

# The Progressive Aesthetic in the Early Writings of Friedrich Schlegel

**Abstract:** The romantic thinker Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) was ahead of its time and broke new grounds in several areas. He introduced game changing ideas on art criticism, wrote scathing critiques of the sexual morality of his time, questioned the foundationalist philosophy of his contemporaries and pioneered comparative linguistics by writing the first German work on Sanskrit. He developed his idiosyncratic use of language and concepts in the circle of friends now called 'Jena romanticism,' which cherished creative experimentation wherever they could find it. They advanced an aesthetic of exposure, formation and participation, emphasising both exchange and individuation as building blocks for communal projects that are not just oriented at the unification of difference, but also at the proliferation and cultivation of difference. To revive the lasting relevance of this aesthetic and revise its most common readings, this article asks the question *what theoretical tools did Schlegel develop in his earliest writings (1793-1800) to further the hoped for aesthetic transformation of his society.* It explicitly examines two tools: the triad of cultivation [*Bildung*] and irony. With the first Schlegel attempted to describe the (trans)formative processes of human projects, such as science, politics and individual development, as processes of multi-faceted becoming through differentiation and exchange. The other, irony, is an instrument to provoke readers into taking part in these processes of cultivation and continually liberating the individual from prejudices and uniformity. It, on the one hand, unearths different perspectives on a given time and space and, by juxtaposing them, demands individuals to take a stance, both in thought and action. As such, his thought remains of undiminished importance for a pluriform society confronted with the limits of the sustainability of its own complex organisation. Instead of responding to complexity by rallying behind someone else's narrative, it makes room for genuine reflection, fostering a willingness to learn and experiment in search for individuality, communality and truth.

## Introduction

Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829)<sup>1</sup> should be seen as a philosopher, cultural critic and linguist who was at the same time remarkably in tune with and ahead of his time. Arriving at the scene during a time in which it became possible to see the pluriformity and agility of thought and societal

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the solitary use of the surname Schlegel will refer to Friedrich Schlegel, unless it is explicitly qualified otherwise.

constellations, he wanted to advance this momentum by challenging the breadth and depth of the intellectual endeavours of his contemporaries. To use Schlegel's own categorisation of this progressive momentum: *the French Revolution* had demonstrated that the organisation of a society was not fixed, that what was deemed to be natural or divine necessity could be changed by the actions of free individuals; Johann Gottlieb Fichte had proven in his *Wissenschaftslehre* that philosophy supported individual freedom as the only foundation of human activity and the quest for knowledge; and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* had illustrated the rich inner world educated individuals could cultivate and had shown that the path towards it demanded unrestrained exposure to the different ideas, perspectives and experiences that life could offer. They formed the intellectual landscape for a new understanding of humanity and its development. To which Schlegel adds: "whoever is offended by this combination, whoever does not think any revolution to be meaningful unless it is loud and material, has not yet ascended to the height of the position of human history. (...) [In it] many a booklet, that to the noisy masses of its time remained unnoticed, plays a greater role than everything that did move the masses."<sup>2</sup>

He became convinced that the present signs of a political, cultural and scientific revolution were only the beginning and that humanity was still far from discovering the final principles that determine its own fate. He came to perceive his time as a transitory time<sup>3</sup> and focussed on developing a radically different aesthetic, a new way of approaching, experiencing and valuing the world. This new aesthetic necessitates a new philosophical form and practice, that allows for the pluriformity of perspectives and ideas to co-exist and be exchanged for everyone to cultivate himself during this undecided epoch. Hoping (or romanticising) that beyond this epoch "it will be recognised and acknowledged that the highest can be achieved by everyone and that humanity up to now was not evil or stupid, but simply clumsy and new."<sup>4</sup>

From his formulations of such romantic ideals Schlegel develops his own philosophical form and practice with at its heart the aesthetic of difference and exposure. It is not by rational mediation

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, "Die Athenäums-Fragmente," *Kritische-Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* *bd. II*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1967), 198-199, [216].

<sup>3</sup> The later in time, the longer Schlegel seems to expect this transitory moment to last. Where he begins expecting to be able to find the principle himself, in the *Griechischen Poesie* he already expects this to be a lasting period of crisis and in the early 1800's writes his brother that these developments will take at least until the next century. From the *Lyceums-Fragmente* onwards he also hints at the possibility that it might itself be an enduring state of instability.

See: Friedrich Schlegel, "Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie," *Kritische-Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* *bd. I*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1978), 355-356.

