical philosophy that it is necessary to criticize all claims to knowledge prior to making any such claims. We cannot bracket all claims to knowledge, and then evaluate them before we make them; for not only does the application of a standard of knowledge imply a claim to knowledge, but also we know the powers and limits of our cognitive powers only by using them. This means that we should be critical of our cognitive powers not *before* but *while* using them. Criticism must be integrated with the process of enquiry and cannot stand apart from it.³⁸

The Myth of the Given

Schlegel is as critical of empiricism as rationalism regarding the possibility of providing a secure foundation of knowledge. He believes the given hard data of sense no more than infallible first principles. This is the message that emerges from *Athenäumsfragment* no. 226 where Schlegel maintains that we can do history only with the guidance of hypotheses (II, 202). We cannot state *that* something is, he argues, unless we can say *what* it is; but to determine what it is we must use concepts. Hence facts are such only through the concepts we use to identify them. This does not imply that anything can be a fact, and that we can use any concept, Schlegel insists, given that among the large number of possible concepts only some are necessary. Still, it is the task of the critical philosopher to be aware of which concepts he uses; otherwise,

he will simply accept them according to chance or caprice. The main mistake to guard against, Schlegel warns, is that one has “pure solid empirical facts [*Empirie*] entirely a posteriori,” for this is only to sanction “an extremely one-sided, highly dogmatic, and transcendent a priori view.”

System

Schlegel’s antifoundationalism makes him ambivalent about the ideal of a system.³⁹ He both affirms and denies it. He denies it in the classical Kantian sense of a body of knowledge derived from, and organized around, a single self-evident first principle. There is no perfect system, in his view, because there are so many ways of organizing knowledge, and no single one can claim to be the sole truth. But Schlegel also affirms the ideal of a system because the only criterion of truth now left to him is internal coherence. Following the Kantian tradition, Schlegel abandons the standard of truth as correspondence and replaces it with coherence. Rather than correspondence with some unknowable realm of being, and rather than deduction from some indubitable first principle, the only standard of truth is now the mutual support of propositions in a whole (*Wechselerweis*). The proper form of a system is not *linear*, where we derive all propositions from a single principle in a unique deductive chain (no. 16, 22; 518, 521), but *circular*, where we can begin from any proposition and return to it because all propositions are interconnected.⁴⁰

Schlegel’s ambivalent attitude toward the possibility of a system is perfectly summarized by a fragment from the *Athenäum*: “It is equally false for the spirit to have a system, and not to have one. It therefore must decide to unite them both” (no. 52; II, 173). Both horns of the dilemma are inescapable. On the one hand, it is dangerous to have a system, because it sets arbitrary limits to enquiry, and because it imposes an artificial order on the facts. On the other hand, it is necessary to have a system, because unity and coherence are essential to all knowledge, and it is only in the context of a system that a proposition is justifiable.

If we must have and also cannot have a system, all that remains is the persistent *striving* for one. For Schlegel, the ideal of a system takes on purely regulative status, a goal we approach but never attain. Of course, there is no perfect system; but that does not mean that all systems are on the same footing. There are better and worse ways of organizing our knowledge. The ideal system is that which combines the greatest unity with the greatest multiplicity, or which organizes the most data according to the fewest principles.

4. Romanticism and Absolute Idealism

Schlegel's critique of Fichte's idealism and foundationalism had the most important effect on his aesthetic doctrines, which were very much in evolution in 1797. In his earlier works on classical poetry, especially his 1795 *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, Schlegel had defended a very rigid, almost fanatical neoclassical aesthetic, according to which all works of art should be judged according to a rigorous "objective" standard of beauty.⁴¹ This neoclassical aesthetic began to fall apart, however, because it could not match his own demands for relentless self-criticism. Schlegel's critique of first principles meant that there are no universal and necessary standards of criticism, and hence that there is no single canon to judge all works of art. When Schlegel disavowed his earlier classicism in the *Kritische Fragmente*, he duly drew attention to the connection between it and his erstwhile naive foundationalism: "The revolutionary rage for objectivity in my earlier philosophical musings had something of that fundamental rage that was so so virulent around the time of Reinhold's consulate in philosophy" (no. 66; II, 155). Understanding this comment in its proper context is important, for it means that Schlegel's romanticism is not as Fichtean as is often thought. It was not Schlegel's discovery and appropriation of Fichte that led him to reject classicism but almost the very reverse: his *critique* of Fichte's idealism and foundationalism.⁴²

Now that Schlegel rejected that "rage for objectivity," the problem was to find a new aesthetic adequate to his antifoundationalism. The result was nothing less than his romanticism, more especially his famous concepts of 'irony' and 'romantic poesy,' which he expounded in the *Kritische* and *Athenäums Fragmente*.

