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The Role of History in Schlegel's Philosophy

The Case against Isolationism and for *Bildung*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the role of history in Schlegel's philosophy, emphasizing its importance for understanding change and *Bildung*, and for fostering philosophical dialogue within a democratic and hermeneutical context. For Schlegel, philosophy is inherently dynamic, involving change and development, not static truths. Philosophy must engage with the past through dialogue, humility, and recognition of its evolving nature. Schlegel advocates for a philosophy that is rooted in life's ongoing flux, inspired by Goethe's morphology. He criticizes Kant and Fichte for neglecting the historical dimension of human existence. Schlegel argues for a continuous, critical engagement with past thought and claims that philosophy always begins in the midst of reality rather than from an ahistorical first principle.

Keywords: Gadamer, Goethe, Schlegel, *Bildung*, history, understanding

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die Rolle der Geschichte in Schlegels Philosophie und betont ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis von Wandel und Bildung sowie für die Förderung des philosophischen Dialogs in einem demokratischen und hermeneutischen Kontext. Für Schlegel ist Philosophie ihrem Wesen nach dynamisch; sie umfasst Wandel und Entwicklung und nicht statische Wahrheiten. Philosophie muss sich durch Dialog, Demut und die Anerkennung ihres sich fortwährend entwickelnden Charakters mit der Vergangenheit auseinandersetzen. Schlegel plädiert für eine Philosophie, die im fortwährenden Wandel des Lebens verwurzelt ist und sich von Goethes Morphologie inspirieren lässt. Er kritisiert Kant und Fichte dafür, die geschichtliche Dimension der menschlichen Existenz zu vernachlässigen. Schlegel plädiert für eine kontinuierliche, kritische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Denken der Vergangenheit und vertritt die Auffassung, dass Philosophie stets mitten in der Wirklichkeit beginnt und nicht von einem ahistorischen ersten Prinzip ausgeht.

Stichwörter: Gadamer, Goethe, Schlegel, Bildung, Geschichte, Verstehen

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1. A Troubling Overture: Why We Must Take History Seriously

We are living in unsettling political times. On February 19, 2025, in his State of the State Address, the Governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker, gave his listeners this grim reminder: “It took the Nazis one month, three weeks, two days, eight hours, and forty minutes to dismantle a constitutional republic”¹. The Weimar Republic (1913-1933) proved more fragile than many had hoped. All democracies are fragile and their protection requires courage from all citizens. Pritzker’s warning and call to remember history is well-placed. In his courageous address, Pritzker detailed the dread he felt upon witnessing the U.S. political landscape emerging from the Trump-led administration and made a fitting comparison with what took place in Europe in the 20th century, emphasizing that “[t]he seed that grew into a dictatorship in Europe a lifetime ago didn’t arrive overnight. It started with everyday Germans mad about inflation and looking for someone to blame” (Pritzker, *Ibid.*). Pritzker continued:

I’m watching with a foreboding dread what is happening in our country right now. A president who watches a plane go down in the Potomac – and suggests – without facts or findings – that a diversity hire is responsible for the crash. Or the Missouri Attorney General who just sued Starbucks – arguing that consumers pay higher prices for their coffee because the baristas are too “female” and “nonwhite.” The authoritarian playbook is laid bare here: They point to a group of people who don’t look like you and tell you to blame them for your problems. I just have one question: What comes next? After we’ve discriminated against, deported or disparaged all the immigrants and the gay and lesbian and transgender people, the developmentally disabled, the women and the minorities – once we’ve ostracized our neighbors and betrayed our friends – After that, when the problems we started with are still there staring us in the face – what comes next? All the atrocities of human history lurk in the answer to that question. And if we don’t want to repeat history – then for God’s sake in this moment we better be strong enough to learn from it (*Ibid.*).

Pritzker takes us to two issues that I would like to put into conversation with the early German Romantics: 1) the central role that history plays in coming to an understanding of our circumstances and 2) the question of how an awareness of that meaning is connected to historical context and to life in its change might create a greater sense of solidarity in society.

