Symphilosophie

International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism

Ironically, I Am Free

How Friedrich Schlegel's Early Romantic Fragments Enact the Logic of Faith in J.G. Fichte's *Vocation of Man*

Karolin Mirzakhan[*]

ABSTRACT

Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" (1800) makes a case for the value of incomprehensibility by utilizing the same logic as "Faith" in Fichte's *Vocation of Man* (1800). Schlegel argues for the necessity of incomprehensibility by referring to a point of strength that must be left in the dark, but which is necessary for all our systems of meaning. If we demand that everything be scrutinized by the understanding, we would destroy this point of strength. In Fichte's *Vocation*, this point of strength is articulated as the free acquiescence to the natural standpoint, or the free will as a moment of faith (and not knowledge). I will argue that Fichte's text functions like a sermon that moves his reader toward this recognition of freedom, to feel it for herself; like faith, the irony that performs the striving for the Absolute in Schlegel's fragments cannot be understood without, in the process, destroying it.

Keywords: faith, irony, vocation, freedom, Friedrich Schlegel, Johann Gottlieb Fichte

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Schlegels Aufsatz „Über die Unverständlichkeit" sucht den Stellenwert der Unverständlichkeit durch eine ähnliche Logik zu begründen, wie Fichte dies für den Glauben in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* unternimmt. Schlegel argumentiert, dass die Notwendigkeit der Unverständlichkeit sich auf einen Kraftpunkt bezöge, der im Dunkel gelassen werden müsse, der aber für alle unsere Bedeutungssysteme notwendig sei. Wenn wir den Anspruch erheben, alles vernünftig zu untersuchen, zerstören wir diesen Kraftpunkt. Bei Fichte stellt sich dieser Kraftpunkt nicht als Wissen dar, sondern als das freiwillige Beruhen auf der sich uns natürlich darbietenden Ansicht oder als die Willensfreiheit im Moment des Glaubens. Dabei werde ich argumentieren, dass Fichtes Text wie eine Predigt konzipiert ist, um das Gefühl der Freiheit bei der Leserin zu erwecken. Ähnlich dem Fichteschen Glauben kann die Ironie, die bei Schlegels Fragmenten das Streben nach dem Unbedingten vorbringt, nicht verstanden werden, ohne sie dabei zu zerstören.

Stichwörter: Glaube, Ironie, Bestimmung, Freiheit, Friedrich Schlegel, Johann Gottlieb Fichte

[*] PhD, Senior Lecturer of Philosophy, Kennesaw State University, 402 Bartow Ave., Kennesaw, GA 30144, USA – contactkarolin@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In 1799, due to the atheism dispute [*Atheismusstreit*], Johann Gottlieb Fichte was forced to resign from his professorship at Jena and move to Berlin where Friedrich Schlegel had found him housing.[1] It was during this first year in Berlin (in 1800) that he completed the *Vocation of Man* [*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*] as a response to the atheism dispute.[2] In this essay, I will examine Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragments and his essay "On Incomprehensibility" ["*Über die Unverständlichkeit*"](1800) via the lens of this contemporaneous work by Fichte.[3] In his fragments, Schlegel makes many explicit references in defense of Fichte, e.g., that Fichte's entire philosophy is concerned with religion,[4] that Fichte is a master of form,[5] and that the charge of atheism is ridiculous insofar as there have never been any true theists.[6] Beyond these explicit references to Fichte, I will argue that Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" makes a case for the value of incomprehensibility by utilizing the same logic as "Faith" in Fichte's *Vocation of Man*.[7] Schlegel argues for the necessity of incomprehensibility by referring to a point of strength that must be left in the dark, but which is a necessary support for all of our systems of meaning, even our own happiness (and, we might add, our vocation as human beings). Schlegel proclaims that if we were to demand that everything be scrutinized by the understanding, we would destroy this point of strength. This point of strength, I will argue, is articulated as the free acquiescence to the natural standpoint in the *Vocation of Man*, or the free will as a moment of faith (and not knowledge). However, I contend that this

[1] Peter Preuss, "Translator's Introduction," *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987), viii.
[2] Yolanda Estes, "Commentator's Introduction: J.G. Fichte, *Atheismusstreit*, *Wissenschaftslehre*, and *Religionslehre*" in *J.G. Fichte and Atheism Dispute (1798-1800)*, translated by Curtis Bowman, commentary by Yolanda Estes (Farnham, England; Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2010), 3.
[3] References to the fragments are cited according to their number and abbreviated as follows: AF = Athenaeum Fragment, CF = Critical [Lyceum] Fragment, I = Ideas. References to the original German are from Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1958). English translations are from Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. and ed. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).
[4] KFSA II, p. 266, I 105.
[5] KFSA II, p. 213, AF 281.
[6] KFSA II, p. 268, I 118.
[7] References to the *Vocation of Man* in the German are from *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth, and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-2012). Hereafter, references to the German will be abbreviated to GA. References to the English translation are to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss.

moment of freedom is one that Fichte must move his reader toward, to awaken in her, so that she can feel it for herself. Like the feeling of faith in the *Vocation*, the irony that performs the striving for the Absolute in Schlegel's *Athenaeum* writings cannot be understood without, in the process, destroying it. What is revealed through the tension enacted by irony is felt, but not known. In the process of attempting to comprehend irony, the understanding would dissect and destroy it. Irony is the appropriate technique for approximating the Absolute, insofar as the Absolute, like irony, is incomprehensible, i.e., it exceeds our methods for comprehending it and our structures of knowing, which would only limit and condition it.[8]

I will begin by sketching some key movements in the three books of the *Vocation of Man*, with special emphasis on the initial act of faith in Book III. Then, I will turn my attention to Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" to argue that it invokes a structurally similar act of faith in its 'defense' of the *Athenaeum* journal's ironic fragments. With the structure of the *Vocation* and "On Incomprehensibility" in mind, I will then examine Schlegel's fragments in order to argue that the fragments enact freedom through their irony and are thus performative in nature. Given what I have said above about free will, the fragments do not provide knowledge of the free will (in Fichte's terms, attempting to provide knowledge would entail a process that would result in a ladder with no highest rung),[9] but rather, via their wit and irony, the fragments enact freedom as an imperative, as an act of positing. The analysis of the irony of the fragments is not disconnected from my interpretation of the essay "On Incomprehensibility" insofar as the very moment I cite above defending the virtues of incomprehensibility can, and ought to, be simultaneously read as ironic. The very moment in the text in which Schlegel appears to be alluding to the role of faith (in Fichte's terms) is also an ironic utterance in which freedom is enacted in this thoroughly ironic essay. The ironic utterance, like the act of faith, is a foundation that is an activity. In the final section, I will address a crucial difference between the texts in question, namely, the contrast between the dramatic closure at the end of the *Vocation* and the open-ended nature of Schlegel's fragments (and indeed early German Romantic *Symphilosophie*).

---

[8] Novalis famously makes this claim in his first *Pollen* fragment. For more on my interpretation of "romantic irony," see: Karolin Mirzakhan, *An Ironic Approach to the Absolute: Schlegel's Poetic Mysticism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), and Karolin Mirzakhan, "Romantic Irony," in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 255-269.
[9] GA I/6, 256.