The connection of Schlegel's aesthetics with his antifoundationalism is especially clear in the case of the concept of irony. This was Schlegel's response to the apparent *aporia* of his antifoundationalist epistemology. Although there are no first principles, no perfect demonstrations, no criteria of criticism, and no complete systems, Schlegel does not despair. He consoles himself with the idea that we are still left with the eternal *striving* toward the truth, the constant *approximation* to our ideals. This is where irony plays a crucial epistemological role: it consists in the recognition that, even though we cannot attain the truth, we still must strive toward it. This was the attitude of Socrates, that great master of irony, who now became Schlegel's model.⁴³ Socrates was a perpetual gadfly, of course, but he was also the wisest man precisely because he knew that he knew nothing.

Schlegel gives his best characterization of what he means by irony in the 1797 *Kritische Fragmente*. There he explains irony as a response to two kinds of predicament encountered in the attempt to know the truth. The first kind consists in “the feeling of the irresolvable conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned” (no. 108; II, 160). The ironist feels a conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned because any attempt to know the unconditioned would falsify it and make it conditioned. The whole truth is the unconditioned, because it completes the entire series of conditions; but any form of conceptualizing and explaining the unconditioned makes it conditioned, either because it applies the principle of sufficient reason, which determines conditions, or because it applies some determinate concept, which has its meaning only by negation.⁴⁴ The second kind of predicament consists in “the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication.” The ironist feels that complete communication is *impossible* because any perspective is partial, any concept is limited, and any statement perfectible; the truth is intrinsically inexhaustible, defying any single perspective, concept, or statement of it. But he also sees that complete communication is *necessary* because it is only by postulating the ideal of the whole, which guides and organizes our otherwise blind and scattered efforts, that we approach the truth. We must never cease to strive after completion because we can always achieve a deeper perspective, a richer concept, and clearer statement of the truth, which is more adequate to the wholeness, richness, and depth of experience.

The ironist’s response to these predicaments consists in “the constant change from self-creation to self-destruction”(no. 37; II, 151).⁴⁵ In other words, the ironist creates forever anew because he always puts forward a new perspective, a richer concept, a clearer formulation; but he also destroys himself because he is forever critical of his own efforts. It is only through this interchange between self-creation and self-destruction that he moves forward in the eternal search for the truth. Schlegel’s *via media* between this self-creation and self-destruction is *self-restraint*: limiting our creative powers, and adopting a critical distance toward them, so that we do not completely exhaust them in the heat of inspiration.

In fundamental respects, Schlegel’s concept of romantic poesy is also the result of his antifoundationalist epistemology. Romantic poesy, as stated by Schlegel in the famous *Athenäumsfragment* no. 116 (II, 182–183), is essentially the aesthetic version of the philosopher’s eternal striving for truth. The romantic poet cultivates the same ironic attitude as the philosopher. Both

the poet and philosopher are engaged in endless enquiry, an eternal striving, to provide the best description of their object. Hence Schlegel states in no. 116 that the "characteristic essence" of romantic poesy is that it forever becomes and is never complete. Furthermore, both poet and philosopher vascillate between self-creation and self-destruction because, though critical of all their efforts to describe their object, they always create anew. Thus Schlegel also says in no. 116 that the romantic poet "hovers in the middle on the wings of poetic reflection between the object depicted and the act of depicting it." Still further, both poet and philosopher realize that there is no end to self-criticism, and that there are no objective rules of criticism that somehow stand above criticism itself. Hence Schlegel writes again in no. 116 that the romantic poet multiplies reflection *ad infinitum*, as if in an endless series of mirrors. Finally, both poet and philosopher refuse to acknowledge any final rules in their search for the truth, because these serve as artificial and arbitrary limits on the creative process. Thus Schlegel declares in no. 116 that the romantic poet will not be bound by any definite rules of genre, and that he recognizes no laws on his own free will.

There can be no doubt that Schlegel's concepts of irony and romantic poesy have a great debt to Fichte. What Schlegel had done is transfer Fichte's ethical concept of infinite striving into the aesthetic sphere. The infinite striving of the Fichtean ego to attain its absolute independence became the infinite striving of the artist to attain perfection and to express absolute truth. This analogy has often been made, and rightly so. However, it is of the first importance to see that Schlegel appropriated this theme without endorsing Fichte's idealism. The artist's infinite striving did not imply any form of idealism, according to which all of reality is a construction of my will or imagination, and still less did it endorse the circle of consciousness at the close of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.⁴⁶ Schlegel's romanticism is decidedly *not* the aesthetics of Fichte's idealism.

