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## The Very Idea of Innovation

### From Descartes to Post-Kantianism

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#### ABSTRACT

Right at the outset of modern philosophy, Descartes surprisingly tried to blunt opposition to his new system by contending that it was not best described as an innovation. Nonetheless, the Scientific Revolution brought about an unparalleled shift in philosophy when the classical early moderns modeled their work largely on the systematic style of the new exact sciences. I discuss how and why the limitations in this approach led to another sea change in philosophical style, with the historically oriented innovations in philosophical writing advanced by the German Idealists and then the Early Romantics. The approaches of these movements are compared and contrasted with respect to how well they do justice to philosophy's genuine need, after the rise of modern science, to be presented in a distinctive and appropriately innovative manner.

*Keywords:* innovation, Scientific Revolution, Early Romantics, *Historical Turn*, Late Modernity

#### RÉSUMÉ

Dès l'orée de la philosophie moderne, Descartes a tenté de manière surprenante de désamorcer l'opposition à son nouveau système en prétendant que le terme innovation n'était pas le terme approprié pour le qualifier. Néanmoins, la révolution scientifique a entraîné un changement sans précédent en philosophie, le travail des penseurs de la modernité classique ayant été largement modelé à partir de là sur le style systématique des nouvelles sciences exactes. J'examine ici comment et pourquoi les insuffisances de cette approche ont conduit à un autre changement majeur du style philosophique, à travers les innovations historiques s'opérant dans l'écriture philosophique promue par les idéalistes puis les premiers romantiques allemands. L'article compare et expose les différences existant entre ces mouvements, eu égard à leur aptitude à rendre justice au réel besoin de la philosophie, après l'essor de la science moderne, d'être présentée de manière distinctive et adéquatement novatrice.

*Mots-clés :* innovation, révolution scientifique, premiers romantiques allemands, *Historical Turn*, modernité tardive

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Snow's idea that engineers would solve the world's problems precisely by *not* reading Shakespeare, i.e., by devoting themselves single-mindedly to inventing industries to generate wealth, has since become so commonplace that we express it in a single word: 'innovation'.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Innovation as a Problem for Modern Philosophy

In his *Principia Philosophiae* (1644), Descartes went so far as to claim, "I have used no principles in this treatise which are not accepted by everyone; this philosophy is nothing new but is extremely old and very common."<sup>2</sup> Such a surprising statement naturally leads to the question of why Descartes, of all people, would feel a need to present his remarkably modern philosophy as if it is *not* fundamentally new and as if this is a *good* thing.

The first steps in an answer to this question can be found in some intriguing research by Daniel Garber, who has shown that, at the beginning of the early modern period, the word "innovator" was in general a term of *abuse*.<sup>3</sup> At that time it was still commonly assumed that it was bad to depart from long-standing philosophical positions, and hence it is not entirely surprising that even Descartes wanted to avoid being branded as a *novatore*, that is, a purveyor of what is merely new-fangled. Descartes even went so far as to claim that it was the Aristotelian-Scholastic systems that had "invented" divisive new claims, whereas his philosophy relies on "ancient" principles that provide the "common ground among all philosophers":

I shall add something that may seem paradoxical. Everything in peripatetic philosophy, regarded as a distinctive school that is different from others, is quite new, whereas everything in my philosophy is old. For as far as principles are concerned, I only accept those which in the past have always been common ground among all philosophers without exception, and which are therefore the most ancient of all. Moreover, the conclusions I go on to deduce are already contained and implicit in these principles, and I show this so clearly as to make it apparent that they too are very ancient, insofar as they are naturally implanted in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Riskin, "Just Use Your Thinking Pump!," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 67 (2020), 51.

<sup>2</sup> René Descartes, *Œuvres de Descartes*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), VIII A 323; henceforth: AT.

<sup>3</sup> All passages from Descartes are cited in Daniel Garber, "Descartes Among the *Novatores*," *Res Philosophica* 92 (2015): 1-19. See also Tad Schmaltz, "What is Ancient in French Cartesianism?," in *The Battle of the Gods and Giants Redux*, ed. Patricia Easton and Kurt Smith (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 23-43; and, for an overall perspective, see *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Princeton: Princeton Center for the Study of Human Values, 2004).

human mind. By contrast, the principles of the commonly accepted philosophy [in the “schools”] – at least at the time when they were invented by Aristotle and others – were quite new, and we should not suppose that they are any better now than they were then.<sup>4</sup>

Along this line, Descartes could also have argued that not only was Aristotle’s system an unfortunate innovation in its own day, but so too was the medieval adoption of Aristotelian doctrines, and hence it was no accident that they were regarded as radical enough to be temporarily condemned in 1277 by the authorities of that era (which in any case was hardly a seamless and unchanging unity). Moreover, by Descartes’ own time, the ever more influential perspective of the Reformation treated the doctrines of all other churches as infected by seriously misguided philosophical notions. The reformers (each in their own way) viewed Catholic doctrines as themselves corrupt departures, in this case from the ancient conceptual framework of the original Christian era. This claim naturally generates the question of whether even that era may have involved some debatable departures from earlier traditions,<sup>5</sup> and it makes understandable the strong interest, in the work of Herbert of Cherbury and others in Descartes’ time, in finding a philosophical framework that would be independent of the controversial doctrines of any local school or dogmatic theological tradition.

The fractured religious and political background of sixteenth and seventeenth century debates about the status of the new science helps explain the special intensity of the disputes between Descartes and his highly energized philosophical opponents. Descartes’ touchiness about being regarded as just another divisive radical is a giveaway that he sensed that major changes were coming and that, with the ascendancy of the new scientific understanding of the world, philosophy needed to prepare for momentous upheavals. As John Donne had realized, it was an era in which “new philosophy calls all into doubt.”<sup>6</sup> This chaotic situation also helps explain the peculiar fact that there were even attempts by some desperate

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<sup>4</sup> Descartes, letter to Dinet, AT VII 580; V 140.

<sup>5</sup> There is an old dispute about change here. For example, according to Ephraim Shedd, “Stephen thus considered himself a restorer of old, not a teacher of new truth.” “Stephen’s Defense before the Sanhedrin,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 13 (1899), 101. Cf. James Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); and Diarmaid MacCulloch, “The Vitality of Orthodoxy,” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 67 (2020), 54: “[we need] to see through the common claim that Orthodox history represents a timeless, unchanging faith and practice. Actually, Orthodoxy has been remarkably good at innovation. In the eighth and ninth centuries [for example]...”

<sup>6</sup> John Donne, *An Anatomy of the World* (1611). See also Richard Popkin’s classic, *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960).

thinkers, such as René le Bossu, to construct a combined Cartesian-Aristotelian system,<sup>7</sup> one that would provide a calming syncretic response to the perplexing worry that, after the scientific breakthroughs of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, a radically innovative philosophy was required. Despite these patchwork efforts, there can be no doubt that by the middle of the seventeenth century a new era had arisen with the irreversible establishment of the new physics. This was no mere technical advance but soon amounted to nothing less than the first-ever universal and well-grounded challenge not only to traditional religious philosophies but also to the age-old and naively teleological worldview of common sense in general.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that this development would give rise to nothing less than a fundamentally new kind of philosophy and a whole new world picture.