2. *Vocation of Man*: Called by Voices

The trajectory of Fichte's *Vocation of Man* [*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*] can be followed via the interjection (or lack thereof) of voices. The German *Bestimmung* can be translated as calling, vocation, purpose, or determination and contains within it the root word "*Stimme*", or voice. Thus, we could say that there is an etymological connection between determination or purpose and a sense of being called, i.e., called upon to do something or be something. This connection between calling and voice is also found in the English translation of the title, in which vocation is derived from the Latin "*vocatio*" (calling), which is connected to the verb "*vocare*" (to call) and the noun "*vox*" (voice), all of which are derived from the same Proto-Indo-European root, which means "to speak" [*wekw-*]. Thus, in the language of vocation, there is already a connection to voice, and, in the *Vocation of Man*, this voice is directly linked to how I determine my calling.[10] The *Vocation of Man* is divided into three books, each with a different relation to voice, and therefore a distinctive relationship to one's calling.

In each book, the reader follows an "I" [*Ich*] that is trying to determine its vocation for itself. The "I", Fichte tells us in the preface, is the reader. And, that reader is, according to Fichte, anyone "at all capable of understanding a book."[11] I will refer to this "I" (or the reader) as the protagonist of the *Vocation of Man* throughout this essay. In the preface, Fichte tells his reader that the purpose of the book is to "attract the reader, to engage his interest and powerfully *move* him from the sensible to the supersensible" [emphasis mine].[12] This book must move the reader to the position laid out in its third section, for it is not a position that anyone can be persuaded of – nor one that Fichte would profess to be able to convince anyone of through argumentation. Each of us, as the reader, must place ourselves in the position of the "I" and must feel the truth of this position in our inmost soul. In another defense written by Fichte in the aftermath of the *Atheismusstreit*, "Appeal to the Public," he claims that he and his opponents have both arrived at the principles of their thinking, "not by means of thinking itself but rather by means of something that is higher than all

[10] Cf. Günter Zöller, ""An Other and Better World": Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* as a Theologico-Political Treatise," in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 19–32. In addition to addressing the German and Latin roots of the title of Fichte's book, Zöller traces the origin of Fichte's title to the 1748 work of a Lutheran clergyman named Johann Joachim Spalding; Spalding's work was titled "Considerations on the Vocation of the Human Being" [*Betrachtungen über die Bestimmung des Menschen*].
[11] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 1-2; GA I/6, 189-190.
[12] Ibid.

thinking."[13] According to Fichte, that which is higher than thinking is what he can "justifiably call … the *heart*."[14] It is the fundamental role of the heart that unites Fichte and his opponents, but it is also because the heart is the means by which they each reach their respective conclusions that neither can convince the other. Thus, to appeal to the public, Fichte must appeal to the heart of his readers – it is their hearts that must be moved to the conclusion in the final sections of the *Vocation*. In the final section of this paper, I will address the stylistic means Fichte employed to move the reader to the culminating position of "Faith," as well as how this choice results in a reversal from the open-ended yearning for answers that characterizes much of the book to a halting of all yearning and questioning.

3. A World of Objects Devoid of Voice: Doubt

Book I, or "Doubt" [*Zweifel*], unfolds a deterministic view of the world; the protagonist "takes hold of" nature as it hurries past.[15] In this case, nature takes the form of determinate objects, which have a definite number of properties (no more, no less) as a result of a "strict chain of necessity" [*Naturnothwendigkeit*].[16] The question "What is my vocation [*Bestimmung*]?" is answered through the language of determinate objects wherein the protagonist concludes that she too must be a determinate object like those others she is examining and that, therefore, she too, like them, is devoid of agency or free will. Determinate objects have a discrete number of properties, and they come to have those properties (and not any others) through a series of causes; for any of an object's properties to change, the entire causal series would have to change. In examining objects of nature as they rush past – trees, plants, flowers – our protagonist finds that she is a determinate object just like them and that all her actions, thoughts and feelings are simply the result of external natural forces; if she is determined by the forces of nature, then she is not self-determining and she is therefore not free. Book I is appropriately devoid of a voice that intervenes in the protagonist's search; the lack of voice is fitting since "Doubt" takes materialism as its starting point and consequently does not consider an inner, subjective or spiritual aspect to the objects it investigates. By the end of "Doubt," however, the protagonist is in a state of despair. Her heart is torn apart by this system of hard determinism, the very same system that sets her mind at ease. Our

[13] J.G. Fichte, "Appeal to the Public" in *J.G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798-1800)*, 118.
[14] J.G. Fichte, "Appeal to the Public," 118.
[15] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 5; GA I/6, 192-93.
[16] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 11; GA I/6, 199.

despondent protagonist is faced with a system that has great explanatory power, but which destroys free will. She *yearns* to be free. In the final passages of "Doubt," she asks whether it is love that must be subordinated to knowledge, or whether knowledge must be subordinated to love.[17] This yearning of the heart, which poses the question regarding the place of love in relationship to knowledge, is not incidental, but rather acts as the motor of the entire work; it is the yearning for freedom that will move our protagonist into the next stage.

4. The Appeal of a Voice Like My Own: "Knowledge"

Book II, "Knowledge" [*Wissen*], takes place around midnight when a spirit [*Der Geist*] visits our protagonist. With the entry of *Der Geist*, the spiritual or mental aspect of the protagonist enters the scene. The protagonist says that this voice appeals to "my own understanding" [*Er beruft sich auf meinen eignen Verstand*].[18] Here, the invocation of the language of "voice" is noteworthy in two ways: first, the voice makes an appeal; the language of "appeal" is significant because knowledge is about justification and therefore this voice appeals to reasons to believe each of its claims (i.e., the rungs of the ladder of knowledge); second, the voice of *Der Geist* is directed toward the "understanding" and therefore to the protagonist's mind, rather than her heart. The conversation that unfolds between the protagonist and *Der Geist* – a personification of mind – takes the form of a Socratic dialogue in which *Der Geist* only asks questions and in which *Der Geist* claims not to show the protagonist (the *Ich*) anything. Rather, *Der Geist*, merely demonstrates the errors of the deterministic worldview presented by the protagonist of Book I. By the end of Book II, "Knowledge," the protagonist realizes that all knowledge is merely a dream or a shadow-copy of reality and that she cannot get to the things themselves (and therefore cannot act).

According to the logic presented in "Knowledge," I think that I perceive things, but all I can know (immediately, strictly speaking) is that my own condition has been modified. I then posit a cause for this modification by using the law of thinking, i.e., the law of cause and effect. This means that the object that I posit as the cause of the modification of my condition is merely the result of a necessary law of my own thinking. Furthermore, I only know this law of thought immediately; it is by way of this law, the law of cause and effect, that I come to know anything at all, and therefore, the law itself cannot be the object of knowledge. Even the notion of a unified "I" that

[17] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 26; GA I/6, 214.
[18] GA I/6, 215.

posits these objects is merely the result of the same process of positing, i.e., I think, I feel, or I sense, and then I posit that there is an "I" that has these thoughts, feelings, or sensations. The activity of positing an "I" is no different from positing a determinate object (e.g., a green pear), which is the cause of the modifications of my condition, such as "I see green," "I taste tart," and so on. The "I" is produced by the same inner law of thought, the law of causality, which attaches a cause, in the form of an object with properties, to a modification of its own condition. The positing of a cause, in the form of a determinate object, happens for each modification; only this time, the determinate object is the "I" (and not the "green pear"). If each instance of the "I" is the result of this inner law of thought, which posits a cause for each modification, the protagonist is forced to conclude that there is no unified "I" that undergoes change.