That this Fichtean interpretation is very problematic should already be clear from Schlegel's critique of Fichte's idealism in his notebooks, which was formulated only shortly before his romantic aesthetic. But there is another factor telling against this interpretation: that Schlegel's romantic aesthetics depends on the realism of Spinozism. This is apparent in the *Athenäums Fragmente*, where Schlegel not only defends Spinoza,⁴⁷ but also stresses that the mystical feeling for the one and all is essential to aesthetics. Schlegel had already said in his earlier *Kritische Fragmente* that the concept of irony presupposes the philosopher has some intuition or feeling for the

infinite, “the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations” (no. 42; II, 152); it is indeed just this mood that makes him doubt that any of his particular statements or formulations will be adequate to the truth. But this mystical dimension is even more explicit in the *Athenäums Fragmente* where he insists that the ideas of irony presuppose mysticism, the perspective from which “the spirit regards everything as mystery and miracle” (no. 121; II, 184).

What the new Spinozistic realism meant for Schlegel’s aesthetics becomes clear from his *Gespräch über die Poesie*, which he wrote in late 1799. Schlegel now states unequivocally that only an absolute idealism that is in the same measure an absolute realism provides the foundation for the new mythology or poetry (II, 314–318). He explains that the new poetry must come from the inner depths of the spirit, from the spirit’s eternal striving to find its creative center, and that idealism aids poetry by discovering the inner depths and creative center. But the idealism Schlegel has in mind here is not a Fichtean *subjective* idealism; rather, it is his new *absolute* idealism, of which Fichte’s idealism is now only one aspect or moment. Hence he insists that idealism must have within itself “an equally unlimited realism” if it is to do full justice to the creative process. This creative process is a dialectical development where the spirit not only goes outside itself, externalizing its activity in things, but also returns into itself, recognizing its limits and internalizing the world outside itself (II, 314). Such a process expresses not only the ideality of the real—the dependence of nature on spirit—but also the reality of the ideal—the dependence of spirit on nature. While the first aspect represents idealism, the second signifies the “equally unlimited realism.” Now this second aspect has to be fully recognized, Schlegel insists, to establish the possibility of the new poetry. For this poetry should not only stem from the inner spirit, but it should also reveal the infinite in the finite, the divine within every individual thing. Because Spinoza has shown how all finite things exist within the infinite, his philosophy becomes the basis for poetry. “In fact I hardly understand how one can be a poet,” the character Ludovoko says, “unless one honors, loves, and appropriates Spinoza” (II, 317).

These passages make it clear that Schlegel’s romanticism was the aesthetic not of the *Wissenschaftslehre* but of *absolute* idealism itself. An essential element of the romantic aesthetic—whether in Schlegel, Novalis, or Hölderlin—is its mystical and realistic dimension, the idea that we must see everything finite as part of the infinite, as an appearance of the absolute. It is this dimension that cannot be explained if we construe romanticism as a derivative of Fichte’s subjective idealism.

5. The Mystical

While Schlegel's absolute idealism is wedded with his romantic aesthetic, it appears to conflict with his antifoundationalism. The source of the tension lies in Schlegel's irrevocable demand for criticism, a demand so uncompromising that it approaches a complete skepticism. Schlegel had indeed called irony, the capstone of his new epistemology, "the highest, purest skepticism" (no. 1023; XVIII, 406). But such skepticism poses a serious challenge for absolute idealism: How do we know the existence of the absolute? Absolute idealism postulates the existence of the absolute, the reality of the one and all, which exists independent of finite consciousness. Yet it would seem skepticism permits at best only an agnosticism about its existence, granting at most only *regulative* status to this idea.

Schlegel had already faced this problem in his earlier years when his Platonic tendencies, his "longing for the infinite," came crashing against the Kantian limitations of knowledge. Thus in his October 16, 1793 letter to his brother, where he first explains his concept of the Platonic ideal, he also expresses his disagreement with Kant, mentioning explicitly his doctrine of "the regulative use of ideas" (XXIII, 141). While Schlegel's early Platonism contains no explicit postulate of the existence of the absolute—he explains that the longing for the infinite is rooted in human nature, thus giving it only a practical rather than theoretical legitimacy—he also plays around with mystical ideas that suggest we have some feeling or sense of the infinite (XXIII, 130). In any case, it is clear that Schlegel had as yet no clear position on this all important question. To his brother he expressed his willingness to reread Kant's first *Kritik*, "the first [philosophical work] of which I understood something, and the only one from which I still hope to learn much."