And: Friedrich Schlegel, "Friedrich von Schlegel an August Wilhelm von Schlegel, 15.04.1808," *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik: Briefe aus dem Schlegelkreis* *Bd. 1*, ed. Josef Körner (Bern: Francke, 1969), <https://august-wilhelm-schlegel.de/version-10-20/briefid/122>.

<sup>4</sup> Schlegel, "Über die Unverständlichkeit," *KSA II*, 371.

and its reduction of complexity, but through juxtaposition of diversity and ongoing exchanges of difference that history shows itself and that its ideals can be developed further. This article will examine the central tools to this form and practice: the triad of cultivation and irony, and attempt to revise the most common readings of Schlegel's early works in order to revive the lasting relevance of his thought. It will ask the question: *how does Schlegel's progressive aesthetic express itself in the theoretical tools he develops in his writings between 1793 and 1800?* The answer to this question may provide a far more progressive image to the young Schlegel than has hitherto been granted him.

For example, the theoretical practice defined by these tools made Schlegel the first German writer to explicitly embrace a radical democratic position, which meant that he took the individual wills of the people to be more fundamental than any rationally determined organisation of society.<sup>5</sup> Beyond that, he also interrogated other inequalities that determined his society. He opposed the monarchy and hereditary aristocracy, even though being born into nobility himself. He advocated a very liberal sexual morality, not only challenging the taboo around sexual pleasure by writing what was at the time perceived as explicit literature, but also promoting playing with the exchange of gender roles in order to challenge their self-evidence and being abhorred by the suppression of women.<sup>6</sup> This playfulness should even be extended to theology, where it should be allowed to probe at anything holy in order for the individual to define what is holy for himself. At some point even suggesting the view that is still held by some theologians and philosophers, that the uniqueness of protestant christianity is its ability to do away with every conventional understanding of religion, if not religion as such.<sup>7</sup>

Schlegel did not develop his ideas on his own, but was part of a small group of friends that are now called Jena romanticism or early romanticism [*Frühromantik*]. This diverse community consisted first of all of Friedrich and his older brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, Novalis, Dorothea Veit, Caroline Böhmer and Friedrich Schleiermacher, and was in frequent contact with Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schelling. Its members were involved in philosophy, literature, cultural history, theatre, theology and politics, and in 1798 they were gathered by the Schlegel brothers to publish a journal called *The Athenaeum* (1798-1800). This community of artists and intellectuals, "the first "avant-garde"

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Marmasse, "Le jeune Friedrich Schlegel, un démocrate radical?," in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 100, no. 4 (2018): 551-567.

<sup>6</sup> "Nothing is in its origin more miserable and in its consequences more horrible, than the fear of being ridiculed. From which stems, for example, the subjugation of women and many other deeply rooted diseases of humanity."

Schlegel, "Die Lyceums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 160, [106].

<sup>7</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 54-55, [357].

group in history”<sup>8</sup> produced experimental literature, advocating for freedom of thought, republican ideals and the cultivation [*Bildung*] of individuals to learn to appreciate cultural diversity. They did not envision a radical break with the past in order to start a new epoch, nor did they attempt to usher in a new epoch by introducing a new all encompassing philosophical system, but rather sought to further the new aesthetic, by opening up the existing discourse through continual criticism.<sup>9</sup> They were striving for independent thought and individual self-determination, in the hope that each individual would be able to take up its own role in the communal project of cultivating and uniting humanity.

The emphasis on a broad cultivation of individuals follows the at the time dominant reading of the failure of the French Revolution. The bloodshed after the early days of the revolution and the reign of terror in 1793-1794 had shown that the promise of freedom, equality and fraternity, or the betterment of the fate of humanity in general, demanded more than the replacement of the monarchy with a republic. Many German intellectuals, like Humbolt, with his idea of harmonious cultivation, Goethe, Herder and Schiller, with their ideas of aesthetic education, saw more promise in some kind of cultivation that led to a more gradual development of freedom, equality and fraternity. Schlegel also held the view that many people had not cultivated themselves enough or had even been deformed by education to be able to live in a pluriform and democratic society. A republic cannot be born out of brute force, but just as little out of pure intellectual necessity. It has to reflect a development of the individuals within the community, in which preconceived ideas and institutionally fixed limits and immobility are questioned through interaction with other ideas and perspectives. It needs a useful ideal of cultivation, in which this critical interaction is perceived as a means for the individual to cultivate himself. Thus it becomes the aesthetic assignment of the *Athenaeum* to bring its readers into this space of critical exchange of ideas and perceptions and to convey the demand of self-cultivation.