¹ See <https://gov-pritzker-newsroom.prezly.com/gov-pritzker-proposes-seventh-balanced-budget>

Within the field of philosophy, too often, we have turned away from history or considered those who take it too seriously to be less rigorous philosophers. After all, if philosophy is to be something like a natural science, then why do we even need to do history? Taken too far, we might even wonder why philosophy needs to be written in sentences: why not just offer atomistic formulas and mathematical proofs for our claims? Just as we endanger our democracies when we don't consider history carefully enough, philosophy suffers if we cut it off from other branches of human inquiry and sequester it within narrow boundaries with the view that only within these boundaries can it achieve the hallowed status of a science. Isolationism in politics has bleak consequences, so too are the consequences of isolationism in philosophy bleak. In what follows, I will present Schlegel's account of why philosophy must be historical and sketch the productive potential of his historical turn.

For Schlegel, philosophy has to do with change and development, a kind of intellectual *Bildung*. It is only through a dialogue with the past and with an attitude of humility, a recognition that we cannot hold truth, but merely ever be in search of it, that we become philosophers in the first place. *Symphilosophie* or the art of doing philosophy in dialogue with others is born in part from the early German Romantics' historical turn.² This art of doing philosophy with others is also decidedly democratic which only works if the participants acknowledge that they have much to learn from their dialogue partners.

The historical turn that I shall highlight in Schlegel's thought is connected to his view that change or becoming is intrinsic to philosophy, a change that has much to do with one sense of how Schlegel applies the term *Bildung*. There are, of course, many paths we could take to trace the meaning and legacy of the vast territory covered by the term *Bildung* in the German tradition, yet for the purposes of this paper, I shall limit my approach to the sense of *Bildung* in terms of unfolding, of life and change, for I think this dynamic captures the aspect of early German Romanticism connected to the progressive spirit of Schlegel's work and is the sort of *Bildung* that Schlegel emphasized in many of his writings.³ It is also the sense of *Bildung* at the heart of his historical turn. A philosopher dedicated to progress has to be comfort-

² I thank Michael Forster and Laure Cahen-Maurel for organizing a meeting that brought together a generous, skilled group of fellow philosophers to share ideas. The rich, productive dialogue we had in Bonn helped shape this essay.

³ An excellent account of *Bildung* in the sense of education can be found in Frederick Beiser, Chapter 6, *The Concept of Bildung in Early German Romanticism*, of *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

table with change. *Bildung* was a term in the intellectual air of the period. Indeed, Schlegel names Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister*, as one of the tendencies of the age.⁴ In his work on morphology, Goethe emphasizes that when we study organic forms, "nowhere do we find permanence, repose, or termination. We find rather that everything is in ceaseless flux. This is why our language makes such frequent use of the term '*Bildung*' to designate what has been brought forth and likewise what is in the process of being brought forth" (*Goethe's Botanical Writings*, trans. Bertha Mueller (Woodbridge, Connecticut: Ox Bow Press, 1952, 23).⁵ In his work on morphology, Goethe claims that we "must avoid speaking in terms of what is fixed"; Schlegel imported Goethe's resistance to the static, and he called for those doing philosophy to embrace change and life, his historical turn is part of this embrace.

Schlegel's historical turn was also part of his concern with the very task of understanding which he saw as necessary to do philosophy in the first place. For Schlegel the task of understanding was inextricably linked to its lack, that is, to misunderstanding or incomprehensibility. As we shall see, Schlegel's endgame was not comprehensibility but rather the creation of a culture of hermeneutical openness. In *Ideas* Fragment 129a, Schlegel writes, "You're not really supposed to understand me, but I want very much for you to listen to me."⁶ / *Verstehen sollt ihr mich eben nicht, aber dass ihr mich vernehmen moget Wunsch ich gar sehr* (KFSA 2, 269, Nr. 129 Notiz 1).⁷ Schlegel's

⁴ For more detail on Schlegel's reception of Goethe's novel, see Elizabeth Millán Brusslan, "Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*: A Tendency of Romantic Philosophy," for *Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Philosophy*, edited by Sarah Eldridge and Allen Speight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 78-105.

⁵ For more on the tight connections between Goethe and prominent members of the German philosophical tradition, see, *Goethe and German Idealism*, special volume of *Goethe Yearbook*, Elizabeth Millán and John Smith, eds. Volume XVIII (2011). See also: Kristian Köchy, "Das naturwissenschaftliche Forschungsprogramm der Romantik," in *Das neue Licht der Frühromantik*, eds. Bärbel Frischmann and Elizabeth Millán (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009): 153-169; Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life. Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Joan Steigerwald, *Experimenting at the Boundaries of Life. Organic Vitality in Germany around 1800* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); Dalia Nassar, *Romantic Empiricism. Nature, Art, and Ecology from Herder to Humboldt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁶ Years after Schlegel's plea for listeners, Theodor Adorno also complained of the decline in listening, linking that decline to the state of music, indicating that it had suffered such a decline in our culture that it was ultimately perceived "purely as background" noise. He added, "if nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen" (Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed., J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 30.