Once Schlegel committed himself to absolute idealism, the problem of knowing the absolute became especially acute. But his skeptical epistemology seemed to undermine any solution. He had agreed with Jacobi and Kant that we cannot know the absolute by *discursive* means. He accepted the thrust of one of their main arguments against such knowledge: that reason operates according to the principle of sufficient reason, which demands that there is always another cause or condition for any event, so that reason cannot grasp first causes or the unconditioned (no. 64; XVIII, 511). But if there cannot be any discursive knowledge of the absolute, then it would seem that the only possibility is some form of mystical knowledge, a purely immediate intellectual intuition. This was indeed the solution of Hölderlin and Novalis, and Schelling too spoke of intellectual intuition as the ultimate ground of

Spinoza's philosophy. But here again Schlegel's skepticism stood in the way. If there cannot be pure empirical data, neither can there be pure mystical insights. Whatever we know or see will be mediated by concepts, by a web of belief, and so subject to interpretation.

Initially, Schlegel himself drew just this conclusion. Unlike Novalis and Hölderlin, he forcefully repudiated mysticism, at least in his published work around 1796–1797. His new hero around this time was Lessing, who represented for him the ideal of free enquiry, the willingness to examine all beliefs regardless of social convention and religious orthodoxy.⁴⁸ But Schlegel's insistence on constantly pushing forward the boundaries of enquiry, and subjecting all beliefs to criticism, made it difficult for him to accept mysticism, which implies the existence of some ultimate and unquestionable experience. This becomes especially apparent in his early 1796 reviews of Jacobi's *Woldemar* and of J. G. Schlosser's *Der Deutsche Orpheus*.⁴⁹ Schlegel criticized both for appealing to some mystical experience that transcends all criticism, and for forcing rational enquiry to follow the guidelines of their own faith. "Whoever demands of philosophy that it creates a Julia for him, will have to come sooner or later to the sublime maxim of Shakespeare's Romeo: *Hang up Philosophy! Unless philosophy can make a Juliet!*" (II, 70). Schlegel censures mystics as enthusiasts, as dreamers who prefer to reach truth immediately by fantasy rather than by the painful effort of enquiry (VIII, 10). His criticism of indubitable first principles made him especially skeptical of Jacobi's appeal to some immediate intuition as the basis of knowledge. He argues that Jacobi's claim that every proof ultimately presupposes something unproven, some self-evident insight or experience, works only if we assume that all knowledge is based on a single fundamental principle; but it is not necessary to appeal to such an experience if the justification for a proposition is based on the mutual support of other propositions in a coherent system (II, 71–72).

Schlegel's published reviews are only half of the story, however. His more private reflections reveal that he had a much more complicated and ambivalent view of mysticism. In December 1796 he sent Novalis a packet containing his latest philosophical musings, which revolve around the theme of mysticism.⁵⁰ Rather than simply condemning mysticism as a betrayal of the ideal of free enquiry, Schlegel now has a much more positive view of it. He states that the mystics are those from whom we should learn philosophy (no. 11; XVIII, 5), that they are the masters of the original science of the absolute (no. 39; XVIII, 15), that they are more moral and consistent than

empiricists, skeptics, and eclectics (nos. 9, 20; XVIII, 4–5), and that mysticism is the beginning of progressive history, whose central goal is a mystical idea (no. 23; XVIII, 6). Not all mystics, Schlegel admits, are like Jacobi, who is a *false* mystic because he mixes empirical motives with purer mystical ideals (nos. 3, 26, 60; XVIII, 3, 6, 9).

There can be no doubt that Schlegel's interest in mysticism in these notebooks stems from his concern with the problem of how to know the absolute. He restates this problem explicitly: "What can I know is only one-half of the problem; the other half is: *how* can I know?" (no. 33; XVIII, 7). Mysticism is one of the most serious attempts to answer these questions because "Its *essence* and its *beginning* consists in the free positing of the absolute" (no. 7; XVIII, 4). Mysticism consists in the aspiration toward absolute unity (no. 39; XVIII, 7), and in the positing of the existence of the absolute, from which it is possible to explain everything (no. 2; XVIII, 3). So seriously does Schlegel now take mysticism that he thinks that both Fichte and Spinoza are mystics, because they both postulate the absolute and appeal to some form of intellectual intuition (nos. 2, 12; XVIII, 3, 5).