By the end of "Knowledge," everything – including the "I" – is determined to be merely an extension of the mind of the protagonist. There is no world, no body, and thus no possibility of acting in a world. And, moreover, the very positing activity of the protagonist is not free. In the course of the conversation with *Der Geist*, the protagonist realizes that she simply *must* posit an object due to the inner law of her own thinking, i.e., the law of causality. Furthermore, even the act of positing an object in general is a result of the characteristics of her own existence as an Intelligence. As an Intelligence, the "I" is a being that only comes to know itself through its reflective activity, i.e., by the separating of a subject (that reflects) from an object (the content of its reflection). Therefore, not only are the objects that the I posits the result of an inner law of thinking, but the very activity of positing itself is merely a result of the very structure of the I as an Intelligence.

The transition from taking determinate objects as the starting point (in "Doubt"), to taking the mind [*Geist*] as the starting point in "Knowledge," was, in part, an attempt to quell the heart's yearning – to rescue the self from its fate as an object amongst objects, deprived of free will. However, what the protagonist finds out at the end of Book II is that knowledge does not and cannot provide her with access to a world (as the sphere of her activity), or the ability to freely act. Even the activity of positing is not free, because it is determined by her being as an Intelligence and the law that governs her thinking. Knowledge cannot provide the means to fulfill our vocation as it merely provides a shadow copy – or worse: "a fabulous dream" with nothing that the dream is about.[19]

[19] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 64; GA I/6, 251.

5. A Voice That is Me: Faith

At the opening of Book III, or "Faith" [*Glaube*], the protagonist's heart is yearning for something more than mere shadow images, i.e., a world that exists beyond mental presentations and that does not solely depend on her activity of representing. She longs for a world that really exists and in which she can fulfill her vocation.

At this point, a second voice intervenes. This voice, unlike the voice in "Knowledge," does not make an appeal to the understanding, but rather it "rings out in my inmost soul [*so ertönt es laut im Innersten meiner Seele*]."[20] This voice is me; it is present anytime I collect myself and reflect upon what I am. Unlike the voice in Book II, which was characterized as separate from the protagonist through its personification as *Der Geist*, this voice is inseparable from me. The language of "inmost soul" not only indicates that this voice is 'closer' to me, but also that the voice is appealing to a different aspect of my being, and, although the language of heart is not used explicitly in this sentence, there is a sense that this voice is a metaphorical way of speaking about the yearning of the heart that has been present throughout the entire book. Later in Book III, this "inner voice" is described as "conscience" [*Gewissen*].[21] This voice of conscience calls out to me and tells me that my vocation is not merely to know, but to act; further, it does not merely tell me to act in general, or provide abstract commands, but it tells me to act in concrete ways and assures me that those actions will produce effects.[22]

The obedience to *this* voice, which tells me my vocation is to act, results in the "voluntary acquiescence in the view which naturally presents itself to us."[23] This "voluntary acquiescence" is "no knowledge", Fichte clarifies, but rather "a decision of the will to recognize the validity of knowledge."[24] In an act of faith, a decision is made to give credence to the natural view. Beyond this initial act of faith, Book III contains many instances of faith, ending with several pages, which David W. Wood describes as a "sermon."[25] I will return

[20] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 106; GA I/6, 253.
[21] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 75; GA I/6, 261.
[22] Ibid. For an account of how the drive to freedom in the *Vocation* is revealed as a feeling (as well as the connection between Faith [*Glaube*] and the positing of the will), see: Marco Ivaldo, "*Faith and Knowledge* and *Vocation of Man*: A Comparison Between Hegel and Fichte," in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, 273–85.
[23] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 71; GA I/6, 257.
[24] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 71; GA I/6, 257. "Der Glaube ist es; dieses freiwillige Beruhen bei der sich uns natürlich darbietenden Ansicht, weil wir nur bei dieser Ansicht unsere Bestimmung erfüllen können... Er ist kein Wissen, sondern ein Entschluss des Willens, das Wissen gelten zu lassen."
[25] David W. Wood, "Fichte's Conception of Infinity in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*," in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, 155–71.

to this notion of the "sermon" at the close of *Vocation of Man* and its stylistic significance in the final section of this essay. However, I want to first focus on this initial moment of faith, i.e., the transition from "Knowledge" to "Faith" in which the protagonist hears the voice of conscience ringing out in her inmost soul; this voice tells her that her vocation is to act, and not merely to know. This voice's message is articulated through a command – it speaks in the form of imperatives. Given the commandment of conscience, the protagonist decides to adopt the natural standpoint, not because she knows that that standpoint is the true one or that it can be justified, but rather because it is the only standpoint that allows her to fulfill her vocation, i.e., to act. This voice leads the protagonist out of the world of mere representations, the shadow copies that constituted knowledge, and into a world that is a sphere of her activity.

Although our protagonist briefly wonders about the source of the voice, she quickly asks whether she will disobey its call and says she will not. To disobey this call, to ignore the voice, is to ignore my own self; this voice rings out in my inmost soul; it is united with me, not separate. The protagonist quickly rejects the possibility of doubting the voice. In a later section, I will return to doubt as one instance of circularity, a shape, which the *Vocation of Man* rejects outright.

By obeying the commands of the voice of conscience, the protagonist freely selects the natural standpoint, or the view that naturally presents itself to us. This view includes the following elements: the fact that there is a world that is as it appears to me; that this world is the sphere of my activity; that I can act in this world; and that those actions have consequences. According to Fichte, we are all "born in faith", i.e., with this belief in the natural view, and most people never question the natural standpoint because of their "interest" in the world; good people remain within the natural standpoint because they have an interest in bettering the world, whereas most people do not move beyond the natural view because they have an interest in the sensible enjoyment of the world.[26] Unlike most people (and even the good person), however, our protagonist does question the natural standpoint and, through the movements of "Doubt" and "Knowledge," she tests out two systems: the system of "Doubt" that began with material things (objects of nature rushing past) and the system of "Knowledge" that began with the mind (and the perception of its own condition). After weighing these two options and realizing that neither allowed her to fulfill her vocation, the

[26] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 72-73; GA I/6, 258-59.

protagonist freely adopts the natural standpoint in an act of faith.[27] It is only insofar as I accept the natural standpoint that I am able to fulfill my vocation. The "I" does not choose the natural standpoint because it has been proven or it is known to be the case, but rather because it will allow her to obey the voice of conscience that commands her to act.[28] This voice [*vox; Stimme*] that calls out to me tells me that my vocation [*vocatio; Bestimmung*] is to act. Only a voice can tell me my vocation because I am a being who is both subject and object, mind and body, spiritual and material. The voice here is not literal, but a metaphorical device for understanding that my calling is derived from the spiritual aspect of my being; and yet, as voice, this calling still depends on my embodied or material aspect for its full expression, i.e., to act out its commands. The metaphor of voice combines the spiritual element of the self (from "Knowledge" and the protagonist's conversation with *Der Geist*) with the material element of the body (in "Doubt"). Furthermore, because the source of the voice cannot be traced, its commands cannot be justified. If I could know its source or if its commands had a knowable cause, the voice would be constrained, limited – by something other than itself – and therefore my will would not be free.