⁷ KFSA refers to the critical edition of Schlegel's work, *Friedrich Schlegel Kritische Ausgabe* (KFSA), 35 vols., ed. Ernst Behler, et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958—). All further

historical approach to philosophy prepares us to listen to or to take in what is before us rather than judging what is before us (words or images) with a narrow lens of our making. Understanding is an unfolding process, dynamic and never static. An embrace of process characterizes Schlegel's view of philosophy and the task of the philosopher. Let us now consider the consequences of prioritizing becoming over being.

2. Progressive Philosophy is Historical

As Schlegel tells us in *Athenaeum* Fragment Nr. 54, "One can only become a philosopher, not be one. As soon as one thinks one is a philosopher, one stops becoming one" (Firchow, 24) /*Man kann nur Philosoph werden, nicht es sein. Sobald man es zu sein glaubt, hört man auf es zu werden* (KFSA 2, 173). The early German Romantics were aware that we could not do philosophy in a progressive spirit without making philosophy historical, for the historical takes us to the unfolding of events in the world, to the living seeds that give rise to change. Schlegel critiqued Descartes for his ahistorical approach, writing in his *Kölner Vorlesungen* (1804-5):

To entirely abstract from all previous systems and throw all of this away as Descartes attempted to do is absolutely impossible. Such an entirely new creation from one's own mind, a complete forgetting of all which has been thought before, was also attempted by Fichte and he too failed in this.⁸

According to Schlegel, prominent representatives of the modern European philosophical tradition such as Descartes and Fichte sought the foundation for philosophy in an ahistorical *cogito* or *Ich*, but Schlegel rejects this move and any attempt to isolate a single, fixed principle (whether that principle is understood as an activity or as a fact) underlying all of our knowledge claims. To "throw away" everything that has been developed by other philosophers or to "completely forget" all that has been thought before is to presume that philosophy can be done without attending to the history of philosophy. It is, according to Schlegel, impossible to do philosophy without tending to its

references to Schlegel's work refer to this edition, noting volume and page number. Some of Schlegel's fragments have been translated in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁸ "Gänzlich von allen vorhergegangenen Systemen und Ideen abstrahieren, und dies alles verwerfen, wie Descartes versucht hat, ist durchaus unmöglich. Eine solche ganz neue Schöpfung aus dem eigenen Geist, ein gänzlich Vergessen alles Vorhergedachten hat freilich auch Fichte versucht, ist ihm aber ebenso mißlungen" (KFSA XII, 111).

history. Schlegel's historical turn is intimately connected to his anti-foundationalism. He writes:

Our philosophy does not begin like the others with a first principle – where the first proposition is like the center or first ring of a comet—with the rest a long tail of mist—we depart from a small but living seed—our center lies in the middle.⁹

Just as Goethe emphasized life and the process of bringing forth life, Schlegel's very view of philosophy is focused upon life and its unfolding, which is why he chooses the botanical metaphor of the seed to give us a sense of where his philosophy begins. This small but living seed is planted in a soil of doubt and probability; doubt regarding the thing / *Zweifel an dem Ding* and the probability of the I / *Wahrscheinlichkeit des Ichs*. Such uncertainty and doubt give us the motor to keep philosophy alive and growing. For Schlegel, a philosophy such as Fichte's, which is based on first principles provides a perspective from the outside, that is, from a point that establishes all that follows from it. Such a position is foundational, with the first principle or foundation standing outside of the matter that it serves to explain. The first principle is fixed, static and presumably explains all the changing, living matter in the world, matter that, in Fichte's words, it need "take no heed of whatsoever."¹⁰ Schlegel's view of philosophy represents a radical departure from Fichte's foundationalist, ahistorical view of philosophy. Schlegel himself describes his philosophical method as genetic or synthetic as opposed to deductive or syllogistic.¹¹ The opposition of his genetic method to the deductive one underscores the historical dimension of Schlegel's approach: the very term 'genetic' is connected to a coming into being, to an evolutionary development, and to understanding the development or genesis of an idea. To understand how a given thing comes into being, we must look at its various phases of development or its history.