Rather than going further into the specifics of the seventeenth-century debate, my main concern will be with arguing that the intense worry about innovation in the era of the birth of modern science has several connections with important issues that are still relevant to appreciating *general* developments in philosophy and, in particular, to understanding the problem of *philosophical authority* and *progress* in our own time. The challenge to traditional philosophy brought about by modern science required a much better response than le Bossu's unpromising compromise. Moreover, it eventually became evident that there were fundamental shortcomings in the new aspects of the mainline work of even Descartes and his major modern successors. It took a while, however, to fully appreciate these shortcomings, and it can be argued that it was not until the end of the classical modern era, with the first post-Kantians in late 1780s Germany, that another *significantly new* model of philosophical writing developed, one that has taken on a variety of valuable forms to this day.

## 2. Innovation and History after Kant

There are a number of variations in the initial German response, and they need to be carefully distinguished in order to be properly evaluated with regard to the issue of how effectively they introduced a new form for philosophy that is innovative in a *fruitful* sense – one that continues to give it a significant role for the future, in the wake of the Scientific Revolution, and

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<sup>7</sup> Garber cites, among other works, René le Bossu, *Parallèle des Principes de la Physique d'Aristote et de celle de René Des Cartes* (Paris, 1674).

<sup>8</sup> Here I must ignore numerous rich complexities in Descartes' work. For a fuller picture, see Deborah J. Brown and Calvin G. Normore, *Descartes and the Ontology of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Durs Grünbein, *Descartes' Devil: Three Meditations*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Upper West Side Philosophers, 2010).

yet is not a crude program that dismisses even Shakespeare but instead has the virtue of finding appropriate ways to make use of past thought. The most distinctive general feature of the shift in philosophy carried out by the post-Kantians is the insistence on a new *form* of expression that I have labeled elsewhere as the *Historical Turn* in philosophy – a turn that was accompanied by the rise of a new general *attitude*, one that still dominates much of the best thought even beyond Germany and that I have labeled as *Late Modernity*.<sup>9</sup> This attitude characterizes an outlook that is still *modern*, since it *accepts* and even emphasizes the continuing significance of the Scientific Revolution – as well as the need for an expansion of the democratic political changes of the era. But it is also *late* in that it involves a new recognition of achievements of the past while beginning from a perception of the *limits* not only of much of premodernity (which focuses on allegedly evident and eternal doctrines) but also of the classical modern notion that philosophy needs to be modeled largely on exact science (which focuses basically on the technical achievements of the present).

In their distinctive *argumentative style*, the late modern exemplars of the Historical Turn stress a fundamentally historical mode of philosophical exposition, a *conceptual narrative* that contrasts significantly with the straightforward form of the quasi-scientific systems of the main classical modern philosophers in the century and a half from 1640 to 1790. In the golden age of genius from Descartes through Kant, major philosophers on the continent as well as in Britain (recall that even Hume aimed to be a “Newton” of the mind) presented their thought not merely in the form of an *ahistorical total system* but as one that – unlike Aristotle’s – aims at mimicking and even *grounding* the universal scope, rigorous style, and special certainty of modern physics. Notwithstanding Descartes’ denials and the differences between rationalist and empiricist approaches, it is clear that the leading philosophers in this period undertook in common what was at that time a truly innovative and extraordinary project. In what Heidegger called “the age of the world picture” – because it reconceived the whole world and our experience in terms of a philosophical vision of it as a technically systematic Cartesian grid – the classical modern systems led to the construction of an all-encompassing “scientific image” to replace not only the Scholastic

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<sup>9</sup> I take this era to extend from right after Kant’s time to our own day. See my *Kant and the Historical Turn: Philosophy as Critical Appropriation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), Part II; *Kant’s Elliptical Path* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), Part III; and *Kantian Subjects: Critical Philosophy and Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Part II.

tradition but also the whole “manifest image” of the everyday lifeworld that had been dominant for centuries.<sup>10</sup>

In reaction to this philosophical revolution, the post-Kantians introduced the next major shift in method when, as late moderns, they turned away from what they took to be, by their time, a redundant and distorting fixation on mechanistic physics.<sup>11</sup> Almost all of them began their main work when they were together in Jena, the small university town near Weimar that the lectures of Karl Reinhold (a renegade former priest from Vienna) had made the center of the huge initial enthusiasm for Kant’s work – and that also, through Goethe’s support, eventually became a major force in sciences such as biology and optics.<sup>12</sup> The Jena writers soon divided into two related but quite different groups: the German Idealists and the Early Romantics.<sup>13</sup> The Idealists carried out their version of the Historical Turn by developing highly dynamic systems with either a *moral-practical* or an *organic-theoretical* emphasis. While the former orientation dominated the largely praxis-directed works of Reinhold and Fichte, and the latter distinguished the especially ambitious developmental metaphysics of the early Schelling (e.g., *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 1800) and Hegel (e.g., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807), all four major Idealists felt it necessary to carry out a step-by-step reconstruction of the philosophical history of consciousness in general.

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<sup>10</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 115–36; and Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 35–78.

<sup>11</sup> Note the transitional terminology in one of the first documents of this change: Eckart Förster, “‘To Lend Wings to Physics Again’: ‘The Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism,’” *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (1995): 174–198.

<sup>12</sup> The immediate post-Kantian era was marked by revolutionary developments in sciences such as chemistry and biology, developments that Kant encountered only in their first phases. See *The Impact of Idealism. The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, vol. 1: *Philosophy and Natural Sciences*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> There are many fine recent overviews of this movement. See e.g., *Brill’s Companion to German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan and Judith Norman (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2018). My aim here is simply to give a sketch of how it can be seen as a *kind* of approach that offers a distinctive response to the question of why and how philosophy needs to be “innovative.” It is impossible in this context to reconstruct the details of the philosophy of the Early Romantics, let alone of related figures such as Schiller and Jacobi. The readings of Kant by these major figures have had – it can be argued – a long-term unfortunate effect, misleading most post-Kantians except for Hölderlin. Schiller’s miscue is the assumption that Kant held to a *necessary incompatibility* of inclination and moral reason, whereas Kant claimed only a *lack of necessary agreement*; and Jacobi’s error is to overlook the technical determinate meaning of “explanation” in Kant and to assume that, in transcendental idealism, things in themselves are introduced as inconsistent *explainers* of empirical determinations rather than as merely *indeterminate grounds*.