By the end of Book III, the natural standpoint, which begins as the common sense way that most people interact with the world, entails the following: first, that I am compelled to believe the world as the sphere of my activity is exactly as it appears to me; second, that my actions have consequences; third, that my willing has consequences (if not in this world, then in the next); fourth, that since much of what I will does not come to fruition in the sensible realm, there is another, supersensible realm, in which my will is an effective force and in which the Supreme Will, as the law of that realm, ensures that my willing has effects.[29] The acquiescence to the natural standpoint is not justifiable; it is not a result of deduction proper that would guarantee the certainty of the knowledge of this standpoint. Rather, in a crucial transition in the opening of Book III, the protagonist makes the decision to believe in the view that naturally presents itself, to remain in the natural standpoint (against the sophistry that might make her abandon it). It is the act of faith, or "the decision of the will" to adopt the natural standpoint,

[27] Fichte, *Vocation of Man,* 73-74.
[28] For more on the account of "decision" in the *Vocation*, as well as how "longing" is contextualized see: Elizabeth Millán, "*Bestimmung* as *Bildung*: On Reading Fichte's *Vocation of Man* as *Bildungsroman,*" in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, 45–55.
[29] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 104.

which raises the natural standpoint's knowledge claims to the status of certainty.

6. Faith in Schlegel's "On Incomprehensibility"

I now turn my attention to Schlegel's short essay "On Incomprehensibility." This essay was prompted by criticisms of the *Athenaeum* fragments, and it is apparently written with the goal of clarifying the meaning of his ironic fragments for those who charged them with being incomprehensible. The essay, as I have argued elsewhere, is not an unironic attempt at parsing out the misunderstandings of the *Athenaeum* for its critics, but rather it is an ironic treatise on irony.[30] It begins by 'attempting' to clarify the meaning of the fragments by using one fragment as an exemplar of the type of misunderstanding that may have occurred: *Athenaeum* fragment 216 in which Schlegel uses the term "tendency" to refer to the "French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's *Meister*."[31] Schlegel begins by parsing out the multiple meanings of the word "tendency," which may have led to this misunderstanding, and then talks more generally about the irony found within the fragments (as well as the definitions of irony in the fragments). However, the essay changes tone and task when Schlegel announces that irony is to be found everywhere within the fragments and that to explain the irony would do violence to the fragments, and to the aims of the *Athenaeum*. Explaining an ironic statement, by way of breaking it apart and parsing out the two contradictory meanings, would destroy the statement's irony. Furthermore, the resulting direct statement would do less, rather than more, than the original, ironic utterance. To put it differently, by "explaining the joke," the power of the fragments to convey multiple meanings at once is flattened out. And, as a result of this flattening out, the fragments cannot accomplish their aim of striving toward the Absolute.

Rather than explaining the irony of the fragments unironically, Schlegel's essay engages the reader in an ironic exploration of the meaning of irony that both obscures and clarifies the meaning of the fragments. In the essay, Schlegel goes as far as to provide an ironic system of irony, which contains various forms of irony, such as coarse, fine, extra fine, dramatic and

[30] Karolin Mirzakhan, "Irony and the Possibility of Romantic Criticism: Friedrich Schlegel as Poet-Critic," in *Critique in German Philosophy: From Kant to Critical Theory*, ed. Maria Del Rosario Acosta Lopez and J. Colin McQuillan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 173-184.

[31] Friedrich von Schlegel, "On Incomprehensibility (1800)," in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M Bernstein (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 300.

the irony of irony. The form of irony at the zenith, or perhaps nadir, of the system, the "irony of irony," is a description of what is going on in this essay itself: irony has taken over and it is no longer clear what parts of the essay are ironic or unironic.[32] Moreover, it seems as if the author himself has lost control over the irony of the essay.

After beginning to clarify the irony of the fragments and then declaring that doing so would be a violent act, Schlegel cautions his reader:

> But is incomprehensibility [*Unverständlichkeit*] really something so unmitigatedly contemptible and evil? Methinks the salvation of families and nations rests upon it. If I am not wholly deceived, then states and systems, the most artificial products of man, are often so artificial that one simply can't admire the wisdom of their creator enough. Only an incredibly minute quantity of it suffices: as long as its truth and purity remain inviolate and no blasphemous rationality [*frevelnder Verstand*] dares approach its sacred confines. Yes, even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible [*verständlich*] in earnest. And isn't this entire unending world constructed by the understanding [*Verstand*] out of incomprehensibility [*Unverständlichkeit*] or chaos?[33]

Although, on face value, this passage reads as an earnest plea with his reader to stop attempting to make everything comprehensible, I argue that, like the rest of the essay, it is an ironic treatment of irony. Schlegel tells his readers that it would "fare badly" to use the understanding to comprehend [*verstehen*] what has been created out of incomprehensibility [*Unverständlichkeit*], and, moreover, that the entire structure of human meaning would "crumble" if we subjected it to analysis by the understanding. However, in his usual tongue-in-cheek manner, Schlegel also says that even our own happiness "depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify" on this point of strength. Within a statement about the danger of rational analysis, Schlegel invokes the very language of analysis; and, what is more, he invokes a notion of a final, or ultimate, analysis. He provides the reader with a conclusion that would be derived from analysis – that the structure would crumble – in the course of a paragraph in which he is warning us against this very analysis. He

[32] Schlegel, "On Incomprehensibility (1800)," 303-304; KFSA II, 370.
[33] Ibid., 305; KFSA II, 370.

follows this statement up immediately with the phrase "as anybody can easily verify"; however, he has just told us that this very fact cannot be verified by the human understanding, and, even if that is the case, it can certainly not be "easily" verified by anyone. To risk doing violence to the irony of this passage a bit more, I am arguing that Schlegel's use of irony in this passage on the dangers of incomprehensibility, or his ironic warning, gives the reader a glimpse into the very foundation he warns us we cannot know.

In order to more fully appreciate Schlegel's critique and warning regarding the understanding, it is necessary to clarify what he means by the understanding. In Critical fragment 102, Schlegel distinguishes between two forms of reason: the thin, watery kind [*die dünne and wäßrige*] and the thick, fiery kind [*eine dicke feurige Vernunft*].[34] Although Schlegel uses the term reason or "*Vernunft*" in both cases, the former, the thin and watery kind of reason, can be applied to the activity of the understanding in the above quote, as that force which breaks apart what it seeks to know; that is, in order to comprehend the whole, the understanding destroys it.[35] The latter, the thick and fiery type of reason, is what makes the ironic fragments witty; it is a synthetic force that brings together previously unrelated thoughts (as in when Schlegel defines wit as the sudden meeting of two friendly thoughts after long separation). It is the thin, watery form of reason, or the activity of the understanding, that is at issue in the passage from "On Incomprehensibility." We ought not attempt to make everything in this world comprehensible, and, moreover, that doing so would be dangerous – fatal to our systems and structures. However, I would argue that the point of strength that Schlegel references is not a fact that could even be scrutinized by the understanding and then destroyed; it is, rather, more appropriately described in the terms of Fichte's appeal to faith in the opening of the third book of the *Vocation of Man*. This point of strength that ought to be left in the dark, must, rather, be left in the dark; it must, rather than ought to be, left in the dark because it *cannot* be brought to light via the understanding. This "point of strength" is not a fact, but rather an act – the act of faith that recognizes the validity of knowledge. What cannot be investigated – because it is no knowledge – is the moment of faith, i.e., that voluntary acquiescence that shores up the entire structure. It is not simply that we ought not investigate what "shores up" the entire structure, but rather that we cannot investigate it because it is an article of faith. To put it in other terms, it is the heart, the yearning or longing itself,