The possibilities of such exchanges and the sources that can be called upon have only grown in the last 200 years. At the same time many inequalities and limitations to the free exchange and cultivation of individuals both locally and globally persist or have worsened. Not only has the present age not reached Schlegel’s ideal of a humanity living in cultivated diversified

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy & Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>9</sup> As Friedrich Schlegel hints at in his fragments from 1797: “*There are so many critical journals of different kinds and varying perspectives! If there would just once be a community of the kind that has as its singular goal to gradually realise criticism itself, which is also necessary.*”

Schlegel, “Lyceums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 161, [114].

communities tolerating and exchanging each other's differences, the ideal itself seems to be losing currency.

The present state of the Schlegel research does little to reinvigorate the afore described spirit of his work and therefore misses out on the coherence of its fundamental characteristics. Initially, responses to Schlegel's work focused on criticising the moral character these critics imagined behind these provocative writings, an eccentric poet diluting the (christian) enlightenment with subjectivising (atheist) egoism. In the earliest philosophical responses, most notably by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard found a conceptual expression of this moral flaw in the notion of irony, as will be taken up at the end of this article. Their works functioned as a theoretical legitimation of the moral rejection of Schlegel's work. Both the moral rejection itself and its theoretical legitimation through irony still reverberate in some of the contemporary research, especially those emphasising irony and its negativity as the driving forces of Schlegel's works, often failing to distinguish between the ideas of Schlegel and Fichte.<sup>10</sup> Another impact of these attitudes was that Schlegel was kept out of the philosophical field of research. He became a figure of art history and literary criticism, evoking enthusiasm among these field, but separating him from the history of philosophy. Too often his unclarity, emptied of its progressive and provocative spirit and its dealings with contemporary philosophers, has been understood in terms of a vague mysticism and artistic idiosyncrasy, rather than the creative performance of a scientist inviting others into a new perspective, building on the discoveries of others, although not yet able to definitively prove its results. Benjamin already wrote that misreadings of Schlegel often went wrong because they overread his writings and failed to take him at his word.<sup>11</sup> However, Benjamin's work also fails to grasp the extent of Schlegel's aesthetic program and fails to grasp its practical motives and significance, claiming that "the practical, indeed, does not interest Friedrich Schlegel in the slightest."<sup>12</sup> The best scholarly works on Schlegel's early works are those concerned with intertextual historical analysis. First called for and initiated by Rudolf Haym's *Die Romantische Schule* (1870), it is this tradition<sup>13</sup> within the Schlegel reception that most clearly has registered the impact of Schlegel's work for philosophy. Nonetheless, the consequences of the early moral renunciation of Schlegel's thought still reverberate throughout

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<sup>10</sup> Forms of this can be found in many works on Friedrich Schlegel, most notably those of Oskar Franz Walzel (1904), Ernst Behler (who has been publishing works on Schlegel since 1950), Peter Szondi (1954), Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs (1977), Hans Eichner (1970), Paul de Man (1988).

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> This tradition is continued in the work of Ernst Behler (who did much work for the historical analysis, but also sticks to a reading of Schlegel that contains much of the conventional image of his person), Manfred Frank (1997) and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (2007).

their works in the fact that their historical and scholarly approaches lack an interest in the prickly subject of Schlegel's practical philosophy, either by depreciating its results<sup>14</sup> or simply failing to research the subject.<sup>15</sup> The work of Fredric C. Beiser forms a welcome exception to both trends sketched above. He has managed to both contextualise the romantics in their historical intellectual context and resurrect some of the progressive spirit that compelled them to write, by introducing them from the context of the influence of the French revolution on the German countries and emphasising their ideal of an aesthetic revolution.<sup>16</sup> Yet, even Beiser limits Schlegel's project, especially because he wants to speak about 'the romantics,' rather than the rather distinct individuals that contributed to what is now called Jena romanticism. The next parts will, in this sense, be close to Beiser's reading of Schlegel. However, it takes up two conceptual instruments that Beiser left alone: the triad of cultivation and irony. The article will attempt to escape the trends sketched above by continually showing how the concepts relate to the aesthetic they are meant to convey, hoping to revive some of the progressive spirit of Schlegel's early works.