It is not surprising that Gadamer was a philosopher who took the work of Schlegel seriously. Long after Schlegel and the early German Romantics had pushed for a fuller notion of "science" so that something like the human or *Geisteswissenschaften* could be included in the notion of science, we were

⁹ "Unsere Philosophie fängt nicht wie andere mit einem ersten Grundsatz an, wo der erste Satz gleichsam der Kern oder erste Ring des Kometen, das übrige ein langer Schweif von Dunst zu sein pflegt—wir gehen von einem zwar kleinen, aber lebendigen Keime aus, der Kern liegt bei uns in der Mitte" (KFSA XII, 328).

¹⁰ IWL, 31/GA, 446.

¹¹ Schlegel's most developed treatment of what the method of philosophy should be is found in *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in zwölf Büchern* (KFSA XII-XIII). See especially his discussion at KFSA XII, 307 ff.

still left with the notion that such sciences were “inexact” (TM, 5) / *ungenauwissenschaften* (WM, 3).¹² As Gadamer tells us, Dilthey wrote in his copy of Mill's *Logic*, that “Mill is dogmatic because he lacks historical training” (TM, 6) / *Mill ist dogmatisch aus Mangel historischer Bildung* (WM, 4). Historical training, it is hoped, leads to an openness and a humble acceptance that the task of understanding is infinite and that we must participate in a tradition to begin the dialogue necessary to understand the world. Of course, Schlegel was well aware that the very notion of ‘history’ was incredibly fraught leading him to claim that “the concept of ‘history’ is thoroughly incorrectly determined” / [d]er Begriff der Geschichte ist durchaus unrichtig bestimmt” (*Condorcet Rezension*, KFS VII, 4).¹³ To get to a more adequate understanding of history, we need artists of history (*historischer Künstler*) (Ibid. 8), rather than mere chroniclers. Schlegel's demand for a more properly determined understanding of history, a corrective to the “unrichtig bestimmt” notion, brings to mind Gadamer's key notion of *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* / *historically effected consciousness*, which lifts history from the mere task of chronicling events in the world and elevates the task of history to an artform. The *historischer Künstler* produces a history built of elements of listening, openness, understanding, all of which are woven into Schlegel's case for the necessity of history for the activity of doing philosophy. Such

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.B. Mohr, 1972), hereafter WM/*Truth and Method*, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), hereafter TM. For more on the relation between Gadamer and the early German Romantics, see: Fred Rush, “Hermeneutics and Romanticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, eds. Michael J. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 65-86, and Kristin Gjesdal, “Herder, Schleiermacher, and the Origins of Modern Hermeneutics,” in *Das Neue Licht der Frühromantik. Innovation und Aktualität frühromantischer Philosophie*, eds. Bärbel Frischmann and Elizabeth Millán Brusslan (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009): 200-212 and *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also Jure Zovko's excellent study, *Verstehen und Nichtverstehen bei Friedrich Schlegel. Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung seiner hermeneutischen Kritik* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1990).

¹³ For a detailed analysis of Schlegel on history, see, Walter Jaeschke, “Die durchaus richtige Bestimmung des Begriffs. Zum Geschichtsdenken der frühen Friedrich Schlegel” in *Das neue Licht der Frühromantik*, eds. Bärbel Frischmann and Elizabeth Millán (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009): 97-110. Especially illuminating is the analysis of Schlegel on freedom and nature and the role of *Wechselwirkung* in Schlegel's understanding of history. For more on the centrality of the *Wechselwirkung* in Schlegel see, Manfred Frank: *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); *Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997); “Philosophische Grundlagen der Frühromantik” in *Athenäum, Jahrbuch für Romantik* 4 (1994), 37-130.

elements would also give rise to an art of history rather than a mere chronicle. The resulting tapestry or work of historical art is not always neat and tidy nor is the philosophy shaped from it.

3. Historical Philosophy begins *in media res*

In *Athenaeum Fragment* 84, Schlegel claims that, “philosophy, like epic poetry, always begins *in media res*.”¹⁴ When we do philosophy, we are not starting from a position outside the ebb and flow of philosophical ideas, but in the midst of this dynamic process itself, *in media res*. Schlegel’s move to “the inside” or “the middle” is a move towards taking the history of philosophy seriously and towards re-conceptualizing the very notion of critical philosophy in historical terms.