The four main Early Romantic philosophers – Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schleiermacher – quickly became disappointed with the new systematic obsessions of the Jena Idealists. They embarked on reconceiving philosophy in a different key by retaining an historical orientation but writing in the more fragmentary style of (1) “*progressive* (2) *universal* (3) *poetry*” – that is, in a manner that (1) is Enlightenment-oriented in ethics, (2) addresses all of humanity as such, including its common rationality, but is distinctive (3) in promoting change by also emphasizing aesthetically creative language and the importance of nonsystematizable features of human life.<sup>14</sup> The Romantic interest in the nonsystematizable takes many forms, but it is not a promotion of irrationality and usually is paired with a Kantian respect for our natural *regulative* interest in systematically utilizing the “Ideas of reason” (introduced in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) as far as is feasible. Like their similarly influential English Romantic contemporaries, the Early German Romantics were extraordinarily skilled creative writers, poets in a broad sense, and invented a new literary style with their highly imaginative stories, fables, and novels. In addition, in their more explicitly philosophical work, they were equally creative in choosing to write in the form of ironic and provocative aphorisms, fragments, and popular essays. A typical example is *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), composed by Schleiermacher around the same time that he was studying Spinoza and deciding to embark, initially in collaboration with Friedrich Schlegel, on his game-changing translations of Plato (while also developing an appreciation of Aristotle, which went back to his oldest existing work, his notes of 1788, and eventually flowered in his *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*, 1812-17). Besides being theologically innovative, this essay is directed toward a general modern audience and complements Schleiermacher’s prescient insights concerning the enlightening value of “free sociability” and new cosmopolitan forms of human relations (salons, reading societies, academic exchanges) that challenge the strictures of standard political and economic organizations and traditional restrictions on women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The famous phrase “progressive universal poetry,” from Schlegel and Novalis’ *Athenaeum* (1798), #116, is treated in detail and connected with Hölderlin’s work in my “History, Succession, and German Romanticism,” in *The Relevance of Romanticism. Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47-67.

<sup>15</sup> See Jeffrey Hoover, “Friedrich Schleiermacher’s ‘Toward a Theory of Sociable Conduct’: An Introduction and Translation,” *Neues Athenaeum/New Athenaeum*, vol. 4 (1994): 9-39; and Peter Foley, *Schleiermacher’s “Essay on a Theory of Sociable Behavior” (1799): A Contextual Study* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

However much they differed, both wings of post-Kantians stressed a *detailed* historical approach, one modeled on a key innovative feature of Reinhold's *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*. This work, which made Reinhold quickly famous throughout Germany, was originally a series of articles in a popular journal (1786-7) that became so widely known that most Jena writers borrowed heavily from its orientation without bothering to make explicit references. In place of Kant's own perplexing characterization of Critical philosophy in his quasi-Newtonian *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present itself as a Science* (1783), Reinhold introduced a striking new standard: that the defence of any viable philosophy of the future must involve showing how it is, supposedly, the *only* proper course to take after a *sequential* evaluation of the *whole* pathway of major previous philosophies.<sup>16</sup> Partially under the influence of his history-obsessed Weimar pastor, Johann Gottfried Herder, Reinhold used this developmental model initially to defend the Critical philosophy as presented in the first edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Instead of laying out the technical complexities of the *Critique*, Reinhold organized his presentation around showing how the general thrust of Kant's thought perfectly expressed the "spirit of the age" and pointed to a way to finally overcome one-sided divisions (broadly empiricist and anti-empiricist) in philosophy that went back to the Greeks and had become acute in the heated conflict between religious and anti-religious tendencies in the Enlightenment.

All the Jena philosophers followed the lead of this methodological innovation in Reinhold's work. The historical observations in the reconstructions offered by the Romantic writers are often more episodic in style than Reinhold's, but they are also much more imaginative, lapidary in form, diversity-oriented in content, and especially perceptive with regard to

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<sup>16</sup> For documentation of this point, see my *Kant and the Historical Turn*, ch. 8. Reinhold's historical approach represents only one aspect of his work. He often switched his tactics (though always with the aim of most efficiently promoting his Enlightenment-oriented goals), sometimes appealing to universally accepted facts of common sense or, at other times, presenting himself as a follower of Herder, or Kant, or Fichte, or Jacobi, or Bardili. Hence Samuel Beckett's perceptive line, in *First Love* (1946): "Yes, there are moments, particularly in the afternoon, when I go all syncretist, à la Reinhold." *Premier amour* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970); English translation (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 26. The mention of "afternoon" already conveys the atmosphere of late modernity. An account of past philosophers can be found, of course, even in the work of figures such as Aristotle, but this is not the same thing as contending that a reconstruction of a full historical *pattern* should *henceforth* be a *primary* feature of philosophical argumentation.



humanity's place in nature.<sup>17</sup> In these ways they contrast with the narrowly progressive attitude of the German Idealists, especially in the works of Fichte and Hegel, which often dismiss non-Germanic and allegedly less advanced cultures. Despite their differences, each of these post-Kantians deserves part of the credit for the momentous shift in writing style that characterizes the broadly genealogical approach that came to dominate much of later philosophy. This approach, albeit carried out in a wide variety of forms, became the main common feature of the writings of a wide range of many of the most widely read philosophers of the future, from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault in Europe to Richard Rorty, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Brandom, and many others outside Europe in our own time.

### 3. The Moderately Innovative Legacy of the Early Romantic Philosophers

As innovators, the Early Romantics were distinctive in a complex manner because when they imaginatively invented their new kind of genre-crossing philosophical style, they also shared the worry about *mere* innovation expressed even by figures such as Descartes. At the same time that the Romantics recognized that it was understandable that modern philosophy would try to retain a special status for itself by co-opting features of the widely-conquering authority of the unprecedentedly successful new physics, they also believed that any attempt at a *totally new* or overly future-oriented understanding of philosophy and knowledge in general was naive. Even today, the texts of the Early Romantic writers have a special appeal because of the way that they show how modern culture needs to look back to the past for authentically revitalizing rather than regressive or Whiggish purposes. The Romantics were motivated to initiate this kind of approach because of their common disenchantment with not only the overly ambitious philosophical claims accompanying the success of the new physics but also the work of their

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<sup>17</sup> See Jane Kneller, "Novalis, Nature, and the Absolute," in *Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations*, ed. Gerard Kuperus and Marjolein Oele (Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 117-32. On the idea that some roots of this view of nature are already in Kant (as argued by Kneller), see Pierfrancesco Biasetti, "From Beauty to Love: A Kantian Way to Environmental Moral Theory?," in *Environmental Philosophy* 12 (2015): 139-160. On the intricate intertwining of nature and history in Hölderlin, see Camilla Flodin, "'The eloquence of something that has no language': Adorno on Hölderlin's Late Poetry," *Adorno Studies*, vol. 2 (2018), 1-25. With regard to diversity, Flodin (19, n. 101) notes that, as a vivid contrast to Idealist philosophies of unity and full reconciliation, Adorno repeatedly stressed a famous line from a late fragment by Hölderlin, *Sämliche Werke: Stuttgarter Hölderlin Ausgabe. Gedichte nach 1800*, ed. Friedrich Beißner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953), vol. 2:1, 327: "Unterschiedenes ist gut." (Distinctions are good.)

Jena contemporaries, the quasi-Cartesian (that is, focused on what supposedly can be deduced from the mere notion of self-consciousness), extravagantly systematic, and all too narrowly optimistic German Idealists.