[34] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 155. KFSA II, p. 159, CF 104.
[35] I am following Alison Stone's interpretation of this fragment from her article "Friedrich Schlegel, Romanticism, and the Re-enchantment of Nature", *Inquiry* 48, no. 1 (February 1, 2005).

that holds up the system, and therefore, cannot be known. If one does not have "it" – like an understanding of the ironic fragments – then one cannot come to "get it" via rational arguments.[36]

The essay, "On Incomprehensibility," is, at one level, about the virtues of incomprehensibility – after all, shouldn't the fragments remain incomeprehensible? Isn't there something good about incomprehensibility? Isn't there something bad about everything becoming, as we wish, comprehensible? And, shouldn't a classical text *never* be entirely comprehensible?[37] At this register, the essay serves as a warning: be careful with the extent to which you analyze using the understanding; you may end up destroying the very thing that you wish to understand. However, in the same gesture, isn't Schlegel explaining something about our systems of meaning? Doesn't he provide us with some understanding even as he warns us about its overuse. Is this passage, which reads as a direct warning, actually, like the rest of the essay, written with the tongue firmly planted in the cheek ("*as anyone can easily verify*")?

Because of its irony, the passage from "On Incomprehensibility" that I quoted above can operate on multiple registers simultaneously. However, its irony cannot be parsed out, broken up, or dissected in order to be understood; it is, rather, understood immediately and all at once, like the witty idea that Schlegel describes in Critical fragment 96, whose "meaning should be immediately and completely clear as soon as it's been hit upon."[38] Likewise, in Critical fragment 108 (and reprinted in "On Incomprehensibility") Schlegel characterizes Socratic irony as "the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation"; with Socratic irony, it is "equally impossible to feign or divulge" and "[to] a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed."[39] Supporting this claim, Schlegel writes, in *Athenaeum* fragment 78, "usually incomprehension doesn't

[36] In Fichte's Lectures "Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy" he is acutely aware of the relationship between the spirit and letter and the role that the letter plays in awakening that which cannot be directly communicated. Spirit, which he defines as the "productive imagination," is the source for all representation, but it is a source that cannot be conveyed directly, i.e., it cannot itself be represented because it is the source for all representing. In those lectures, much like the closing pages of the *Vocation*, Fichte's employs language that will awaken spirit within his audience. Spirit can only be awakened, not pointed to; any pointing to the productive imagination already invokes the productive imagination, as the source of all representing. To put it in other words, it (the productive imagination) is beyond reach, because it is doing the reaching.

[37] KFSA II, p. 149, CF 20. Schlegel also quotes this fragment in his essay "On Incomprehensibility."

[38] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 154, CF 96; KFSA II, 158, CF 96.

[39] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 155-156, CF 108; KFSA II, 160, CF 108.

derive from a lack of intelligence, but from a lack of sense [*Sinn*]."[40] The ironic utterance is not like the voice of the spirit [*Der Geist*] in Book II of the *Vocation of Man*, which appeals to the protagonist's understanding; it is more like the ringing out in the inmost soul of the protagonist that occurs in Book III, "Faith." If, in the attempt to understand irony, I break apart its component parts – the overt meaning of the statement and the hidden meaning of the statement – I immediately reduce or destroy the power of irony as a linguistic utterance that can capture, in one and the same breath, what is / what is not. To put it rather unironically, irony both says what it says (the explicit statement) and what it does not say (the hidden meaning); it is the union of what is said and what remains unsaid (but is meant). Irony can be realized immediately and fully, but it cannot be explained without thereby, in the process, destroying the irony of the statement.

The feeling for irony, which requires sense rather than intelligence, is analogous to the feeling of our protagonist in Book III of the *Vocation*. Fichte attempts to express this feeling – our link to the supersensible realm, to our freedom — in the language of a yearning, an urge, a longing, and "a drive to absolute independent self-activity."[41] Using these various terms to evoke the feeling of the heart, Fichte can only approximate this drive, which is inseparable from who I am at any moment when I collect myself. By anthropomorphizing this calling as the voice of conscience, language uses metaphor in an attempt to point to this drive. However, language can never capture that which lies beyond our systems of meaning, and yet is the source for their validity.

Additionally, both the act of faith and the ironic utterance cannot be "understood" because they are wholes rather than parts. In the act of faith, the protagonist is not merely a determinate object amongst other objects (as in "Doubt"), nor merely a subject that "thinks up the object" (as in "Knowledge"), but instead, the protagonist, as an embodied will, is both spiritual and material, and affirms this union in the act of faith. As soon as thinking or reflection is applied, the subject-object split is created within the I, i.e., the "I" as the form of reflection itself and the "I" as the content of that reflection. To avoid this split, the I must be an acting I and its action the movement of faith. Likewise, irony presents a whole, which is fractured as soon as the ironic utterance is parsed out, broken apart, or analyzed. In analyzing irony, the unity of what is / is not gets split apart and, through

[40] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 170, AF 78; KFSA II, 176, AF 78.
[41] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 68; GA I/6, 254. For an account of this drive, see: Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

direct communication, the elements of the ironic utterance are reified; the understanding "things the unthinged" and eliminates the ironic fragments' ability to convey the absolute. Discourse destroys the absolute and turns it into what it is not.

7. Irony as Faith in the Fragments

In this section, I want to briefly explore how my claims about the structural similarity of "On Incomprehensibility" and the *Vocation of Man* can be applied to Schlegel's fragments. In *Athenaeum* fragment 53, Schlegel writes, "It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two."[42] Frederick Beiser has interpreted this fragment to mean that we both need structures in order to have any kind of inquiry at all, but that those same structures can place limits on our inquiry; therefore, we must both have some kind of framework, or regulative ideal, even as we know it cannot be reached. Beiser contends that the aim of this ideal is to "goad our striving."[43] For the purposes of this project, however, I would like to focus on the language of decision in this fragment – i.e., as it is equally fatal to both have/not have a system, the mind must "simply *decide*" to have both [emphasis mine]. The holding of both is a *decision* of the mind, and not a conclusion to a line of reasoning. Thus, this fragment, and its language of decision, mirrors the protagonist's decision in "Faith" to acquiesce to the natural standpoint; faith is a "decision of the will" to recognize that standpoint.[44] And, likewise, in this fragment, the mind decides to have a system and not have a system; it decides to affirm incompleteness, not to deduce it. The mind decides to affirm both because it would be fatal to do otherwise, just as the protagonist in the *Vocation* decides to affirm the natural standpoint because it cannot fulfill its vocation otherwise.

In *Ideas* fragment 28, Schlegel writes, "Man is Nature creatively looking back at itself."[45] In Book I, "Doubt," Fichte presents a nearly identical claim: "In man, its greatest masterpiece, [Nature] returns into itself to look at itself

---

[42] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 167. KFSA II, p. 173, AF 53. "Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden."