Although his attitude toward mysticism is more positive than his published reviews suggest, Schlegel still rejects it. His new appreciation of mysticism goes along with a new criticism of it. Schlegel thinks that skepticism, eclecticism, and mysticism are three "degenerate forms" (*Abarten*) of philosophy, three kinds of "logical sickness." Although mysticism is the most instructive and consistent of these forms, it is still deviant, a form of "unphilosophical philosophy" (no. 101; XVIII, 13). All these aberrant forms not only destroy one another, but also themselves (no. 6; XVIII, 4). Mysticism ends in "dull inner brooding." The main problem with mysticism is still the same as that which Schlegel had insisted on in his reviews: it is uncritical (nos. 52, 93; XVIII, 8–9, 12). Schlegel reaffirms his commitment to the endless creative activity of free enquiry, which he now sees as the basis of philosophy itself. The essence of philosophy is "the striving for unity in our knowledge" (no. 101; XVIII, 13), and the only given from which it begins is the principle "I strive after unity of knowledge" (no. 18; XVIII, 5). Hence the only cure for mysticism is *Bildung*, going gradually through all the stages of one's education and realizing that one cannot attain insight except after a long process of enquiry (no. 13; XVIII, 518).

It was only after his first meeting with Schleiermacher, which took place in July 1797, that Schlegel embraced the mystical as the basis of his philosophy. A fragment from that year shows its growing importance: "With the

mystical everything begins and ends. Only from the mystical must be derived physics, logic, poetry, ethics” (no. 656; XVIII, 84). There is now a major, though subtle, shift in Schlegel’s views about the nature of philosophy: it does not begin and end with the infinite striving of reason, but with some intuition or feeling for the universe. Hence he writes that philosophy in the strict sense should provide a *characteristic* of the universe (no. 494; XVIII, 70), that this is to be had only in poetry (no. 231; XVIII, 141), and that it requires something like an intellectual intuition (no. 1005; XVIII, 103). This new understanding of philosophy emerges fully in his essay *Über die Philosophie*, which he wrote in August 1798 and then published in the *Athenäum* in 1799. Here Schlegel is explicit that “The thought of the universe and its harmony is my one and all” (VIII, 49), and he makes religion the heart and soul of all *Bildung*. Hence, rather than being the antidote to enthusiasm, *Bildung* now derives from it. Schlegel further explains that “the *universe* remains my slogan” because there must be in all human feeling, thinking, and acting an interaction between individuality and universality, the single person and the universe as a whole (48–49). The more we love a person, the more harmony we find in the world; and the more harmony we find in the world, the more we will see the depth and richness of every individual. If we truly love someone, we also love the world in our beloved; and to do this we already must have at least a sense for the world. This was the mysticism of Diotima in the *Symposium* and of Schiller in the *Theosophie des jungen Julius*. It was indeed the mysticism involved in the Platonic longing for the ideal, which had been implicit in Schlegel’s thinking ever since 1793.

We are still left with the questions, however, how Schlegel could square his new mysticism with his radical criticism, and how it could provide a sufficient support for his absolute idealism. These were issues that Schlegel only fully faced in his lectures on transcendental idealism in 1801, to which we must now turn.

6. Lectures on Transcendental Idealism

Since July 1797 Schlegel had been living in Berlin, leading an insecure bohemian existence while trying to earn his living as a writer. But he never abandoned hopes for an academic career, and considered returning to Jena someday as a university lecturer. That opportunity finally came in the summer of 1800. Fichte and Schelling, the most popular champions of the new transcendental philosophy and the main rivals for prospective students, had

left Jena. It now seemed as if Schlegel could establish himself, unchallenged, as the chief spokesman for transcendental philosophy, and at the very university that had become the center of philosophy in Germany. So Schlegel duly returned to Jena and announced two lecture series for the winter semester, a public one entitled *Philosophiam transcendentalem* and a private series called *de officio philosophi*, an intended successor to Fichte's very popular lectures on the vocation of the intellectual. He began the first set of lectures on October 27, and concluded them on March 24, 1801; the second seems never to have been given.

Schlegel's lectures on transcendental philosophy were his most serious and sustained attempt to explain his new absolute idealism. Rather than simply suggesting his ideas in a few witty fragments, as he had done in the *Athenäum*, Schlegel now had to explain himself before a student audience. Furthermore, he also had to organize his ideas, casting them into something approaching systematic form. Unfortunately, however, the lectures have been lost. Schlegel's manuscript has disappeared, and all that remains are some fragmentary and incomplete notes by an unknown hand.⁵¹ Still, these notes are invaluable, providing the only insight into the details of Schlegel's thinking about absolute idealism around 1800.

