

Symphilosophie

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Symphilosophizing in German Romanticism

Relationships, Methods, and Ideas

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The following eleven papers arose from an international conference held at the Internationales Zentrum für Philosophie of the University of Bonn in March 2025. Entitled “Symphilosophizing in German Romanticism: Relationships, Methods, and Ideas”, this conference had as an aim to better define and intellectually clarify a concept for which there is still surprisingly little research. There exist some notable exceptions, however, and two studies in particular are worth mentioning: “Symphilosophieren”, a lengthy 1981 article in German published by the philosopher Kurt Röttgers in the *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*; and the collective volume in French: *Symphilosophie: F. Schlegel à Iéna* (Symphilosophy: F. Schlegel in Jena), edited by Denis Thouard, and published by Vrin in 2002. This special issue of the journal *Symphilosophie* follows in these footsteps by exploring the diverse paths and philosophical horizons opened up by this concept.

The early German romantics did not create the evocative expression “symphilosophizing” out of the blue. The word itself has an ancient Greek heritage, originating in the sphere of ethics and the question of how to lead a good life. Indeed, it was Aristotle himself who coined the term *symphilosophēin* in his reflections on friendship in Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, using it to describe a specific manner of spending one’s leisure time or *scholē* with friends. Aristotle first provides various examples of individuals cultivating friendship in their free time: people coming together to drink, to play dice, or

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to hunt. Yet there exist certain other people who make it their choice in life to meet and discuss philosophy together, who take delight in the experience of a theoretical life in common; i.e. these people *symphilosophize*.

The Jena Romantics were aware of this origin, with Aristotle's neologism serving as a model to develop new philosophical concepts, methods, and theories. In the age of philosophical modernity it led the romantics to redefine philosophy around 1800 as *symphilosophieren* or symphilosophizing—an inherently social activity that is capable of transforming our ordinary experience of human life. As the present studies show, symphilosophizing in German romanticism does not just have one single idea or procedure in common, nor does it seek to be a rigid school of thought as such. It encompasses a wide variety of new philosophical dimensions.

Friedrich Schlegel was the instigator of romantic symphilosophy, and it becomes a *topos* in his early work. In the opening article of this issue, "Friedrich Schlegels Konzept der Symphilosophie", Bärbel Frischmann traces the systematic significance of the term. She argues that Schlegel does not merely repeat a traditional concept of philosophizing in common with like-minded people, in line with the narrow sense that the 'ancients' had ascribed to the word. Schlegel attributes a more universal scope to it. The notion receives an innovative significance through a series of extensions: it permeates numerous concepts and various doctrines—irony, dialectics, hermeneutics, formation (*Bildung*), sociability—and draws upon the fields of anthropology, culture, politics, history etc.

Christian Berner, a co-author in the above-mentioned collective volume *Symphilosophie: F. Schlegel à Iéna*, points out that Greek thought was not Schlegel's sole point of reference in developing the Romantic concept of symphilosophy: Kant also played a decisive role during Schlegel's formative years as a philosopher. In "Gleichsam in Gemeinschaft mit anderen denken: Reflexionen zu Friedrich Schlegel und Kant", Berner highlights a convergence between the perspectives of Schlegel and Kant. As a sceptical philosopher of human finitude, Schlegel admittedly underscores the notion of polemic, whereas Kantian criticism seeks to free human reason from scepticism and to establish peace within the sphere of philosophy by putting an end to the conflict between dogmatists and sceptics. However, by proposing to understand the doctrine of symphilosophy as a dialectical theory of thinking for oneself, with discord, dispute, and the antagonism of views as its central element, Schlegel makes symphilosophical dialectics an extension of critical philosophy and the three maxims of common sense. These maxims—thinking for oneself, thinking by putting oneself in the place of others, and thinking in harmony with oneself—coexist in Kant himself with the sceptical

method and the idea that maintaining the health of the mind involves a form of friction with the ideas of others.