What distinguishes the Idealist movement, in contrast to the Romantics, is its tie to another of Reinhold's striking claims, his bold insistence – in the *Elementarphilosophie* (1789) that he developed in his first attempt at trying to surpass Kant as a systematic thinker – that a proper philosophical system must derive everything “from one principle,” the principle of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> Rather than mocking this extraordinary demand, Reinhold's immediate Idealist successors opted at first for trying to provide a *more fundamental* principle than the one offered by Reinhold. At the same time, this systematic wing of post-Kantianism combined its derivations from a first principle (e.g., the “I” or “being”) with the presentation of a *logically* developmental version of the Historical Turn, that is, one that claimed to be rational in the rigorous sense of *demonstrating* the *necessity* in Western philosophy of each stage of a *full* succession of dialectically improving epistemological and metaphysical positions. Here too they were following Reinhold, who had provided a relatively modest model for these efforts with his extended earlier argument, in the second half of his *Letters*, that the Critical philosophy (which for a while was re-baptized as “Kantian-Reinholdian”) was appealing precisely insofar as it could be reformulated as a synthesis of what was lacking in the extreme positions developed in recent as well as ancient philosophy.

The Idealists connected their historical agenda with a broadly monistic and quasi-Spinozist belief that something analogous to the seemingly complete physics of the Newtonian era could be reproduced and even improved upon in the a priori truths of their developmentally dynamic as well as metaphysically exhaustive system. They each proposed an all-inclusive holism that understood reality as “subject as well as substance,” that is, as critically dynamic in its underlying argumentative path toward having finally entered, in principle, into a dialectically complete stage of rational self-consciousness and self-satisfaction. This famous phrase from the Preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* could also have been endorsed by Fichte and

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<sup>18</sup> Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* is presented in *Gesammelte Schriften: Kommentierte Ausgabe, vol. 1: Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens*, ed. Martin Bondeli and Sylvan Imhof (Basel: Schwabe, 2013). Even at the time of the *Versuch*, however, Reinhold was more involved with historical and political matters (e.g., the anti-slavery movement) than generally recognized. See my “Reinhold, History, and the Foundation of Philosophy,” in *Karl Leonhard Reinhold and the Enlightenment*, ed. George di Giovanni (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 113-30; and *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 2.

Schelling,<sup>19</sup> although the subtext of Hegel's first major publication, the *Differenzschrift* (1801), was precisely to suggest that the systems of Fichte and Schelling, as well as of their predecessor Reinhold (whose name is also featured in the full title of the *Differenzschrift*), need to be understood as merely one-sided, although necessary, steps toward an encompassing Hegelian position. In proper dialectical-historical fashion, Schelling, in his *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (1833), eventually returned the favor to his one-time colleague by edging back toward the Romantics and reconceiving his own work as a more inclusive combination of a new "existential" "positive philosophy," featuring contingency and radical freedom, along with an old Hegelian "negative philosophy" of essences.

The Early Romantics rejected all the Jena versions of systematic philosophy, but insofar as *both* wings of post-Kantianism *insisted* on some kind of historical mode of presentation, it is worthwhile keeping in mind that they shared a *style* of argumentation that differs considerably from that of Kant and also the leading figures of the earlier, classical modern period.<sup>20</sup> The early moderns assumed that philosophy should proceed from first principles that are best laid out *directly* in a manner that parallels and undergirds the flourishing ahistorical sciences of mathematics, physics, and/or psychology (even though some had the skill to express their main points in dialogue form as well). Although Spinoza, Hume, Kant and others certainly had influential new perspectives on history, the presentation of their philosophical systems as such did not *emphasize* a need to invoke detailed argumentative treatments of a practically full *sequence* of the positions of their predecessors. With Reinhold and after, however, all the most interesting writers in the German

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<sup>19</sup> Schelling's development is especially complicated. See *Interpreting Schelling*, ed. Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Naomi Fisher, "Life, Lawfulness, and Contingency: Kant and Schelling on Organic Nature" (forthcoming). On the (often unappreciated) historical dimension of Fichte's early philosophy, see Ezequiel L. Posesorski, *Between Reinhold and Fichte: August Ludwig Hülsen's Contribution to the Emergence of German Idealism* (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2012). For a sketch of Novalis' compressed history of philosophy, see Laure Cahen-Maurel, "Novalis's Magical Idealism: A Threefold Philosophy of the Imagination, Love, and Medicine," *Symphilosophie*, vol. 1 (2019): 143-144.

<sup>20</sup> Some qualifications are in order for figures such as Gassendi. See Lynn S. Joy, "Humanism and the Problem of Traditions in Seventeenth-Century Natural Philosophy," in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 139-48; and Monte Johnson, "Was Gassendi an Epicurean?" *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 20 (2003): 339-359. Rousseau and Herder also wrote before 1790, but much of their impact on historical thinking in philosophy came later. Although some of Herder's writings preceded Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he counts as a post-Kantian because his career began only after being one of Kant's first students.

tradition were innovative in explicitly stressing the need to construct a broad narrative of past systems for the purpose of showing in a successive manner how their own work was a compelling alternative to the main stages of prior philosophy, including orthodox Kantianism. There are understandable reasons why this shift occurred exactly where and when it did. The key catalyst for the Historical Turn right then was the *double crisis* of a bewildering plurality of *conflicting interpretations* (“misunderstandings” that needed to be explained) of Kant’s Critical philosophy, and a growing awareness that the exact sciences were now threatening to develop an independent and improper *monopoly* on intellectual authority. In the academy as well as society at large, modern science marched forward impressively without any appeal to the alleged but conflicting “foundations” offered in classical modern philosophy, let alone to the basic ideas that dominated earlier and more teleological and theological traditions.

From this point on, most philosophers faced two main options. A first and more systematic option was taken by those who chose to still attach themselves closely to something that at least tried to appear very much like the general *form* of “rigorous science.” This could be done either by attempting yet again, like the Idealists, to *ground* science in some kind of pure, although historically inflected, *Wissenschaftslehre* (Husserl, who as a student enjoyed Fichte’s work, worked out a late version of this project), or instead, in the positivist movement (which, after Comte, had a broad international following), by turning philosophy into a new kind of handmaiden, tasked with simply putting science’s independent achievements into a *perspicuous natural order* and thereby reducing philosophy to an after the fact *Wissenschaftstheorie*.

The second option that developed in the chaos of the immediate Kantian aftermath was taken by Romantics such as Novalis and Schlegel, who developed an orientation that still affirms the new exact sciences but stresses other irreducible capacities of philosophy and culture in general.<sup>21</sup> The Romantics turned away from the pretence that philosophy itself is a

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<sup>21</sup> See Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: The Romantic Generation and the Discovery of the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2010). On the “Romantic narrative” of nineteenth century science, see Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 233. It is significant that the most scientific work of Novalis, who was well-trained in geology and mathematics, is called *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, to indicate its form as a collection of suggestive affinities rather than a tight deductive order. Schlegel’s early work was important in stimulating interest in Sanskrit and the early science of linguistics. See Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24-27.

quasi-science or mere handmaiden. They had the talent to develop an appealing new form of historically conceptual philosophical writing by employing a flexible, ironic, and aesthetic style, one that best exploits the *general argumentative* capacities that give philosophical writing a unique role and authority. The Romantics' turn toward a less rigidly systematic approach, in appropriating what is best in philosophy's own long development, provided a stimulating new paradigm for numerous innovative writers in later generations – including the well-schooled Anglophone sequence of Coleridge, Emerson, and Cavell. It eventually inspired a whole series of philosophers to more effectively supplement and bridge, from a late modern perspective, the very different realms of art, ethics, religion, and science, and thereby to further Enlightenment goals in a way that is at once sophisticated and yet appropriately popular.