In his Köln Lectures, *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in Zwölf Büchern* (1804-5), Schlegel describes the various philosophical systems that comprise the history of philosophy as links in a coherent chain, with an understanding of any given philosophical system requiring some understanding of the chain to which it is connected. Indeed, Schlegel argues that all too often, philosophers interact with other systems by reducing them to rejected or negated remains that are empty, but Schlegel claims this is “completely insufficient and unsatisfactory” (*unzureichend und unbefriedigend*), because,

a philosophical system is supported by other systems, and to understand one system, knowledge of the others is necessary and philosophies build an inter-related chain, such that knowledge of one link depends upon knowledge of a related link / *ein philosophisches System sich aus das andere stützt, zur Verständigung des einen immer wieder die Kenntnis des anderen vorhergehenden erforderlich ist, und die Philosophien eine zusammenhängende Kette bilden, wovon die Kenntnis eines Glieder immer wieder zur Kenntnis des anderen nötig* (KFSA XII, 111).

A few years before delivering his lectures in Köln, in a fragment from 1796, *Zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Schlegel described system in a similar way, stressing the connection of the whole, coherence, and the organic nature of system:

System is an integrated, connected whole of the matter of knowledge [*wissenschaftliche Stoff*] in a continuous mutual confirmation and organic coherence – a whole of a plurality that is in itself perfected and unified.¹⁵

¹⁴ KFSA II, 178.

¹⁵ “System ist eine durchgängig gegliederte Allheit von wissenschaftlichem Stoff in durchgehender Wechselwirkung und organischen Zusammenhang – *Allheit* ein in sich selbst vollendete und vereinigte Vielheit” (KFSA XVIII, 12, Nr. 84).

In Schlegel's conception of a philosophical system, change and interaction are stressed, and organic coherence is the goal: a goal that no systematic derivation will achieve for us, and no single system either. The philosopher must work from a single system, that is, from one link in the chain of all systems, but always with a view towards the unity of which each system is but a part. This fluency between one's own system and the greater whole of which it is a part is stressed by Schlegel in the following fragment:

Every philosopher has his own line or tendency which is his departing point and his cycle. He who has a system is as lost as he who has none. One must therefore reconcile both.¹⁶

How are we to deal with this dilemma of needing a system, and yet of not becoming tied to a single system? Schlegel's anti-foundationalism leads him to see philosophy as consisting of a plurality of systems, each of which can offer a piece of the whole of the system of knowledge, but never the complete system. No individual line or tendency constitutes a system in the sense of the "integrated, connected whole of the matter of knowledge" to which Schlegel makes reference. The philosopher must work from a single system, that is, from one link in the chain of all systems, but to critique other systems, to critique philosophy itself, the philosopher must be able to see beyond her own system. Bubner nicely captures the historical method that Schlegel initiates in terms of "an actively sympathetic response on the part of the critic and the philologist to the significant creative works of the past," a view that gives rise to a model of doing philosophy that contrasts sharply to the models of the German idealists, who saw philosophical systems as "godlike creations," which were, of course, ahistorical.¹⁷ Jure Zovko also highlights the hermeneutical dimension of Schlegel's thought.¹⁸ Zovko's emphasis on Schlegel's hermeneutical critique brings the work of Schlegel into a richly detailed context enabling us to more deeply appreciate just how relevant Schlegel's work remains.

¹⁶ "Jeder Philosoph hat auch seine Linie—Tendenz was sein Punctum (saliens) und seinen Cycluz. Wer ein System hat, ist so gut geistig verlohren, als wer keins hat. Man muß eben beides verbinden" (KFSA XVIII, 80, Nr. 614). Cf. "It's equally fatal for the mind to have system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Es wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen beides zu verbinden) (KFSA II, 173, Nr. 53).

¹⁷ R. Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33.

¹⁸ See J. Zovko, *Verstehen und Nichtverstehen bei Friedrich Schlegel. Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung seiner hermeneutischen Kritik* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1990).

Alas, the field of philosophy still prefers system builders, certainty, and final words. For example, the credentials of Kant and Fichte are never questioned. Both thinkers believed that there was one system that could capture all truths, there was no pressing need to look to other systems, for at best they could offer partial truths and at worst, merely a collection of falsehoods. And there was an important sense in which for both Kant and Fichte the notion of system stood outside of the matter that was explained by the system, as a bedrock of sorts that holds unconditionally and provides the “secure path of the science” to the searchers of truth. Schlegel’s view of the task of philosophy and the role of system therein is radically different. He does not think that a philosophical system exists outside of the truths that are captured by it. Indeed, social and political desires shape the system and the very truth that will emerge from any philosophical inquiry.