By bringing back the essence of romanticism to the infinite—which remains marked by the sign of incompleteness—Andreas Arndt’s contribution, “Symphilosophieren und Symprojektieren: Schleiermacher und Friedrich Schlegel”, maintains that symphilosophy is an ideal. This concept must be interpreted in the sense of a regulative idea. That is to say, it is both a task assigned to the human being and a metaphysical absolute that we can draw ever closer to but never attain, because it has no objective reality. Engaging in symphilosophy is therefore a striving towards what the romantic mind conceives as the pinnacle of perfection, furnishing a self-cultivation with perfect satisfaction at the intellectual, moral and aesthetic levels. Yet symphilosophy in praxis inevitably leads to a dead end for Arndt: it incessantly involves devising pie-in-the-sky projects, because there is no real possibility of realising them. Taking the example of Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher—and more specifically their project to translate Plato together—Arndt upholds the view that far from being an example of actual thinking in common, the ‘literary marriage’ between the two figures failed altogether.

Katia Hay’s contribution, “*Symphilosophieren* with Unknown Friends – On the Meanings and Possibilities of Symphilosophy”, further explores the potential of the romantic concept of symphilosophy. She regards symphilosophy as a shared communicative practice, which she primarily analyses through the lens of epistolary exchange. In fact, Friedrich Schlegel lays the foundation for a conception of symphilosophy in his correspondence. Hay underlines the novelty of the epistolary practice of symphilosophy, which is not the same as an epistolary practice of philosophy *tout court*. The communicative aspect is much more important in the former, since the focus is less on the message or the objectification of thought and proof of truth than on universal subjectivity. It takes the addressee into account while conveying that ineffable aspect which is the singularity of a self-reflective experience. In this respect, symphilosophy becomes the place for an aesthetic experience in its own right, in which life and thought, emotions and reason are combined, while *autrui*, the other, through their presence and absence, provides a constitutive framework. Hay sees in this epistolary practice of symphilosophy a true laboratory for experimenting, creating, and sharing a new world of meaning. This is essential to the process of thinking itself and to the elaboration of the main published theoretical texts of the early romantics. Additionally, she considers the impact that the issue of gender—as addressed by feminism—has on symphilosophy. Building on the Schlegelian concept of

irony, Hay analyses what remains unsaid or, rather, unheard in Dorothea Schlegel's neglected novel *Florentin*, interpreting the novel as an expression of a feminist disruption of the hegemonic male philosophical discourse.

Michael N. Forster's "Hegel's Debts to Friedrich Schlegel in Metaphysics and Epistemology" presents an implicit form of symphilosophy between Hegel and Friedrich Schlegel. As is well known, Hegel displayed less a shared vision and willingness to engage in dialogue and more a sense of otherness and hostility towards the Jena romantics. Drawing on Schlegel's *Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy* (1800 / 01)—lectures attended by Hegel and often overlooked in the scholarship—Forster's contribution demonstrates the broad extent of the convergence of the underlying philosophical principles in the two authors, both in the fields of general metaphysics (metaphysical monism of absolute idealism; synthesis of Spinozism and Fichteanism; the relationship between the infinite and the finite; emphasis on the whole; encyclopaedic organisation of philosophical knowledge; historicity of consciousness) and the metaphysics of art (the establishment, amongst other things, of an ascending hierarchy of particular art forms in which the Idea manifests itself through increasingly internalised sensible forms) as well as in the field of epistemology (the relation between scepticism and philosophy).