One of the conditions of becoming a faculty member at the University of Jena was holding a public disputation, in which the candidate had to defend theses against opponents. Holding his dispute March 14, Schlegel chose to defend eight theses from his lectures.⁵² Some of them are very revealing about the nature of his absolute idealism. That his philosophy had a Platonic inspiration, and that it understood the ideal in Platonic terms, is clear from his first thesis: "I. *Platonis philosophia genuinus est Idealismus.*"⁵³ That his absolute idealism involved a preponderant element of realism is evident from his second proposition: "II. *Realismi majores sunt partes in Idealismo producendo quam Dualismi.*" And that he would conceive his idealism in aesthetic terms, by giving art a fundamental role as its organon and criterion, is clear from his fourth proposition: "IV. *Enthusiasmus est principium artis et scientia.*"

Schlegel's Jena lectures are important first and foremost because they are his only attempt to provide a systematic account of his absolute idealism. Unlike Novalis and Hölderlin, Schlegel half succeeded in organizing some of his ideas systematically, even though it was only in his lectures and in no published form. *Prima facie* this seems to contradict his earlier antifoundationalist views, especially those about the impossibility of creating an ideal system. The inconsistency appears all the greater when Schlegel begins

his exposition in foundationalist fashion, employing the geometric method with all the apparatus of definitions, axioms, and theorems. The inconsistency is only apparent, however, once we realize that Schlegel makes no claims whatsoever for the finality of his system.⁵⁴ Rather, he continues to stress that there is no ideal system, and that there are many different ways of organizing our views, none of which can make a claim to absolute truth. His old antifoundationalist scruples are still very much in evidence. Hence he insists that philosophy is only an experiment, whose success cannot be known a priori (XII, 3); he denies that philosophy can begin with formal definitions, which presuppose the knowledge it should attain (4); and he recognizes that there are an infinite number of proofs about the infinite (23). The lectures indeed end with Schlegel strongly reaffirming his antifoundationalism: that philosophy cannot start from a presuppositionless beginning, that all truth is relative, and that absolute truth can never be given (93–94). Given such antifoundationalism, we might wonder why Schlegel attempts to formulate a system at all. The reason is that he still thinks the philosopher has an obligation to strive after the systematic ideal: the maximum amount of unity for the greatest diversity of ideas (10, 28).⁵⁵

The introduction to the lectures sketches the foundation of Schlegel's absolute idealism. He begins with a short characteristic of philosophy itself, stating that "The tendency of philosophy is toward the absolute" (4). The absolute consists in a positive and negative factor: the positive factor is the unconditioned, the negative is the conditioned or the infinite series of individual finite things. Now what philosophy seeks in its attempt to know the absolute is some account of the unity of the unconditioned and conditioned, the unity of unity and multiplicity. The main problem of philosophy, as Schlegel puts it, is to find the central point of all *principles* and *ideas*. A 'principle' is that which gives us knowledge of the original or primary, the unity of all things, while an 'idea' is that which gives us knowledge of the whole, the totality of all finite things (4). The central point of all principles and ideas would then be the unity of the conditioned and unconditioned, of unity and multiplicity (7).

How do we find this central point? We first must abstract from everything that is not absolute, Schlegel urges, until we come to some point from which we cannot abstract any further. We then must "constitute" the absolute, that is, we must posit it absolutely as all reality (5). We do this through the "annihilation of every imagination of the finite."⁵⁶ In other words, we must affirm the absolute not only negatively, as that which is opposed to the finite, but also positively, as that which has infinite reality. This demands

completely negating the reality of the finite as something opposed to the absolute, because such a reality would limit it. How such negation is to take place the notes do not explain.

Still, the crucial question remains: What gives us the right to postulate the infinite? Schlegel replies that the consciousness of the infinite is given to the individual through the *feeling of the sublime*. Here indeed is the core of Schlegel's aesthetic idealism: the feeling of the sublime is the guarantee for the reality of the infinite, the criterion for knowledge of the absolute.⁵⁷ Schlegel states that this feeling consists in *enthusiasm*, which is the positive factor of philosophy just as skepticism is its negative factor (4, 6). In choosing this term, Schlegel was attempting to give a positive meaning to what had derogatory connotations ever since the Reformation. The *reductio ad absurdum* of any philosophy was once said to be that it "opens the gates of enthusiasm." Schlegel insisted, however, that it is one of the *strengths* of his philosophy that it does just this (42). But the main source of Schlegel's enthusiasm was Platonic rather than Protestant: it was nothing less than the third kind of madness of Plato's *Phaedrus*, that which comes from the muses and consist in poetic inspiration (245a).