The answer to the question how Schlegel's progressive aesthetic expresses itself in the theoretical tools he develops in his early writings, is presented in this article in three parts. The first part focuses on Schlegel's aesthetic and how it differs from his major predecessors, while also explaining his choice for an experimental philosophical form in relation to the major philosophical developments on which he builds. The second part can be seen as asking how Schlegel conceptualises this aesthetic in terms of the triad of cultivation. The triad sketches the possibility of individual diversity and a harmonic totality through critical interaction, which can be applied to different domains, in particular to science, politics and individuality. In science it guarantees the openness to a diversity of sources and theories, in politics to a diversity of individuals and communities, and in individuality to a diversity of internal differences and friendships, as will be shown below. The third part can be seen as asking how an aesthetic transformation can come about. It begins with explaining the contrast between the way aesthetics is used in this article and the way it is used in Germany around 1800. Next it explains the need for a form of presentation and use of language that can convey this fundamentally new way of approaching, experiencing and valuing the world, which Schlegel finds in irony. Where the triad described the process of cultivation, irony is first of all an instrument to introduce the

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Schmitt (1919), Klaus Peter (2004) and Philip Lacou-Labarthe (1988).

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin D. Crowe, "Friedrich Schlegel and the Character of Romantic Ethics," in *The Journal of Ethics* vol. 14 no. 1, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick C. Beiser (2006).

aesthetic and its processes of cultivation, or to return them whenever habit, dominance or partiality has petrified these processes of cultivation to processes of conservation.

## 1. Architectonic or dynamic thought

Schlegel develops the triad through criticism of Kant and Fichte and makes use of Fichte's three forms of judgement: the synthetic, the antithetic and the thetic. One way to show how Schlegel's triad is an attempt to provide a more dynamic understanding of thought than Kant and Fichte allowed for, is to see how Schlegel intervenes in their conversation.

Kant begins his first critique, *Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, with the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements. Judgements that derive their conclusion from the object of research, that do not add any new knowledge, he calls analytic and those by which a property is ascribed to the object of research, by which therefore new knowledge is produced, he calls synthetic. The question whether the human being is capable of synthetic judgements that are not mediated by experience leads him to those structures of the human subject that condition experience.<sup>17</sup> Here the object of research thus becomes the human subject itself, in so far as it conditions the kind of experiences it can have. In his second critique, *Die Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, he introduces the postulate of the freedom of the subject, which means that it must be assumed that the subject is capable of initiating a causal chain. This raises the question whether there can be said to be any relation between these two subjects. Thus Kant's dualism between the noumenal, that what lies beyond experience, and the phenomenal, that which can be known from experience, also produces the inaccessibility of the relation between the knowing subject and the moral subject. To Kant, such a relation can only be assumed, because of the moral law it should be assumed that the world is organised morally towards the realisation of the highest good, bringing him to the postulate of god.<sup>18</sup> This is, however, only a morally necessary assumption and whether it has positive reality escapes any form of knowing.

Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* [*Wissenschaftlehre*] changed the orientation of this thought by trying to present the act of knowing itself as necessarily grounded in freedom. Thus Fichte does not only unify the moral (acting) subject with the knowing subject, but above all makes subjective activity foundational for knowledge, by grounding knowledge in a free act: the I that sets itself. The original unity is for Fichte not merely a practical, but a theoretical necessity. Knowledge can only be understood from an original unity that posits itself as initiating the

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<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 57-61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 843.

See also: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010), 183.

reflection about itself as an interaction between object and subject. Fichte thus in fact introduces the kind of triad Schlegel will work with, summarising it as “the I posits within the I the divisible I in opposition to the divisible not-I.”<sup>19</sup> The very possibility of science is therefore the consequence of an act of freedom, of a subjective act of self-positing as divisible, providing the unity in diversity from which any judgement becomes possible. The method so far does not yet have any other content than this act of opposing self and not-self, extending the presence of this itself undetermined, but determining activity throughout thought.

In response to Kant’s introduction of the concepts of synthetic and analytic judgements, Fichte proposes to introduce three forms of judgements. He differentiates between synthetic judgements, which defines a relation between two elements, allowing them to be grouped together in a higher category, and antithetic judgements, which defines a difference between two elements, allowing to distinguish them within a group. They are reciprocally dependent, that is, every higher categorisation presupposes a lower differentiation and vice versa. (E.g. defining a group of animals as birds represents an antithetic judgement by distinguishing them from mammals and fish, but are the synthetic judgment of the difference between a black bird and an eagle.) Although the formulation is different, it is clear that this relates to Kant’s distinction between synthetic and analytic. Fichte, however, adds a third judgement, the thetic, which opposes itself to both synthetic and antithetic judgements, because it defines that which is presupposed in every judgement, but cannot be understood in a relation of similarity or difference. The examples Fichte gives of such judgements are “I am” or “the human being is free.” These judgements cannot be reduced to a category or distinction, but only affirm themselves and relate to the other judgements as the conditioning of the act of differentiation between the judging activity and that which it judges. However, because freedom is absolute, according to Fichte, that which is opposed to the judging activity, must itself also be the realisation of freedom, providing Fichte with the idea of interchanging determination. Determining and being determined function as two alternating roles, describing a process of understanding in which the thetic judgement is spread out throughout all subjective activity and determines this process through continually alternating determination [*Wechselbestimmung*].