As I emphasized above, Schlegel rejects a foundationalist approach to the problem of knowledge and emphasizes the importance of coherence: we never have the last word on how to justify a claim, but we must try to bring our claims into some coherent scheme or whole. What goes for our own body of knowledge holds too of the body of knowledge that philosophers construct. And construct they do, but not via systematic derivations anchored in a firm foundation. Schlegel reads Fichte’s emphasis on systematic derivations as an embrace of deduction, claiming that his demonstrations work by way of deduction and deduction is never as strong as construction.¹⁹ Schlegel’s dedication to a historical approach to philosophy gave rise to a radically new sense of philosophy in the post-Kantian period.

4. History and Critique

Schlegel was interested in a reform of the very conception of philosophy that was shaping the post-Kantian period – he sought to move philosophy away from its moorings in natural science understood as a foundational science generative of results endowed with certainty and the concomitant deductive method that had taken hold, and to bring it into the company of art and history. Schlegel thus endorsed a progressive and never-ending method for philosophy, based on the view that our knowledge claims would never be

¹⁹ Cf. KFSa XVIII, 36, Nr. 185: “Construction is far more than deduction” (Construction ist weit mehr als Deduction); *Ibid.*, 31, Nr. 129: “Deduction never has an end and should never have an end (Das Deducieren hat nirgends ein Ende soll nirgends ein Ende haben)”. Of course, Fichte emphasizes “systematic derivation” and not deduction, and not all systematic derivation is deductive, so there are problems with some of the details of Schlegel’s charges that Fichte is guilty of deduction, but the general picture of philosophy endorsed by Fichte is at odds with Schlegel’s conception of philosophy.

endowed with the certainty granted by absolute foundations, but rather would only ever have increasing degrees of probability, they would tend towards truth. An infinite search or longing for the infinite (the totality of all truths) replaces any model (not just Fichte's) that departs from an absolute first principle.

Schlegel's position is that we never begin with the certain knowledge that there is any first principle; instead we must begin with what we have—a history of what has been thought by other philosophers before. According to Schlegel, an introduction to philosophy can only be a critique of all earlier philosophy. His first lecture of *The Historical Characteristics of Philosophy* concerns the problem of introducing philosophy, and this is ultimately the problem of the beginning of philosophy. Schlegel *was* interested in the historical frameworks of philosophy and even wrote a history of philosophy.²⁰ In the first book of the lectures on the history of philosophy, entitled *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in Zwölf Büchern* (Köln, 1804-05), Schlegel addresses the problem of where we begin when we philosophize:

To desire to provisionally prove what the beginning point of philosophy is, concerns separating out the first principle of philosophy (if there is such a principle), as is actually attempted in some scientific introductions. One can admit that in a tentative treatment the point from which one must begin to philosophize will be searched for and proved.²¹

If there is no such principle, it will only be searched for and never found. Schlegel accused Kant, the great critical philosopher himself, of being only a “half-critic” because of his neglect of the history of philosophy and his inability to critique philosophy itself. Schlegel's conception of philosophy committed him to metaphilosophy, to coming to terms with the nature of philosophy itself. A Critical Age that criticizes everything except itself is not a fully critical age; one could say that it is “half-critical”. Schlegel is after a critique of critique, a philosophy of philosophy, attempting, through his conception of historical critique, to achieve a metaphilosophy, a way of

²⁰ *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in zwölf Büchern* (The Development of Philosophy in 12 volumes) in KFSX XII. This was part of a series of private lectures given in Cologne (1804-5).

²¹ “Den Anfangspunkt für die Philosophie provisorisch nachweisen zu wollen, mag einer angehen, als das Grundprinzip (wenn es übrigens ein Grundprinzip gibt) von der Philosophie abgesondert angeben, wie das wirklich in einigen wissenschaftlichen Einleitungen ist versucht worden. Man kann zugeben, daß in einer vorläufigen Abhandlung der Punkt, von wo aus man zu philosophieren beginnen muß, aufgesucht und nachgewiesen werde” (KFSX XII, 110).

looking critically at philosophy itself, as a discipline that has developed through history.