[43] Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 34. "If romantic irony is indeed directed against any claim to completion or closure, that is only because its aim is to goad our striving, to intensify our efforts, so that we approach closer to the ideal of a complete system."

[44] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 71; GA I/6, 257.

[45] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 243, I 28; KFSA II, 258, I 28.

and observe itself: it duplicates itself in man as it were, and its mere being becomes being and consciousness in union."[46] In the context of "Doubt," this statement means that we, as human beings, are simply a development of nature; we are the highest development in that we have the capacity for self-reflection, but that capacity is not free. Rather, this capacity for self-reflection is merely the result of evolutionary processes that have reached a pinnacle in the human being. In his fragment, Schlegel includes the term "creatively" and therefore asserts that the human being is not merely a determinate object in nature that has the capacity to reflect upon itself because of the chain of strict necessity that led to her having this capacity; instead, human beings creatively, and thus freely, determine how we do that activity of reflecting. The fragment is a performance of the freedom that it describes; it is a positing. Like the fragment about the mind's decision to embrace having a system and not having a system, this fragment asserts the role of creativity in our reflective activity as human beings – thus performing or enacting the free activity that it describes.[47]

This free act, as a performance of the fragments, is also enacted by their wit, which is crucially tied to the brevity of the fragments. Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* 120 that wit is often not taken seriously because "its expressions aren't long and wide enough."[48] He continues on in the same fragment to describe wit "like someone who is supposed to behave in a manner representative of his station, but instead simply *does* something."[49] This characteristic activity of wit is also defined as its sociality in the fragments. Wit is social insofar as it is marked by the *activity* of joining previously disconnected ideas.[50] Wit is characteristically active – it performs the playful combining that distinguishes romantic philosophizing.

But, Schlegel tells his readers, wit cannot be analyzed: "The flame of the most brilliantly witty idea should radiate warmth only after it has given off light; it can be quenched suddenly by a single analytic world, even when it is meant as praise."[51] As I argued earlier, our attempts (including mine in

[46] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 15; GA I/6, 203.
[47] In his *Athenaeum* fragment 168, as an analogy for thinking about the best philosophy for the poet, Schlegel presents a ranking of philosophies in terms of how well suited they are for the orator; at issue in this ranking of philosophies is, in part, whether they would prohibit the orator from making decisions. Schlegel decides, after surveying the options, that the only philosophy left for the poet is a "creative philosophy," which "originates in freedom and belief in freedom." Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 183, AF 168.
[48] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 176, AF 120; KFSA II, 184, AF 120.
[49] Ibid.
[50] For these descriptions of wit, see Schlegel's *Kritische* (Critical) fragments 9 and 56. KFSA II, p. 148, CF 9; KFSA II, p. 154, CF 56.
[51] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 145, CF 22; KFSA II, 149, CF 22.

this very essay) of "explaining the joke" destroy its power – they quench the flame. Wit cannot withstand analysis, because analysis, the thin and watery sort of reason (or the way that the understanding operates in "On Incomprehensibility") seeks to know by breaking apart, and therefore, performs the opposite operation of wit's chemical bonding. If it is true, as Schlegel claims, that poetry can only be criticized by way of poetry,[52] then perhaps wit can also only be approximated by way of wit and an analysis of wit destroys its very function and does not allow us to get any nearer to it.

8. Faith's Closure and Romantic Irony's Openness

In this section, I will address a crucial difference between the role of faith in Schlegel and Fichte. Whereas Schlegel's fragmentary, ironic writings leave the reader with the inexhaustible task of an unending pursuit of possible meanings, Fichte's protagonist in the *Vocation of Man* closes the book on her investigation in the final pages of "Faith."

The final pages of "Faith," in the *Vocation of Man*, close the book by shutting off any further investigation. There is a supreme sense of closure in the *Vocation*; it is "supreme" in the sense that it is the relationship to the supreme infinite will that causes the protagonist to rest, to stop questioning – even if the object of that questioning is the profound evil found in the world. This relationship to the supreme infinite will is revealed to the protagonist through her acquiescence to the natural view. For Fichte's protagonist, the supreme infinite will speaks to her when it "bends down toward" her through the command of conscience; in a reciprocal motion, I (or, the protagonist) "raise myself to it" through my obedience.[53] The voice of conscience – the voice that tells me my vocation is to act (and to act in specific ways in line with its commands) – is my tether to the supersensible realm. Through her obedience to this voice, the protagonist raises her existence to a higher, loftier level. And, it is through this obedience, that Fichte's protagonist finds peace, calm, and repose.

Although it was the heart's yearning that moved our protagonist from "Doubt" into "Knowledge" and finally to "Faith," the heart's yearning all but disappears by the end of the book when our protagonist realizes that Reason's plan is working through her (via her obedience to the voice of conscience). Even though she may often find that plan incomprehensible, she will not question it. Earlier, I referenced David W. Wood's incisive description that the closing pages of "Faith" read like a "sermon." In these

[52] KFSA II, p. 162, CF 117.
[53] Fichte, *Vocation of Man,* 107.

pages, the protagonist repeatedly claims not to know or comprehend the plan of reason, but nonetheless to have found a profound kind of peace; the text becomes repetitive – it is as if the protagonist is convincing herself of her own inner calm. The protagonist says that "all puzzles from my existence are solved",[54] that she "will rest content",[55] and she is "satisfied" because her mind has "perfect harmony and clarity."[56] A yearning to know her vocation is replaced with "calm devotion."[57] This aforementioned harmony, satisfaction and contentedness, is not based on comprehension but rather the protagonist repeatedly states that she does not comprehend that which "transcends" all her thought and is "hidden" from her.[58] She remains calm because even those "events which seem so sad to me could, in the plan of the eternal one, be the nearest means to a good result."[59] Any evil that occurs is part of the grand plan of reason and therefore ought not bother me (amongst the evils of oppression and natural disasters that Fichte names, we might add his loss of his professorship at Jena as something beyond his control and part of the plan of reason). Our protagonist remains unmoved by any external events as she is only concerned with her duty to obey the voice of conscience, a duty which is her vocation. Whereas, at the beginning of the book, the search for vocation is open-ended, by the conclusion, the protagonist has closed off all possibilities by affirming a peace in knowing that she is to follow the plan of reason. This plan is conveyed to her through the voice of conscience. She cannot know that plan; it will often seem incomprehensible to her; but, she must obey nonetheless. Why obey? Because this voice is me; it is one with me; and it is ringing out in my inmost soul. At this point, the previous movements of the text – and their respective voices – are conceived of as voices of "limited cleverness" and even what was previously conceived of as enlightenment is now described as mere sophistry.[60]

The tone of the book changes from a restless questioning to a calm repose, from a deep desire and yearning to understand one's vocation on one's own terms to a complete relinquishing of control and the urge to know. The central role of the heart, and the heart's yearning, is replaced by vision, which becomes "spiritualized" [*meinem Blicke vergeistiget*].[61] These spiritualized eyes recognize the plan of reason in all things and do not even question

[54] Ibid., 111.
[55] Ibid.,112-113.
[56] Ibid.,115.
[57] Ibid., 117.
[58] Ibid.,115-116.
[59] Ibid., 118-119.
[60] Ibid., 116, 119.
[61] GA I/6, 307.