François Thomas, in his essay, "Peut-on 'symphilosopher' avec les Indiens ? Schleiermacher et la pluralité des philosophies et des traditions de pensée" (Can we 'symphilosophize' with the Indians? Schleiermacher and the plurality of philosophies and traditions of thought), expands the meaning of symphilosophizing from two or more individuals involved in a philosophical friendship to a dialogue between cultures. In particular, he focuses on the dialogue between early 19th century German philosophy and non-European traditions of thought, especially Indian thought. Thomas expounds the problem of the conditions under which a genuine intercultural dialogue is possible: rising to a universal perspective but without erasing the linguistic, historical and cultural distance that separates these traditions. In response to this difficulty, Schleiermacher's dialectic and philosophy of translation offer a solution characterised by prudence and an awareness of the finitude of all philosophy. At the same time, they hypothetically attribute the foundation of all understanding and knowledge to a timeless universal that is grounded in God but inaccessible to finite, sensible human understanding. The article distinguishes in this regard Schleiermacher's thought from a range of conceptions of philosophical and cultural otherness present in German philosophy around 1800, notably the positions of the early romantics, Schopenhauer, Humboldt, and Hegel.

The next two contributions concern the figure of Novalis. Violetta Waibel, in “Friedrich Hölderlin und Friedrich von Hardenberg über das Wechselspiel von Sinnlichkeit und Erkenntnis, von Natur und Kultur im *Hyperion* und in den *Lehrlingen zu Sais*” (Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich von Hardenberg on the Interplay of Sensibility and Cognition, of Nature and Culture in *Hyperion* and *The Disciples at Sais*), explores the symphilosophy between the two great poet-philosophers of Germany at the turn of the 19th century through the consonances and dissonances in their ways of thinking about the interaction between sensibility and rationality. While Laure Cahen-Maurel, in “Symphilosophizing as Transcendental Philosophy: Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis”, examines the philosophical evolution of the relationship between the two thinkers, which has gone down in history as one of the paradigmatic examples of symphilosophizing. The article sets out the conceptual framework in which Schlegel and Novalis respectively operate. It shows that a fundamental difference sets them apart. For the sceptic Schlegel philosophy itself remains a mystery. Symphilosophy therefore is about aiming at these secrets or higher truths that only an exceptional being can possess. This occurs via polemical and aporetic dialogue. For Novalis, in contrast, the new symphilosophy specific to the age of modernity belongs to transcendental philosophy. It not only rests on the assumption of an egalitarian and aesthetic common sense, but on the actual exercise of the hidden art of the productive imagination as the reconciliation of two opposites into a unity. The article demonstrates this in the specific case of the fragment collection *Pollen*.

Finally, the last three contributions in this issue consider the question of symphilosophy both upstream and downstream of early German romanticism. In “Justice, Attunement, and the Ethics of Friendship: A Principle from Schiller and Aristotle”, Gerad Gentry analyses the notion of the ‘aesthetic state’ as Schiller’s extension and modification of the Aristotelian concept of *symplosofia*. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan, for her part, in an essay entitled “The Role of History in Schlegel’s Philosophy: The Case against Isolationism and for *Bildung*”, draws on the dimension of exchange and history as conceived in Schlegel’s philosophy to argue that the current isolationism of the United States is harmful at this particular juncture in time. The issue concludes with a piece by Christoph Haffter on the contemporary extensions of romantic symphilosophy. His contribution, “Die Gegenwart der Mythologie: Symphilosophie in Frühromantik, Poststrukturalismus und Neuem Materialismus”, argues that a key aspect of romantic symphilosophy is that it offers a unique position within the field of philosophy in times of crisis. For the Jena romantics, philosophy was not intended either to serve other forms of discourse nor to lay the foundations for the principles of all

knowledge, but to invent a new mythology as a means of finding one's bearings in the turbulent periods of a society, when customary beliefs, points of reference, and ways of life are profoundly called into question. He interprets the symphilosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, which sought to engage with the events of May '68, as well as the more recent ecological reflections of 'new materialism', as part of the tradition of the Jena romantics. However, Haffter does not merely highlight the relevance of the concept of symphilosophy today: he also reflects on the limitations inherent in this concept.

To conclude, on behalf of the Internationales Zentrum für Philosophie and the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Bonn, we would like to warmly thank all the conference speakers and the authors who contributed to the publication of these proceedings for cultivating the spirit of symphilosophy, that essential inspiration which is one of the fundamental characteristics of German romantic philosophy.