Schlegel insists that the feeling of the sublime cannot be explained or defined. The absolute thesis of all philosophy—the postulation of the existence of the absolute—cannot be demonstrated because it contains its proof within itself (24). It is not, however, simply a form of faith (*Glaube*), because this feeling is a form of knowledge. All faith contains something uncertain, whose opposite is also possible, which is not the case with the first principle of philosophy (24). Although this feeling cannot be explained or demonstrated, it can still be interpreted, Schlegel insists, and the media of its interpretation is poetry.⁵⁸

But is it not possible that the feeling of the sublime is mistaken? Is the feeling the poet has for the infinite perhaps only a delusion? Schlegel's reply to this objection is surprising: he admits that this feeling is a fiction (*Erdichtung*), but he insists that it is still a necessary fiction because it is inherent in the most fundamental tendency of human nature. This tendency consists in the longing for the infinite, the striving to reunite ourselves with the universe (9). In calling it a fiction, Schlegel does not mean that it is false, but simply that it is an ideal that we cannot verify or falsify by discursive means. In other words, he admits that there is no proof for the infinite, and that we must simply *experience* its reality, which can no more be proved than the existence of colors to a blind man.

Whatever the problems of knowing the infinite, Schlegel devotes most of

his attention in the introduction to exploring the *implications* of postulating its existence. No sooner does he posit the infinite than he comes to an important conclusion about the two basic elements or concepts of his idealism. If we abstract from the finite, and if we posit absolutely the infinite, we are still left with something outside the infinite from which we cannot abstract, namely the acts of positing and abstracting themselves. Since these acts belong to the *consciousness* of the infinite, it follows that the consciousness of the infinite remains something outside the infinite itself. Hence Schlegel concludes that *consciousness* and the *infinite* are the two basic elements of all philosophy, the two fundamental poles around which it forever revolves (5). With this argument, Schlegel had made his basic concession to Fichte, who had always maintained that the subjective is irreducible because the ego forever remains after abstraction from every object of consciousness.

Now that he has found his two irreducible poles, Schlegel states that the task of philosophy is to synthesize Fichte and Spinoza (6, 29–30). The pole of the infinite represents the philosophy of Spinoza, while that of consciousness stands for the philosophy of Fichte. His philosophy is to be a synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza because it insists on the necessity of each pole and the complementarity of both. They are interdependent, Schlegel says, because the only object of consciousness is the infinite, and the only predicate of the infinite is consciousness (6). The infinite and consciousness relate to one another as matter and form, he later explains, where matter gives substance and reality to form and form determination to matter (39).

Schlegel states that the basic formula of his philosophy, his synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza, is that “*the minimum of the ego is equal to the maximum of nature, and the minimum of nature is equal to the maximum of the ego*; in other words, the smallest sphere of consciousness is equal to the greatest of nature, and conversely” (6). This formula implies that the ego and nature, the subjective and objective, or ideal and real, are not *absolute* opposites, which are qualitatively opposed to one another, but *polar* opposites, which are quantitatively opposed to one another. The subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, therefore stand in a continuum where they are in inverse ratio to one another. The more we proceed in one direction, the further removed we are from the other. The middle point, where the two poles are perfectly balanced with one another, Schlegel calls by the neutral term “reality” (6). Following Schelling, he sometimes calls this center “the indifference point.”

What allows Schlegel to reconceive the subjective and objective in these

quantitative terms is his organic worldview, which he shares with Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schelling. The subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, differ only *quantitatively* because they are simply different degrees of organization and development of a single life force. In the first part of the lectures Schlegel makes the fundamental concept of his theory of nature the concept of 'life' or 'energy' (*Energie*). He then divides nature into two fundamental elements, form and matter. What unites these two elements, he explains, is the concept of an organism. It is the essential characteristic of an organism that it is matter making itself form and form making itself matter. The concept of energy designates the living inner power, the principle of organization, behind every organism (35). The concept of energy means that all things have only as much power (*Kraft*) as they have sense (*Sinn*), and that all things in nature are alive (33). Schlegel then applies this concept of an organism on a grand macrocosmic scale: "The universe is a work of art—an animal—a plant" (40).⁵⁹

Schlegel calls his synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza "idealism." It is idealism not in the sense that it holds all reality depends on the ego, but in the sense that it maintains all reality depends on an "absolute intelligence" within the universe itself (96). This absolute intelligence is not something subjective, having personality and consciousness, but it is that rational principle or archetype active in all things, the idea of all ideas. As Schlegel formulates idealism in an entry from the notebooks: "Idealism means nothing more than all reason is universal. It is the organ of man for the universe" (no. 701; XVIII, 252). Such idealism, Schlegel maintains, consists in two basic elements, 'dualism' and 'realism' (14). While dualism corresponds to the element of consciousness, because all consciousness involves some distinction between subject and object, realism corresponds to the element of the infinite. Schlegel is emphatic and explicit that this realism is not an *empirical* realism, because it goes beyond ordinary experience and concerns the infinite (14n).