The importance of keeping in mind the distinctive advantages of different kinds of disciplines has been noted in recent discussions that helpfully distinguish the *general* methodologies and values of the sciences and the humanities in our era.<sup>22</sup> These discussions tend, however, to stay at a nonhistorical, “geographic” level and leave underthematized the historical issue of exactly how *philosophical progress* in particular – especially in our post-Scientific Revolution and post-Kantian era – compares and contrasts with the nature of development in exact science as well as art. In this context it is relevant to ask again how we are to make sense of the fact that even the greatest early modern talents in both science and philosophy, namely Descartes and Leibniz,<sup>23</sup> wanted to downplay the notion that philosophy itself should be understood as basically innovative. What was going on then, and what lessons does that have for later philosophy, especially in the context of post-Kantian thought?

My hypothesis is that Descartes and Leibniz had considerable preemptive foresight and were motivated in large part by suspicions that, no matter how impressive the new results of early modern physics were, the particular scientific advances that they generated would likely be vulnerable to further revolutions. Although Descartes could give the impression that he was committed to claiming that substantive principles of physics followed from his most basic *metaphysical* notions, in the end he admitted that the best argument for his particular system of *physical* principles was how well, in

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<sup>22</sup> See Richard Foley, *The Geography of Insight: The Sciences, The Humanities, How They Differ, Why They Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Leibniz's interest in connecting his mature philosophy and science with what he took to be genuinely valuable in the Scholastic tradition has been well documented by Daniel Garber and others.

comparison to other alternatives, it appeared to *explain* a wide range of phenomena.<sup>24</sup> It did not take very long, however, for new and even better explanations to arise in science. Even though Newton and others needed to pay considerable attention to Descartes' work, most of the Cartesian physical system was quickly known to be outdated. Nevertheless, precisely because Descartes emphasized a distinction between the levels of the a priori metaphysical principles in works such as his *Meditations*, and the ineliminable empirical content of modern physics and other sciences, much of his "first philosophy" could appear to remain safe from being disproven by a quick *reductio* argument. Although the Cartesian physical principles that led to falsehood were presented as in some way grounded in deeper metaphysical principles, the physical principles could be given up, after the development of better scientific explanations, by insisting that the more general metaphysical claims were not themselves at fault, and there was simply some mistake in what was thought to be dependent upon them. Similarly, Leibniz can be read as having a two-level system, such that particular empirical claims about bodies could be taken to be accurate and "real enough," but in a "lightweight" and possibly transient sense that is distinct from the most basic metaphysical principles of his system.<sup>25</sup>

This kind of separation between levels of argument can be used by defenders of rationalist philosophy *in general* – in the early moderns, Kant, and German Idealism – to contend that their metaphysical principles are not "mere innovations" in the manner of the concrete "here today – gone tomorrow" scientific hypotheses that, for example, Tycho Brahe had used in his new but still not elliptical model of the solar system, or that Descartes had advanced in his new but soon refuted thermal conception of the circulation of blood. Matters became quite problematic for philosophy itself, however, at the end of the classical modern period, when critics such as Hume and Kant offered arguments that convinced most philosophers that classical (i.e., early modern) rationalist *metaphysics* was also vulnerable to radical correction and was in many ways *even less* trustworthy than the principles of early modern science that had turned out to need to be quickly replaced. The status of philosophy and the issue of its methodology became even more of a problem when similar arguments were then advanced against Hume's phenomenalism and Kant's transcendentalism as well.

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<sup>24</sup> See the discussion of Descartes' scientific procedure in Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), ch. 9.

<sup>25</sup> I borrow these terms from a recent talk by Robert M. Adams, "Lightweight Empirical Realism and Heavyweight Metaphysical Agnosticism about the Physical."

Although metaphilosophical scepticism understandably became a serious threat in this period, the more remarkable fact is that metaphysics, and a priori approaches to philosophy's fundamental questions in general, still managed, at least for a while, to thrive even in the post-Kantian era. This is because the distinctive feature of the Historical Turn, as practiced at first by the major Jena thinkers, was not a form of relativistic historicism or history-blind system building. It was instead a broadly dialectical approach, with intricate arguments that systematic philosophy could vindicate itself by showing precisely how the understandable motivations and errors of previous thinkers could be *rationally* arranged and understood in terms of a philosophically reconstructible, self-correcting, and overall progressive process, one that constituted a sequence of improved conceptual frameworks that overcame the dilemmas of the past, one after the other. Insofar as earlier philosophical principles were found, in this manner, to be in need of correction in a generally convincing but (unlike natural science) non-empirical way – as happened, for example, with overly extensive rationalist appeals to analytic truth, or the atomistic empiricist reliance on the primacy of private representations – this development could be understood as a result of counterarguments that *vindicated*, rather than undermined, an underlying *general trust in philosophical reason*.

There are, however, significantly different ways to express this general trust. As long as post-Kantianism took the form of the ambitious Idealist systems of Reinhold, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (which were themselves formulated in quite different ways at different times), reason was understood in terms of strict deductive patterns that, still in a way like logic and mathematics, involved strong claims of certainty, necessity, and in principle converging completeness. The Early Romantics, in contrast, were more interested in presenting sharp self-critical observations (e.g., Hölderlin's perceptive treatment, in *Hyperion*, of disillusioned sentimental indulgence and hasty patriotic fervor) and a variety of alternatives that respect neglected positions of the past without trying to force everything into one grand scheme. Furthermore, they were not only philosophers who saw the need to get beyond the Idealists' "imperialist" presumptions about what abstract reasoning could accomplish. They had, in addition, a widespread impact as extraordinary masters of language, literature, and popular creative writing. Like their highly innovative – but anti-Whiggish and not rigidly systematic – predecessors, Rousseau and Herder, they not only understood but also influenced history, and philosophical progress as well, in terms that recognized contingency, plurality, and speculative uncertainty with regard to alleged first principles and ultimate results.

This contrast, between ambitious Idealists and relatively modest Romantics, needs to be kept in mind in addressing the question of which form of post-Kantianism is best positioned to respond, after the common Historical Turn, to Descartes' statement that philosophy should, at least in some way, rely on "what has always been common ground" rather than "invented" notions. Despite their common Enlightenment belief that modern culture and philosophy were progressing in a significantly new way, *both* wings of post-Kantianism turn out, like Descartes, to present themselves also as, in a way, more closely tied than one would expect to "what has always been common ground." In part this characteristic derives from an orientation shared by Kant's Critical philosophy, because that philosophy too, despite its reputation for being revolutionary, was in fact constantly dependent on what our "healthy common understanding" (*gesunder Menschenverstand*) takes to be the *most basic* necessary features of experience constituting the human mind, namely, the elementary shared forms of space, time, language, and logic, as well as a universal *capacity* for appreciating broadly Rousseauian notions of morality, human dignity, and right.<sup>26</sup>