Fichte understands his ideas as emphasising something that was already present in Kant’s critiques: the philosophical meaning of subjective activity of every individual. “That every single I is itself the singular highest substance.”<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that every individual is absolute

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<sup>19</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre,” *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämmtliche Werke* Bd. 1 (Berlin: Veit, 1845), 110. <http://www.zeno.org/nid/20009167463>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

freedom, but that it is free to the degree that it takes up the determining role, when it makes the thetic judgement, to act undetermined by any categorisation, like title, function, religion, theory, procedure, natural properties etc.

In response to this Schlegel intends to write his own science of knowledge. In the remaining fragments and notes that were to become this work, Schlegel shows respect and appreciation for the work of Fichte, his teacher, and takes up many of his ideas. He especially appreciates the idea that all judgements should be understood as following from the same original unity which presents itself in an alternating determination. However, he claims that his teacher did not take it far enough and criticises him for the idea that philosophy should be built upon some ground rule, such as Fichte's "I that posits itself." In other words, even though Fichte's thought attempted to take freedom as the sole foundation of science, it remains too architectural for Schlegel, it still tries to take hold of this foundation in a final formula. For Schlegel the rule of divisibility and of alternating determination are the most fundamental elements of philosophy. Indivisible original unity and indivisible individuality are merely extrapolations of the processes of interaction that inform our understanding. This even proves itself in Fichte's ground rule, which can itself again be divided into two rules reciprocally determining one another: "The "I posits itself" and "the I has to posit itself" are altogether not derived rules from a higher one; the one is as high as the other; they are also two ground rules, not one. Alternating ground rule."<sup>21</sup> In other words, any "ground rule" must already make a claim on both reality and necessity.

For Schlegel it is not about finding the foundation of thought, but providing the tools to understand its development. Thus, he simply rejects the idea of one founding principle, one ground rule, but demands an opposition on every level to guarantee a dynamic. So, not just alternating determination and an alternating rule, but an alternating everything. As Schlegel puts it: "Ultimately, philosophy does not only need an alternating proof, but also an alternating concept. With every concept and every proof one can ask for a concept or proof thereof. Therefore, philosophy, like an epic poem, cannot but start in the middle, and it is impossible to present it piece by piece until its first moment is both completely grounded and clarified. (...) [Deduced] from two ideas, rules, concepts, observations."<sup>22</sup>

With this dynamic presentation of thought, Schlegel hopes to guard philosophy against two dangers of architectonic thought. On the one hand, the threat that what announces itself as the individuality is given a fixed philosophical determination, limiting the individuals and positions

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<sup>21</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 36, [193].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 518, [16].

that are allowed to take part in it, and, on the other hand, that what announces itself as totality is given a fixed philosophical determination, limiting what can be known and even what judgements, explanations, ideas or concepts are and are not allowed. Schlegel's conception of the critical philosophical method, contrasting it to false philosophies, does not allow any final determination in either of the extremes of the spectrum. Against these false philosophies, he writes: "In every false philosophy the limitation and fixation are the consequence of incompetence, stubbornness, exhaustion, the satisfaction of particular wishes, impotence etc. to ascend to the unconditioned. (...) The core (...) of criticism is situated (...) in its method."<sup>23</sup> There is no final ground (for now). If one asks the right questions it will always be possible to arrive at an unwarranted assumption or conviction and it is here that diversity becomes inevitable. Any attempt to overcome or veil the unconditioned, ultimately leads to the exclusion of difference. This informs the critical method, which Schlegel will describe in terms of the triad, which should continually be open and aspire to further exchanges with experience, history and positions other than its own, looking for these limits, without determining them.