evil in the world.[62] With the recognition of this new, lofty vocation (lofty because it is dictated by the commands of conscience, the tether to the supersensible realm) the heart is now "closed" to the desire for earthly things.[63] Whereas the heart had been the guiding force for the book up to this point, the eyes take precedence in these last pages, and all the unrest of both the heart and mind that had occupied our protagonist are gone and replaced with calm, repose, and certainty. I've included some examples of the language of Book III in the previous paragraph to convey the repetitive tone of these final pages, which carry on long after the argument of the book has already been made. In the last sections of "Faith," Fichte adapts the mode of a preacher and these final pages read like a sermon; however, I would argue that this format of a sermon makes sense given Fichte's comments in the preface – i.e., his goal was to *move* the reader from the sensible to the supersensible. I contend that, throughout the text, this movement is happening at the level of the heart. The initial yearning for answers prompts the protagonist's journey at the beginning of "Doubt"; and, at the end of each section, her heart's dissatisfaction with the system that has been presented goads her forward. The "I" – or the reader – must feel her own freedom in the act of positing that is faith by the time that we get to Book III, otherwise the text fails altogether. Likewise, Fichte cannot provide arguments to prove the existence of the supersensible realm – a realm that guarantees my existence has meaning – but rather he must find a way to make the reader feel that this realm and this plan exist. If not, there will be no calm, no certainty, and no resolution by the end of the book.

This format of a sermon on the grand plan of Reason – working itself out through finite beings – mirrors Fichte's description of nature in the second section of Book III. Fichte views nature as opposed to human beings and as an opponent that must be defeated by us and organized to reflect reason. Once we arrive at peace within and among states, he argues, human beings can work together as one collective toward our combined enemy: nature.[64] Humanity's goal is a complete domination of nature through which nature would submit to the commands and laws of reason. Nature, in the end, becomes a reflection or echo of man – a servant to his needs. Fichte's

[62] Ibid.
[63] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 120.
[64] Ibid., 89-90.

depiction of the mastery and control of nature presents an initial blueprint for the closure that will take place at the end of Book III.[65]

The domination of nature also occurs through Fichte's rejection of circularity throughout the *Vocation*. Fichte finds a state of affairs in which I am merely born to eat, drink and procreate until I reach the grave to be repugnant.[66] He calls this circle [*Zirkel*] a mere game [Spiel].[67] By the end of Book III, a linear plan of Reason has replaced any circularity found in the natural rhythms of nature, which Fichte refers to as a circle-dance [*Cirkeltanz*].[68] In both instances, natural cycles, such as birth and death, or the rising and setting of the sun, are characterized through language (of dance or play) that minimizes their significance. Fleeting worldly existence marked by the cyclical repetitions of the sensible realm have been superseded by the eternal life offered by the supersensible realm. Now that our protagonist recognizes the plan of reason in all things, her spiritualized eyes can see "constant progress" in terms of a "straight line to infinity."[69] The ability to see this "straight line" also fits with the protagonist's calm repose at the end of "Faith"; whereas doubt and uncertainty might be conceived as a circular movement folding back on itself, faith contains a conviction that no longer questions, but rather trusts that the great plan of reason is always on the move, forwards, towards progress.

This lack of movement and the rejection of circularity, at the end of the *Vocation of Man*, is in direct contrast to the unending yearning and striving for the Absolute found in Friedrich Schlegel's early German romantic fragments. Irony, a key device of these fragments, ensures that their meaning will never be fully formed, that – like a cultivated work – they will always be open to new interpretations by their readers. The tension created by irony is never eliminated, but rather it is a necessary component of philosophy understood as an active process of symphilosophizing.

In Schlegel, and early German romantic philosophy more broadly, there is a mistrust and rejection of closed, all-encompassing systems. The early German romantics are critical and skeptical of philosophy's desire for closure. Schlegel presents this critique throughout his fragments; in one instance, he writes in *Athenaeum* fragment 43 that philosophy is far too linear

[65] For a critical assessment of Fichte's view of Nature, see: Elizabeth Millán, "*Bestimmung* as *Bildung*: On Reading Fichte's *Vocation of Man* as *Bildungsroman,*" in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, 45–55.
[66] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 81; GA I/6, 267.
[67] Ibid.
[68] GA I/6, 307.
[69] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 122.

and not yet cyclical enough [*nicht zyklisch genug*].[70] In another fragment, *Athenaeum* 54, he writes that the person who thinks they are a philosopher has stopped becoming one;[71] philosophizing is an activity without end. Philosophy is not a static identity category, a possession, or a destination.

This quintessential romantic incompleteness is also achieved through the irony of Schlegel's fragments. The ironic utterance is characterized by its openness to multiple meanings; or better yet, irony is the literary technique that makes possible the open-ended philosophizing that marks the early German romantic period. Irony is the technique by which the early German romantics resist the closure of the philosophical systems of their contemporaries. Irony resists closure by positing multiple, often contradictory, meanings at once.

In Schlegel's definitions of the term, irony is characterized as a doubling or multiplying of meanings; in this multiplication, the reader is moved away from a definitive interpretation of the text, and therefore irony provides a distance that brings the reader closer to the Absolute. For example, Socratic irony is described via a series of couplets – it is both serious and playful, deeply open and hidden, at the same time.[72] Likewise, when describing the good writer, Schlegel invokes the language of self-restriction and freedom, but he emphasizes that the good writer is the one that is not too close to the subject matter nor too far away from it; her relationship to the material is similar to a good conversation – able to be cut off at any time. The effective writer needs to maintain the appropriate amount of restraint because, without self-restraint, she will be controlled by the world; but, if she has too much restraint, the process of creative activity cannot take place. Therefore, the good writer is the one who dwells within the tension between too much and too little self-restraint.[73] In another definition of irony as the "form of paradox," irony names the linguistic technique that is capable of holding a contradiction without allowing either term to be diluted by the other or conflated into the other.[74] In each of these instances, irony makes possible a tension between contradictory ideas, and therefore, the ironic writer is the writer who is most comfortable with abiding in tensions without needing to resolve them. Framed from the perspective of the reader of the fragments, it is irony that shows the reader that she has tried to capture the text, to pin it down to one meaning. Irony then turns this interpretation of the text against

[70] KFSA II, p. 171, AF 43.
[71] KFSA II, p. 174, AF 54.
[72] Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 155-156, CF 108; KFSA II, p. 160, CF 108.
[73] KFSA II, p. 173, AF 53.
[74] KFSA II, p 153, CF 48.

the reader and, by turning on her, it resists her attempts at closure and shows her the folly of her ways.

This sense of tension can be found not only in the content of the fragments, but also in their form. Each fragment is like a hedgehog, Schlegel tells us, separate and isolated from the surrounding world.[75] As hedgehogs, the fragments are individuals, but they are also connected to each other. The fragments are surrounded by space, which exhorts their reader to pause before continuing on to the next one. The meaning of the fragments is found in the relationship between the fragments and between the fragments and their reader – a reader who will, hopefully, know how to read them and who will not find them incomprehensible. This reader is attentive to the pauses and to the myriad possible meanings that arise in different configurations.

In their form, the fragments also enact the resistance to closed, all-encompassing systems that characterizes romantic *symphilosophie*. There is no foundational fragment, no final fragment, and no perfect ordering of the fragments that would arrive at a complete system. The fragments can stand on their own, like the hedgehog they are compared to, but they also function in relationship to each other. Their meanings rely on their being read together, and on the reader's relationship to them. She brings the breath that enlivens them; she tends the soil that allows these seeds, in Novalis' terms, to be nurtured and cultivated.[76] The fragments cannot function without the reader and therefore they are always incomplete on their own.