More generally, a common thought in modern philosophy, from Descartes to Kant and beyond, is the idea that, even after all the revolutions of modernity, one need not worry that humanity's *most fundamental presumptions* are *entirely* subject to dismissal. The view that a constant acceptance of these presumptions is important, and that significant knowledge need not be characterized simply in terms of a stress on "innovation," is still consistent with an appreciation of the need for considerable development and historical sophistication, as is evident even from late modern mathematics and physics (as well as recent debates concerning metaphysical principles). The Idealists could also agree with these points because, even in Hegelian dialectic, any "determinate negation" that arises must involve a conclusion that is necessarily dependent on a stock of prior implicit notions that provide essential material for the future, even as they are being revised under the constraint of some constantly valid dialectical norms. In other words, all the German philosophers stressed both continuity and change, and they did not go so far as to become radical

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<sup>26</sup> See my *Interpreting Kant's Critiques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), Introduction. Admittedly, the "Rousseauian" presumptions in particular are not as *uncontroversial* (allegedly "self-evident") as was assumed by Kant and others, such as Richard Price and the authors of the Declaration of Independence. On some blindspots in (and fateful misuses of) Kant's work, see my "The Fate of Dignity: How Words Matter," in *Kant's Concept of Dignity, Kant-Studien Ergänzungshäfte* 209, ed. Yasushi Kato and Gerhard Schönrich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 263-84.



pragmatists who would leave behind all fixed points, let alone philosophical nihilists who treat the human situation as thoroughly chaotic.<sup>27</sup>

The very notion of progress, in the Early Romantic idea that future writing should take the form of “progressive universal poetry,” also assumes a fundamental and necessary relation of partial *dependence* upon something that is already existent, namely, one's own main predecessors. As Kantian writers of “exemplary originality” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* § 46), looking back at and swerving forward from previous exemplars, but neither burying nor slavishly imitating them, the Romantics were simultaneously history oriented and forward looking. They were innovators in the very intensity of their unearthing of, and building on, valuable notions found in our common but neglected or misunderstood cultural history. We owe to the Romantics a proper philosophical appreciation of the value, for a *truly enlightened* contemporary culture, of studying Eastern languages, the medievals, and early Greece, and in learning from otherness in general. Hölderlin (whose special significance was perceived by the young Nietzsche and Dilthey) and Schlegel's recovery of the unique features of “pre-Socratic” thought, for example, was an important rejuvenating insight well before Nietzsche's now lionized publications on tragedy and the “use and abuse” of history.

Furthermore, the Romantics also went beyond the limits of scientism by making the elliptical move of encouraging a return to an appreciation of prescientific dimensions of common life obscured by the revolutions of modernity. Hence Novalis' famous proposal that a proper function of “extraordinary” thought and “genius” is precisely to bring us back down, albeit in a significantly intensified form, to the “ordinary” – and thus also to raise us up to an appreciation in a new way of what is extraordinary within it. Along this line, one can add a more specific point made in similar language by Bernard Williams, namely, that a virtue of *historical* considerations in *philosophy* in particular lies in precisely how they frequently “make the familiar look strange, and conversely.”<sup>28</sup> Methodologically, this late modern focus on

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<sup>27</sup> See Christoph Haffter, “Grenzen der Reflexion: Pragmatismus, Idealismus und Frühromantik als Formen unendlicher Philosophie,” *Symphilosophie*, vol. 1 (2019): 75-104. Schlegel's interest in irony has been frequently misunderstood, especially in Hegelian circles, as tantamount to a total acceptance of arbitrariness. For crucial clarifications, see Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 181, n. 2. Cf. Novalis, “romanticizing...[gives] the commonplace a higher meaning; the operation is precisely the opposite for the higher,

philosophy as a version of historical and conceptual “home-coming”<sup>29</sup> is itself an important innovation in *form*, and yet it is also a crucial feature of this view that much of its *content* is taken to have been already in existence, albeit in a manner that undergoes transformation in the process of renewed appreciation.

The decisive issue, in evaluating the advantages of Romanticism over Idealism, is just whether Romanticism’s kind of non-linear and partial appropriation of the past for future purposes has been philosophically more productive and less distorting than the strictly systematic claims of German Idealism. To begin with, it is essential that Early Romanticism not be inappropriately characterized (as, unfortunately, it often has been) as a surrender to arbitrariness or reactionary thought. Once that is clear, it surely appears that the test of time shows that in fact philosophy has by and large – in addition, of course, to many technical advances in formal areas – moved profitably toward an appreciation of a form of exposition that is more like the flexible model of the Romantics than the rigid structures of the Idealists (as well as of the positivists) and the age-old supposition that a major philosopher must present a system. A glance back at a list of the most influential writers of the last two centuries reveals that the more open and pluralistic “method” of the Romantics has understandably become one of the most forceful forms of philosophy in Late Modernity – and precisely because it can claim to be innovative in a highly creative and yet disciplined sense.

#### 4. Different Ways to Carry Out Innovation Now

An especially relevant issue to pursue in our contemporary context is how the way that philosophers after the Historical Turn may now see their own future compares with the way that scientists are beginning to recognize the limitations of the long-term significance of their work – especially after the

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unknown.” *Novalis Schriften*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), vol. 2: 545, #105. Translation from Jane Kneller, “Introduction,” in Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, trans. and ed. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xxxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Novalis, “philosophy is really homesickness...,” *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, trans. and ed. David W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 155, #857. See also the discussion of Hölderlin’s poem *Heimkunft*, in Alexander J. B. Hampton, “Romantic Religion: Dissolution and Transcendence in the Poetics of Hölderlin,” *Symphilosophie*, vol. 1 (2019): 61-73. On Hölderlin’s line (in a draft of *Lebenslauf*), “...und kehre woher ich kam,” see Charles Larmore, “Die Freiheit verstehen, aufzubrechen wohin man will,” *Hegel-Studien*, vol. 47 (2014): 11-40; cf. Larmore, *Das Selbst in seinem Verhältnis zu sich und zu anderen* (Frankfurt: Klostermann Verlag, 2017). See also Rylie Johnson, “From Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* to Novalis’ Poetic Historicity,” *Symphilosophie*, vol. 1 (2019): 105-127.

influence of Thomas Kuhn and the growing emphasis on understanding science in terms of particular historical contexts. If one considers the content of leading-edge scientific theories, an honest look at the history of relatively recent radical changes should lead one to be quite cautious about supposing that, beyond meeting conditions of empirical adequacy, our current theories disclose anything looking like a unique ontology now, let alone one that is likely to hold up throughout all the changes of the future.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, there is the real possibility that, even if we were to have all sorts of good epistemic fortune in the future, we might never be able to claim a view of reality that is not missing a fundamental natural dimension. For example, given what we now know about how galaxies are traveling away from each other at ever greater speeds, one can easily imagine a situation in which there may be well-trained scientists who live in a galaxy so distant from all other ones that the rational conclusion of those scientists would be that there are not and never have been any other galaxies (and associated phenomena such as the “big bang”). This would be a huge error, but there is no ground for saying that we who are on earth now might not be subject to some kind of analogous, but impossible for us even to begin to describe, deep mistake – a mistake not just about spatial facts but about whole dimensions of theory that we could be blocked from ever developing. (This problem is to be distinguished from additional worries that can arise from recent speculations about a multiverse.)