The higher realism involved in Schlegel's absolute idealism is most apparent from some of the notebook entries written around the same time as the lectures. Sometimes Schlegel simply identifies idealism with "absolute realism" (no. 1174; XVIII, 418); and sometimes he insists that, though the ideal disappears in the real as the real in the ideal, it is always realism that dominates (no. 1236; XVIII, 298). So close is the connection of idealism with realism that he holds Spinoza is "the highest idealist" (no. 975; XVIII, 401–402). Schlegel's usage is not entirely consistent, however, because he also some-

times continues *to contrast* idealism with realism, saying that idealism becomes realism when the absolute appears as nature (no. 451; XVIII, 358). On the whole, however, Schlegel stresses the predominance of realism in his absolute idealism, fearing that his doctrine could be confused with the more subjective idealism of Kant and Fichte. It is this realist dimension of idealism, he claims, that undermines Jacobi's objections against its purely subjective status (no. 459; XVIII, 358). The realist dimension of Schlegel's idealism ultimately derives from his postulate of the infinite, the one and all, which transcends all finite consciousness. This is not, however, Spinozism pure and simple, given Schlegel's vitalism. This injection of life into Spinoza's static universe restores the subjective component on a cosmic scale.

Schlegel maintains that, properly conceived, idealism is opposed to not realism but dogmatism.⁶⁰ The distinguishing characteristic of dogmatism is that it seeks reality in merely formal principles (12). It begins from the merely phenomenal and assumes that the categories (for example, causality, quality, and quantity) are true of reality itself (14). What Schlegel means by 'dogmatism' here is not the fallacy exposed by Kant: ascribing to things-in-themselves what is true only for the understanding. Rather, it is the sin later described by Schelling and Hegel: assuming that the categories valid for the finite world are also applicable to the infinite. In opposing idealism to dogmatism in this sense, Schlegel apparently means that idealism is committed to the doctrine that there is something infinite that transcends expression in the finite or conceptual terms.

It is striking that Schlegel, like Schelling around the same time, virtually identifies the standpoint of idealism with *Naturphilosophie*. Physics is the first of all the sciences, he says, because all science is ultimately the science of nature (16). He is almost ready to conclude that the standpoint of idealism completely coincides with physics, but then stops himself by asking what is the distinction between them. It is as if Schlegel now intends to work out his differences with Schelling. The distinction between philosophy and physics, he answers, is that the philosopher has to deal with the maximum and minimum of reality themselves, the two poles of the absolute, whereas the physicist has to deal with only the finite members that lie between these poles (17). In finally assigning the physicist such a subsidiary task, Schlegel had put a distance between himself and Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. This distance indeed grew with the years, as Schlegel increasingly allied himself with Novalis' efforts to go beyond Schelling.⁶¹

Schlegel reformulates the basic problem behind his lectures—how to

think the unity of unity and multiplicity—by raising the question why the infinite goes outside itself and makes itself finite. In other words, why are there individual things? His answer to this question again reveals the pivotal role of the aesthetic in his idealism. He explains that there are two fundamental opposing concepts that must be reconciled: the infinite, which is indivisible and eternal, and the finite or the individual, which is divisible and transitory. The mediating concept between these two is that of the image (*Bild*), presentation (*Darstellung*), or allegory (*Allegorie*). The individual is the image of the single infinite substance, its presentation of the essence of substance. The allegorical form of this explanation is that “God creates the world in order to portray himself” (39). This means that the infinite is a kind of divine artist, creating the entire world for its self-knowledge. The infinite is therefore to be conceived as a kind of intelligence, what Schlegel, anticipating Hegel, calls “spirit” (*Geist*) (39).

Schlegel's postulate of the infinite, his fondness for Spinoza, and his identification of reality itself with the divine, makes his absolute idealism appear essentially pantheistic.⁶² This is indeed the case; but it is important to stress that it is a pantheism with a difference. True to his organic vision, Schlegel sees the divine as in a process of becoming, as undergoing a process of organic development whereby it moves from unity, to difference, to unity-in-difference.⁶³ Schlegel further insists that this process of divine development is something in which all human beings participate. The universe itself is imperfect and in development, gradually realizing itself through our finite actions.⁶⁴ Hence history becomes a constitutive part of the absolute. This historical dimension of Schlegel's metaphysics becomes especially apparent when Schlegel states that God is really only a task for us, and that we create him through our own actions.⁶⁵

All these aspects of Schlegel's lectures—the Platonic inspiration, the emphasis on the unity of Fichte and Spinoza, the aesthetic vision of the universe, the organic conception of reality—make them an *almost* perfect epitome of absolute idealism. All that they lack is rigor and detail, which is not surprising for a student transcript. It is all the more a pity, therefore, that the original manuscripts are missing. Yet, given Schlegel's restless creative spirit, we might well doubt if he would have ever sat long enough to perfect them.