The very first fragment of the *Athenaeum* gives expression to Schlegel's concern with making philosophy the subject of philosophy: "Nothing is more rarely the subject of philosophy than philosophy itself."²² To appreciate this claim, we must keep in mind that Schlegel was interested in making the *entire* tradition of philosophy the subject matter of philosophy, for he was well aware that other philosophers, even those who thought philosophy could begin with a first principle (e.g., Descartes and Fichte) had reflected on the nature of philosophy itself in developing their methods. But this was not enough: one had to approach philosophy historically in order to get a view of the whole, and so to *really* make philosophy the subject of philosophy. With characteristic irony (of just the sort that led so many of his contemporaries to misunderstand him), Schlegel describes his push to criticize philosophy as just retaliation:

Since nowadays philosophy criticizes everything that comes in front of its nose, a criticism of philosophy would be nothing more than justifiable retaliation.²³

Schlegel's charges against the limits of Kant and Fichte's "critical philosophy" are rooted in his desire to develop a critical philosophy of philosophy itself.

Schlegel's emphasis on history as essential to critique is part of his general view of philosophy as framed by life, as beginning *in media res* in the midst of change and flux. Accordingly the object of philosophical critique is also something changing and growing, and the philosopher must be equipped to handle this teeming mass of material.

5. Concluding Remarks: The Infinite Task of Understanding

In several fragments and in an essay, *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, Schlegel stresses the value of incomprehension.²⁴ Because our knowledge claims are

²² "Über keinen Gegenstand philosophieren sie seltner als über die Philosophie" (KA II, p. 165, Nr. 1).

²³ "Da die Philosophie jetzt alles was ihn vorkommt kritisiert, so wäre eine Kritik der Philosophie nichts als eine gerechte Repressalie" (KFSA II, 173, Nr. 56). Cf. "Da die Philosophie so vieles je fast alles im Himmel und auf Erden Kritisiert hat; so kann sie sich ja wohl gefallen lassen, daß man sie auch einmal kritisiert" (KFSA XVIII, 40, Nr. 228).

²⁴ The reception of Schlegel's journal, *Das Athenaeum*, was not warm. Many philosophers, especially those targeted in its pages, took offense at their portrayals. There were also frequent complaints about the *Unverständlichkeit* of the entries, especially the fragments.

never rooted in an absolutely certain foundation, we cannot be so arrogant as to think that we will ever have the last word on the meaning of any given event or text or idea, the remainder is that which is incomprehensible. Gadamer reads Schlegel's characterization of the "classical" as a work's "fundamentally unlimited" power to speak as a move that leads us to a new conception of understanding. Gadamer writes: "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated / *Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen, in dem sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart beständig vermitteln*" (TM, 290/WM 274-5). When Schlegel claims in *Lyceum* Fragment Nr. 20, that: "A classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it", Schlegel is not giving up on meaning, but rather pointing us to our infinite participation in the tradition of which the text and we are a part. As Gadamer emphasized in *Truth and Method*, such an openness to tradition requires an openness to the other, which takes us back to Schlegel's desire to be listened to. Understanding cannot take place without an openness to the other, and this openness requires listening. The past will not say anything to us if it remains other to us. Schlegel's view of philosophy as historical calls for a "fundamental sort of openness / *grundsätzliche Art der Offenheit*" (TM, 361/WM, 344).²⁵ This openness is part of the attempt to bring us into dialogue with our traditions and to resist the isolationism that only leads to misery, hermeneutical and otherwise. Our present political situation makes the fundamental sort of openness called for by Schlegel more relevant than ever.

The essay on incomprehensibility was published in the last issue of the journal, a kind of swan song.

²⁵ Schlegel plays with the more typical, naïve mode of historical comparison in *Lyceum* 25, where he writes: "The two main principles of the so-called historical criticism are the Postulate of Vulgarly and the Axiom of the Average. The Postulate of Vulgarly: everything great, good, and beautiful is improbable because it is extraordinary and, at the very least, suspicious. The Axiom of the Average: as we and our surroundings are, so must it have been always and everywhere, because that, after all, is so very natural / Die beiden Hauptgrundsätze der sogenannten Kritik sind das Postulat der Gemeinheit, und das Axiom der Gewöhnlichkeit. Postulat der Gemeinheit: Alles recht Grosse, Gute und Schöne ist unwahrscheinlich, denn es ist ausserordentlich, und zum mindesten verdächtig. Axiom der Gewöhnlichkeit: Wie es bei uns und um uns ist, so muss es überall gewesen sein, denn das ist ja alles so natürlich" (KFSA II,149, Nr. 24) / Quoted by Gadamer WM 344/TM 361).