Schlegel also acknowledges the opposite danger: losing one's thought because of a lack of clear borders. He illustrates it with an example of young writers who fail to write because of their wish to write everything at once.<sup>24</sup> This is a necessary risk that is only resolved by self-cultivation: "Cultivation is the only thing that secures someone against getting carried away, there is no ground rule, which can be a general, expedient guide and leader towards truth. Even the most dangerous can be justified in specific stages and for intellectual cultivation, and also the most secure and excellent can lead to an abyss of errors."<sup>25</sup> The triad should, therefore, provide an aesthetic in which methodic rigour is brought in relation to the creative interventions that individuals need to make to position themselves.

## 2. A dynamic aesthetic: The triad of cultivation

In this dynamic aesthetic, reality is no longer perceived as constituted from fixed entities, but as a plurality of continually interacting processes of becoming. Schlegel's triad conceptualises such processes by describing their functioning in an idealised form, which therefore simultaneously attempt to explain as well as criticise the existing processes it describes. According to his own ideal of criticism as both experiencing the object, being taken in by it, and explaining how it

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 521, [24].

<sup>24</sup> Schlegel, "Die Lyceums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 151, [37].

<sup>25</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 518, [13].

works, to what ideal it tends and to what degree it realises or fails to realise this ideal.<sup>26</sup> He is especially concerned with describing processes of human cultivation, as is illustrated below by looking at his use of the triad to describe the development of science, politics and individuality.

## Scientific cultivation

The first time Schlegel formulates this triad is to describe the development of scientific progress. In the fragments that were supposed to become his science of knowledge [*Wissenschaftslehre*], he proposes to describe this development in the dynamic interaction between three historical positions, his proto-philosophies of science. They are mysticism, representing the immediate unity of individuality and the whole of reality, eclecticism/empiricism, representing the accumulation of the material of knowledge in preliminary systems, and scepticism, representing the need for doubt and critical evaluation of knowledge. On their own these philosophies are mere deviations [*Abarten*] from science, one-sided modes of thought, but together they sustain a developmental process towards complete knowledge, what Schlegel calls omniscience [*Allwissenheit*].

From the mystical<sup>27</sup> perspective knowledge can only consist of an immediate participation in the whole of reality and can therefore not be communicated. As such it obstructs the very possibility of a knowledge as a communal project of humanity. The only way in which a mystic can express his “knowledge” is by delivering paradoxes evoking this participation, such as Heraclitus’ riddling expression: “The divinity is day-night, winter-summer, war-peace, satisfaction-hunger - all opposites.”<sup>28</sup> However, mysticism also represents what Schlegel found so valuable in Fichte: the assumption of the original unity of all knowledge. On the one hand, mysticism provides thethetic judgement, that the activity of the whole (of god/nature/reason/freedom) works in individual activity, on the other hand, the antithetic judgement, that all things coexist within the whole, but without the capacity to clarify how they relate to each other and to the whole.<sup>29</sup> For this reason its synthesis remains a virtuality. The second proto-philosophy represents the arbitrary delimiting of the scientific conversation, either on the basis of a limit of experience, empiricism, or a selective delimitation of what counts as relevant history for science, eclecticism. They both fragment reality by creating incomplete syntheses, a multiplicity of systems of knowledge that have their own “knowledge” and clarifying capacity within the arbitrary limits

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<sup>26</sup> Goethe’s meister

<sup>27</sup> It is clear from Schlegel’s writings that he has a broad tradition of western mysticism in mind, in which he includes Heraclitus and Empedocles, neoplatonists, like Plutarch and Proclus, Christian mystics such as Nicolas of Cusa and Meister Eckhart, and ultimately Fichte.

<sup>28</sup> Jaap Mansfeld, “Heraklit,” *Die Vorsokratiker* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1987), 257, [45].

<sup>29</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 8, [51].

and rules of their own domain, but exclude everything outside of it.<sup>30</sup> These incomplete syntheses nonetheless make their “knowledge” communicable by referring to observations, made through experiments and examples from history. These incomplete syntheses constitute the material of science, the content which mysticism was lacking. Scepticism represents the doubt and criticism of every arbitrary delimitation of a system of knowledge, up to the limit of rejecting such systematicity on the basis of its inevitable arbitrariness. It poses the antithesis to a supposed synthesis, demanding a higher synthesis to be found, but above all, calls out the lack thereof.<sup>31</sup> Within the dynamic, however, it guarantees the ongoing criticism of preliminary systems, engendering the ongoing polemics needed to progress towards omniscience. In short, to overcome the virtuality of mysticism, the arbitrariness of empiricism/eclecticism and the negativity of scepticism, it is necessary to allow incomplete syntheses to be continually criticised through polemic interaction, sustained by the assumption of the original unity of all knowledge.<sup>32</sup> This is how Schlegel describes the triad of science, which he calls criticism or the critical method.