Kant repeatedly expressed concern with this kind of problem, for it is a disturbing thought that if scientists like Newton had never existed, or if Kant himself had been born much earlier, he might have lived with all sorts of fundamentally wrong beliefs about nature that would have appeared to be in no need of correction.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Kant was concerned with the fact that he and others have been living in eras that, in a moral sense, are very far from anything like the achievement of the highest good, or even any strict proof of the real possibility of getting close to it. Hence, it can seem that, in a most important sense, the prime goals of human existence may be sought ultimately in vain, practically as well as theoretically. Kant’s response to this

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<sup>30</sup> See Anjan Chakravartty, *Scientific Ontology: Integrating Naturalized Metaphysics and Voluntarist Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). This book could be read as an unintended reductio of scientific realism. When scientific realism is understood as the view that ontology is determined by what “ultimate” science says, this can sound reassuring to naturalists. But problems arise once it is realized that we cannot expect there is only one way that the ontology of even “ultimate” science has to be interpreted.

<sup>31</sup> See Kant on Newton in e.g., *Metaphysik* L1 (28: 294), in *Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101.

double problem was to go beyond even Descartes and Leibniz's double-level view (which distinguishes basic principles of science from those of philosophy) and hold that the possibility of even severe limitations in natural science should not matter so much because, on his metaphysics, the best that theoretical cognition in general can reveal of nature is in any case merely phenomenal (that is, with ultimate grounds that we cannot determine), albeit in an objective and not private sense. This is not such a disturbing fact because, with respect to value and morals, Kant's ultimate position was the practical claim that, although we would be foolish to think that any individual human life, by its nature alone, ever reaches an adequate ethical state, it can still be maintained that at least a basically adequate conception of that state is all along familiar to us, insofar as we are not blind to moral duty.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, we can even rationally retain a rational hope that (given this conception and the help of some kind of ultimate fit with the world that exceeds what can be naturally expected) an adequate state of existence is at least within the reach of humanity as a species, and that our belonging, in the right way, to an early part of the human chain is after all enough to "justify" our existence (to use a Lutheran term found even in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, although for aesthetic purposes, since he had – rather quickly, to say the least – given up on all pure notions of morality).<sup>33</sup>

In this way, despite the skepticism that the complicated worries that modern history, philosophy, and scientific progress can all engender, there is still a kind of historical solace that is available in the philosophical "faith" of

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<sup>32</sup> To simplify matters, I have been putting a stress here on the *contrast* between the Early Romantics and their predecessors, including Kant, but it is also true that, with respect to having a strong, but not speculatively established, progressive practical orientation, the Romantics are *very close* to Kant – and also to the emphasis, in Idealism, on concrete forms of mutual recognition. See my "Hölderlin's Kantian Path," in *Kantian Subjects*, ch. 12. Nonetheless, with all due respect for the popularity of the Kantian slogan of the "primacy of the practical," it must be conceded that he himself insisted that the only way to meet challenges to the claim that there is rational room for the employment of pure practical reason is to fall back, as a necessary condition, on the general transcendental idealist theoretical doctrine that the structures of the spatiotemporal world (and the concepts built upon them) do not give us metaphysically *ultimate knowledge*. Novalis and other Romantics were content with this restriction. Kant's theoretical philosophy also includes specific transcendental principles of experience, which in their detail and grounding go beyond common sense, and in this regard he is like the German Idealists in claiming to have established certain and *determinate* metaphysical *principles* (albeit "merely" for the realm of objects for our kind of experience).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), and Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Niko Kolodny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Karsten Harries, at the end of his *Between Nihilism and Faith: A Commentary on Either/Or* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 170, cites Goethe's famous poem on mortality, *Grenzen der Menschheit* (1781), which concludes with the image of the human chain (*Kette*).

Kantian ethical subjects and their post-Kantian successors.<sup>34</sup> If they are fully serious and consistent, such subjects should concede that – contrary to the highly ambitious claims that distinguish the Idealist systems – it cannot be expected that, simply in their own life, they will obtain strict proof of a satisfaction of the fundamental aims of human existence. Nonetheless, they may defensibly believe that their orientation toward ideals of reason can be warranted after all because, at least in the long run, the rational struggle that they have been involved in may eventually take on something like a fundamentally adequate – that is, genuinely progressive and widespread – practical form.

There is a relatively indeterminate sense of consolation here – developed most fruitfully by the Early Romantics – that is unlike the attitude of orthodox theoretical Kantians, as well as of pre-Kantian rationalists and systematic post-Kantians. These groups still all believed that their work had overcome the problem of innovation – the worry about being merely innovative – by accomplishing the feat of having finally identified significant core metaphysical principles (with uplifting implications) that in fact would remain invulnerable to change, and that rest on truths so basic that, in their purest form, they might in principle, like mathematics, have been endorsed even in the early phases of our common humanity. This common ahistorical claim is compatible with the fact that the German Idealists at first were committed to justifying their metaphysics by giving an account of how it can be derived as the necessary culminating stage of the underlying logic of the whole sequence of major earlier positions in the history of philosophy. This strict narrative procedure of the Idealists is understandable, especially given Reinhold's influence on the style of the times, because it seemed the best way to make an immediate impact on the controversies of their age. This did not mean, however, that once their system was worked out (and as long as, unlike Schelling at times, they did not revert to early Romantic notions), they were committed to holding that philosophy would always have to employ this narrative style. The prime example of this transition is Hegel's abandonment of substantive reference to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* once he had worked out the final and exhaustive conceptual framework of the *Science of Logic* (1812) and the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817). This residue of systematic conservatism has had its obvious costs though, and as even one of Hegel's ablest defenders, Robert Brandom, has argued, it made Hegel,

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<sup>34</sup> This is a kind of faith, *Vernunftglaube* in the sense of a trust that substantive reason will eventually bear fruit. For an important argument that commitment to morality *in general* requires a significant degree of "moral faith," see Robert M. Adams, "Moral Faith," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92 (1995): 75-95.

despite his considerable emphasis on history, ultimately not attentive enough to the changes that can continue to arise even in the field of logic.<sup>35</sup>

The general moral-Kantian, Early Romantic, and contemporary scientific responses to the vicissitudes of history have had a different and much more open form, one attached to the idea that what matters most is not a particular set of constant metaphysical principles but just being part of an often contorted but enduring chain of self-correcting rational agents heading in a broadly appropriate direction (while maintaining, as noted before, numerous common informal presumptions). This is not to deny that, as early members of such a chain, even the best late modern philosophers must live with the expectation of likely turning out to be in large part forgotten by history, and to that extent looking like others in a long sequence of innovators who have become out of date. But this is just one way to look at matters. From another perspective, they can regard themselves as attached to something that is far from fleeting, namely, the human chain as an ongoing process, which includes the advances of its earlier stages and their likely rational effect, in some way, on its later fundamentally enriched states. There is no need to think in terms of needing to reach a final state, for presumably even if, in a process of “infinite approximation,” future Kantian moral agents, modern scientists, or Early Romantics, ever reach a condition close to basic satisfaction of the interests of reason, there still would remain for them an enormous variety of rewarding ways to refine and apply their insights. And so, even if they, like Descartes, were to say that on this point they would prefer, in a sense, not to be regarded as innovators, they still would have countless new tasks of detail worth pursuing.