9. The Heart, or What is Left Unsaid

In "On Incomprehensibility," Schlegel ironically conveys that which is at the 'base' of our systems of knowing, but which cannot be known. To the reader willing to be patient with this text, he is giving her a glimmer of something beyond our structures – there is a glimpse, via irony, into a groundless ground, or a ground more properly conceived of as an activity. I am arguing that this groundless ground is akin to the feeling that prompts the moment of faith in Fichte's *Vocation of Man*. There is a yearning at the 'base' of our

[75] KFSA II, p. 197, AF 206.

[76] In *Pollen* fragment 104, Novalis calls the fragments "literary seed houses"; like seeds, many will not germinate. However, he ends that fragment by calling the reader's attention to the possibilities of even a few of the fragment seeds germinating. In Logological fragment 100, Novalis writes simply that "Everything is seed." Novalis, "Miscellaneous Remarks," in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M Bernstein (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 213, #104. Novalis, "Novalis, Miscellaneous Observations and Logological Fragments," in *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph J. Tanke and Colin McQuillan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 315, #100.

systems of knowing, but even though that yearning makes possible those systems, it cannot be known — it is, like the witty fragment, destroyed the very moment it is analyzed. Both authors gesture to what cannot be known but is felt and both defend themselves against being misunderstood by their critics, not by appealing to logic and understanding, but rather to what lies beyond the understanding. Schlegel tells his readers that the misunderstanding of irony is not so much the result of incomprehension, but the lack of sense. Fichte directly states in his "Appeal to the Public" that he and his critics share an appeal to the heart, which cannot be realized through rational arguments; less directly, he appeals to the heart as a narrative device through the *Vocation*.

In the *Vocation of Man*, a yearning motivates the protagonist's search for her vocation. This yearning is the clue to that vocation: the yearning of the heart is the yearning to act and it tells me (by way of the anthropomorphized voice of conscience) that my vocation, my purpose, is to act, and not merely to know. In order to act, I must believe in the natural standpoint, for only that belief makes my activity possible. What my yearning to know reveals, for both authors, is that what is unknown, and never to be known, grounds our systems. In Schlegel, this means that there is, at once, a system and not-a-system (that which is outside the system yet makes it possible). This groundless ground is something each author's reader must be moved toward – either via emotional appeal (through a sermon) or via irony; but, either way, 'it' remains a riddle or a mystery if it is not arrived at by that reader.

However, Schlegel and Fichte diverge with regard to the completion or closure of the system presented in their works. Because of their irony, Schlegel's fragments and his essay "On Incomprehensibility" remain open-ended. Schlegel presents the reader with multiple instances of irony as a holding together of contradictory opposites through the fragments and the essay. The reader is held in a tension and that tension is never resolved. However, Fichte resolves any tension that is created by the heart's yearning or the protagonist's questioning through the protagonist's faith in the plan of reason. This plan unfolds out of the free choice to adopt the natural standpoint – i.e., there is a world like the one I perceive, that same world is where action takes place, and those actions have consequences. The voice of conscience, which is immediate and united with me, assures me that those actions have consequences; if those consequences do not occur in this world, then they must come about in the next. Actions are guided by laws, and therefore that other realm (the supersensible realm) must also have laws that govern the actions of wills (in this case, ensuring that willing takes place). That law must also be a will (because it cannot be heteronomous to the will)

and therefore that law which ensures the willing of all wills takes place is the Supreme Will.[77] The commands of reason are given to me by the voice of conscience – my link to the supersensible – and my duty is simply to obey even as I do not comprehend those commands.

Fichte's *Vocation* is full of voices, perhaps to a fault; unlike Schlegel's writings, which, through their irony, leave room for what cannot be said, Fichte's protagonist has the final word through her repeated appeals to the plan of Reason.[78] In Schlegel's warnings about the human yearning to comprehend the incomprehensible, he utilizes irony and therefore allows the meaning of his essay to be incomplete – to be open to a future reader in whose mind and heart the meaning of the essay will continue to germinate. Fichte, on the other hand, says so much at the end of the *Vocation* that he leaves no room for the unsaid. Anything unsaid, unnamed, or incomprehensible is simply a part of the grand plan of Reason that quells my yearning and sets my heart to ease. The protagonist's eyes are "spiritualized" and all wonder has left her senses, mind, and heart.[79] There is no space left for the reader or for the unknown – everything has been explained away; everything that I see, think, or feel is the result of the plan of Reason and I must simply believe it to be so. While the *Vocation* begins with yearning and the task of an open-ended investigation that will not cease until the protagonist determines for herself her own vocation, it ends by sealing itself off to any further questions. Unlike the romantic fragments, which, through their wit, brevity, and irony, leave the reader to endlessly contemplate their meanings, the *Vocation* offers very little to the reader who is not compelled by the move to faith in the opening pages of Book III. Indeed, it also offers very little to the one who is compelled, since she must simply "silently obey" reason's commands.[80]

10. Conclusion

I have argued that the irony in Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" and the wit of his fragments mirror the activity of faith in Fichte's *Vocation of Man*. Faith is no knowledge and cannot be known. If it is not felt, it too, like

[77] Fichte, *Vocation of Man,* 104-106.
[78] I am reminded of Nietzsche's "Dying Socrates" in *Gay Science* aphorism 340. Whereas Schlegel presents the figure of an ironic Socrates in Critical fragment 108 (irony is tied to wit and therefore brevity), Fichte seems to be the figure of the Socrates who said too much at the moments before his death. And while Book II of the *Vocation*, "Knowledge," does present a Socratic figure (who only asks questions and does not grant you anything you do not yourself know), that figure is jettisoned by the end of Book II and replaced with the tone of a preacher full of conviction.
[79] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 122.
[80] Ibid., 91.

irony, "remains a riddle even after it is openly confessed."[81] Yet, without faith, knowledge's validity cannot be recognized and our structures of meaning – our very vocation – would have no support. Both irony and faith gesture to 'some-thing' that cannot be understood, that defies our understanding, and that would be broken apart and thereby destroyed by our attempts to understand. However, this 'some-thing' is necessary to "shore up" our structures of meaning. What is at the 'base' of our systems cannot be the object of our scrutiny because 'it' is beyond the reach of our understanding. However, 'base' is only an approximation, a metaphor, for thinking about a ground that is an activity. Irony provides its careful readers access to that which is beyond our structures of knowing without at the same time destroying that "point of strength"; unlike the thin and watery sort of reason, or the activity of the understanding, irony is not destructive because it does not seek to know by cutting apart, but rather, like the thick and fiery type of reason, it performs a chemical process of combining previously disconnected – even contradictory – ideas in a way that produces something more than the sum of their parts. By attempting to understand irony, we reduce it to its parts, and thus we no longer gain access to that which exceeds the sum, and which is intuited, or felt, in the ironic gesture. Analogously, by attempting to understand "faith," we reduce it to knowledge and thereby destroy our ability to fulfill our vocation.

[81] This is a reference to Schlegel's definition of Socratic Irony found in Critical fragment 108. Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 155-156, CF 108. KFSA II, p. 160, CF 108.