The three positions of the triad do not have to be filled by one individual. If all individuals somehow participate in the totality, they can also all lay claim to a capacity for knowledge, however every individual is limited in the experiences and historical examples it has at its disposal. The dynamic can therefore be played out between individuals, as “a communal search for omniscience.”<sup>33</sup> Such communal omniscience is at first merely virtually present, as in the mystical assumption of the unity of individual and totality, but it is more than a postulate, more than a necessity demanded by practice. The unity of knowledge is also affirmed in practice, in every scientific discussion in which individuals not only try to prove the other wrong, but allow their own position to be criticised in order to develop a shared knowledge.<sup>34</sup> These polemical discussions inevitably also reproduce the other two positions of the triad. Individuals will continually shift between taking the role of empiricist or eclecticist, presenting their own preliminary ideas on the basis of experiments and examples from history, and that of the sceptic, verifying the other’s position by experience and history, and search for the limits of the other’s proposed synthesis. Together they constitute the “polemic totality” crucial to any critical method.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4, [6].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3, [1], & 12, [94].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 12, [84].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 515, [97].

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 520-521, [21].

Schlegel's ideal of the critical method demands the individual scientist to cultivate himself not only by specialising, but also by taking note of what is happening in other fields, and to remain conscious of the history of his own field and of human history in general. Furthermore, to be always willing to give account of his own position, not take himself too seriously, knowing that there remains so much to know beyond his scope and allow and seek exchanges with those who are less cultivated and those who take another position. It envisions the scientific community that knows that its knowledge is borne only by the cultivation of individuals, taking care of the cultivation of those willing to join the conversation and allowing a wide diversity of voices to interact, within and between sciences, looking for the contribution each voice can make to one another's argument, without letting one voice dominate the discourse.

This rendering of the triad as a description of the critical method allows Schlegel to take the position of the sceptic and clarify his criticism of Kant and Fichte. He realises that, although Fichte thought of himself as a continuation and improvement on Kant, the two philosophers actually ask two diametrically opposed questions. Where Kant asked the philosophical question 'what can one know', Fichte asked how to understand the possibility of knowledge in the first place. Fichte is, therefore, not interested in demonstrating the structure of the knowing subject to prove what it can and cannot know, but in explaining how it is that the subject can develop himself in relation to objects around him, necessitating him to accept an original unity in which they both participate. Rather than philosophy, Schlegel calls Fichte's interest the science of formation of knowledge [*Bildungslehre*].<sup>35</sup> He remains, according to Schlegel, a mystic and his value is limited by his unwillingness to bring into the intellectual exchange with other perspectives, coming to terms with the concrete material of history and experience.

In contrast to Fichte's mysticism, Schlegel sees Kant mainly as an eclecticist and empiricist, building a synthesis on the basis of history and experience. He has two problems with Kant's philosophy. First of all, Kant is lacking the kind of science of the formation of knowledge as Fichte provides. He is unwilling to accept the original unity of knowledge and, thus, inevitably ends up with a dualism, demarcating the limits of his synthesis. For all the attention Kant gives to the differentiation between and deduction of concepts, he cannot account for the possibility of this differentiation from a unified reality in the first place. His dualism proves, as it were, that he rather sets a limit, than allowing contradictions to remain visible and unresolved, while allowing contradictions to show might inspire readers to develop new philosophies. As Schlegel wrote later: "every syllogism should start with a paradox. (...) The antinomies should not have made

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 7, [33] & 11, [79] & 506, [5].

Kant sacrifice the infinite, but the rule of non-contradiction.”<sup>36</sup> Instead Kant opts for a dualism that ultimately comes at the price of limiting the scope of the scientific conversation.

Schlegel’s second criticism follows from the first. For even if Kant should be seen as taking the position of preparing the material for science, he fails to adequately address one of its sources: history. It is not enough to demonstrate your theory theoretically, but one also has to show its reality in history. Every philosophical synthesis has to be understood from its place in the historical development of philosophy and more general the history of humanity and its languages. However, even when Kant does attempt to overcome the distance between theoretical and practical reason in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, he tries to do so from a transcendental logic alone. For this reason Schlegel accuses Kant of lacking familiarity with history and his interpretations of philosophers of being anti-historical.<sup>37</sup> There is no pure thought that exists detached from historical and thus practical concerns. Criticism should thus be the philosophy that acknowledges that and understands itself historically.<sup>38</sup>

The triad helps Schlegel to designate the limits of these two thinkers, to show where the conversation can be taken forward towards a more complete knowledge. Ultimately, however, it is not driven by some imperative of complete knowledge, such as “there should be science”, but by the self-realisation of the individual. The need for science must be synthetically derived from the universality of the individual’s will to know. The ‘I shall be,’ the imperative of self-realisation, specified in the human capacity of knowing, and the impossibility of arriving at omniscience on one’s own, together found the shared project of human knowledge. This reciprocal dependence, that individuals need each other for their self-realisation, is not restricted to the human project of knowledge alone, but also applies to that of a human community: politics.