There is also no need to deny that the corrective procedure of science in particular, at least as it was understood by 1800, has had the distinctive feature of having achieved – unlike metaphysics – innumerable impressive and precisely confirmed testable results (even though, as William Whewell argued, their discovery generally depends, like art and philosophy, on the breakthroughs of genius, the creative introduction of innovative “Ideas”). Metaphysics (like the “moral sciences” as well, of course), despite Kant’s own theoretical and Idealist goal of it finally becoming a genuine science, is nowhere close to being able to boast of similarly well tested and broadly accepted accomplishments, let alone the kind of uncontroversial progress

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<sup>35</sup> See Robert Brandom, “Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel,” *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism*, vol. 3 (2015): 131-161. It is understandable that Brandom himself, like other interpreters such as Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard, advocates a more flexible form of Hegelianism – and a more charitable, but controversial, way of interpreting Hegel.

found in numerous a priori developments in mathematics and formal logic. As has already been noted, however, modern science itself is still nowhere near establishing a theoretical situation of complete convergence and closure. Contrary to the earlier expectations of the best minds, recent centuries have brought with them, even in physics, a plurality of radically new scientific frameworks (relativity, quantum mechanics, string theory) that have left us far short of any right to claim we are in confirmed possession of a single and exhaustive account of the ultimate features of the natural world.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the perplexities of contemporary science turn out to bear some analogy to the situation of philosophy, Romantically reconceived, which is also characterized by a fundamental lack of convergence and closure – and yet, within each of a variety of approaches, there continue to be numerous advances in detail. In contemporary philosophy,<sup>37</sup> this is a progress in better defining old options, imaginatively constructing new variations of them (e.g., neo-Aristotelianism, neo-Spinozism, neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism), and, in the wake of the Early Romantics, relentlessly refashioning a host of mind-opening new methodologies (including cultural studies and gender studies) that are especially relevant to enlightening the complexities of common life in our inescapable late modern situation. In addition to adding new twists to the continental movements of hermeneutics, phenomenology, Critical Theory, and neo-structuralism (and the detailed critiques developed by Manfred Frank), the pluralistic spirit of Romanticism lives on in a variety of important strands of recent Anglophone philosophy. Consider, for example, the Schleiermachian “patterns of moral complexity” traced by Charles Larmore, the ironic and quasi-Kierkegaardian neo-Freudianism practiced by Jonathan Lear, and the radical (broadly Marxist) and fragmented “real politics” promoted by Raymond Geuss.<sup>38</sup> All this amounts to real innovation after all, innovation that need not be taken to

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<sup>36</sup> See Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, The Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). In other words, and despite recent enormous horrors, Martin Luther King’s dream of crossing over into a practical “promised land” still looks more rational now than Einsteinian dreams of an all-inclusive “unified field theory.”

<sup>37</sup> For examples of piecemeal progress outside of the German tradition, see Gary Gutting, *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> See Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 53, and *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

literally call “all into doubt” but is still more than enough to give philosophy a distinctive and creatively critical role.

### 5. Yet Another Concluding Unscientific Postscript

The piecemeal character of the writing of the Early Romantics is a feature that can also be found in many examples of contemporary analytic philosophy that – *unlike* the perceptive appropriation of earlier European writers by Larmore, Lear, and Geuss – seem to have nothing directly to do with developments in *German* philosophy. In this respect, the shift from German Idealism to Early Romanticism can be regarded as only a partial *analogue* to – and not a likely *cause* of – the epochal shift, in mainline twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy, from highly systematic programs, such as the early Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and logical atomism, to something more like the fragmentary style of the late Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and then countless variations on conceptual analysis.<sup>39</sup> The fairly typical approach of a leading contemporary analytic philosopher such as Harry Frankfurt – who in addition has had considerable success at the best-seller level – involves an admirably honest but quite “modestly systematic” attitude, one that does not explicitly feature an insistence on a historical (or quasi-scientific) form of presentation:

It is sometimes claimed that the analytic philosophy in which I was educated, and to whose ethos and canons of intellectual style I still endeavor more or less to adhere, possesses certain new and especially powerful tools and techniques, which allegedly enable it to achieve an invaluable penetration and rigor but which inevitably also distance it from the uninitiated. I have no idea what these remarkable tools and techniques are supposed to be, and I am pretty sure that I do not possess them.<sup>40</sup>

Although in fact Frankfurt is also a distinguished expert on the history of modern philosophy, well known for his radically innovative interpretation of Descartes, he has not gone so far as to also construct an extensive historical narrative, to intertwine with his main analytic claims, in the way that several other leading figures (in addition to those mentioned earlier), such as John Rawls, J. B. Schneewind, Stephen Darwall, and Terence Irwin have done. But Frankfurt’s influential argumentation concerning the concept of the will

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Alexander Stern, *The Fall of Language: Benjamin and Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), x.



and its connections to various parts of our tradition from Genesis and after, up through several of the major moderns, still involves, like the Romantics, a trend-setting philosophical recovery operation on long misunderstood historical positions, albeit again in a more lapidary rather than exhaustive form.

Attitudes toward Descartes in particular have been one of the main bellwethers of major changes in philosophy's orientation. Ironically, his alleged influence eventually became more widely decried than that of the Scholastics in early modern philosophy, and by the middle of the twentieth-century he – or at least what was hastily assumed about his thought – had become the common whipping-post of both Anglophone and continental thought. But Frankfurt's work was a major catalyst in the remarkable reversal that occurred when top analytic philosophers began to turn their serious attention, without apology, toward Descartes and then other classic figures of the modern era.<sup>41</sup> It thus can even be said that an unexpected turn back to a renewed appreciation of the old has been one of the main new features of genuinely innovative philosophy in the last half-century.

More generally, a major lesson of recent research in fields such as the history of science, as well as (what is presumptuously labeled as) “political science,” is that any work involving a focus on the nature of language and/or the elucidation of important contested concepts – which is precisely what dominates most of contemporary philosophy – cannot help but benefit from the consideration that our understanding of concepts is developed in specific historical contexts. These contexts need not limit the concepts to a merely relative meaning but they can often be relevant to evaluating bold claims on substantive issues – for example, what does “religion” or “evil” or “autonomy” mean even for us, once we appreciate that there are cultures that do not seem to have the term? In sum, even if the Historical Turn has not been behind every important innovative work in recent philosophy, there is, fortunately, now much more of an acceptance of historical considerations and other aspects of the attitude of the Early Romantics than was the case in earlier periods in the last century of Anglophone philosophy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's "Meditations"* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). Reissued with a Foreword by Rebecca Goldstein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Also pathbreaking around then was the work of Bernard Williams and Edwin Curley on Descartes, as well as P.F. Strawson, Jonathan Bennett, and Wilfrid Sellars on Kant, and then Robert Fogelin on Hume, Robert Adams on Leibniz, Nicholas Wolterstorff on Locke, and so on.

<sup>42</sup> Special thanks on this project to Tad Schmaltz, Fred Rush, Noell Birondo, Aaron Wells, Robert Audi, Charles Larmore, and the editors.