## Political cultivation

In his *Versuch über dem Begriff des Republikanismus* (1797), Schlegel tries to criticise Kant’s political philosophy by arguing that politics represents the communal counterpart to an ethics of individual freedom and equality. Freedom, derived immediately from the imperative of self-realisation, and equality, derived from the reciprocal validity of the imperative for all individuals, are only the minimal conditions for self-realisation and even their full realisation

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 410, [1080].

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19, [10].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11, [80], [81], [82].

demands the communal project of politics.<sup>39</sup> The same emphasis on the reciprocal dependence of communal and individual cultivation, therefore, drives Schlegel's theory of the state. Here, however, the 'I shall be' is not specified in the human capacity for knowing, but in the human capacity for communicating. Realising one's capacity of communication does not result in scientific knowledge, but in the sharing of lives, in other words, in communality.<sup>40</sup> The notion of communality for Schlegel refers to the fraternity of the motto of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity.<sup>41</sup>

This is another way in which Schlegel opposes Kant, who had, in his *Zum ewigen Frieden*, based his rationalist politics on freedom and equality. Kant thereby made his politics subservient to his ethics, from which these values had been derived. He rejected political moralists and only saw the possibility of realising the moral aim of politics through legislation and jurisdiction.<sup>42</sup> Truly moral rulers and politicians would advance beneficial laws and policies that would gradually provide the people with equal duties and rights, necessary to guarantee their freedom and equality and to protect against the ever looming state of nature. Politicians only have to organise the state apparatus in such a way that it will be most beneficial for all subjects to act according to those equal duties and rights, so that even when guided by their self-interest, they will still further the good of the state and its people. Whether this will contribute to moral (or other) cultivation of individuals depends on the individuals themselves. "The problem of the formation of the state, hard as it may sound, is not insoluble, even for a race of devils, granted that they have intelligence. (...) For it deals, not with the moral reformation of mankind, but only with the mechanism of nature."<sup>43</sup> In other words, politics becomes a matter of the technical skill to employ natural drives in the service of the good of the state. The same logic can be applied in international politics, peace can be guaranteed as long as their relations are organised in such a way that the most beneficial option for all states is to keep their peace treaties.<sup>44</sup>

For Schlegel the function of politics, developing the human capacity of communication, can never be realised by a monarch or through the technical apparatus of a government, but only realises (or fails to realise) itself through all the different levels of communication between individuals and the communities they form. As such politics has its own intrinsic goal: "Every

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<sup>39</sup> Schlegel, "Versuch," *KSA VII*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, "Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus," *Kritische-Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe bd. VII*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1966), 13-15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. M. Campbell Smith, (London: Charles Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1903) 161 ff., <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50922/50922-h/50922-h.htm>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-155.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

human society, whose goal is the community of humanity (as a goal in itself or as the goal of a human society) we call a state.”<sup>45</sup> What is usually called politics should reflect this and focus on the cultivation of the capacity of communication and the facilitation of its use. For this reason, the formation of and participation in communities and interaction between distinct communities should be the main goal of the state. As Schlegel writes in notes from 1798: “The goal of politics should be negative - to facilitate as many families and churches as possible; and no less corporations, alliances and states within the state, as in the middle ages.”<sup>46</sup> Here the family refers to the smallest unit of human communality, while the church refers to the largest. These middle ages should, however, less be read as referring to a particular historical moment, and more as a reference to Novalis’ specific idealised characterisation of this vast period of time in his *Die Christenheit oder Europa*.<sup>47</sup> In this essay, Novalis wanted to provide an image of medieval Europe that could function as a mirror for his own time, showing a Europe that allows for a great diversity of states and communities, united in a spiritual-intellectual culture represented by christianity. That this is more than simple theocratic conservatism is clear from Novalis descriptions of this unity derived from religion, which has a surprisingly tolerant and cosmopolitan character.<sup>48</sup> Schlegel goes along with this reading of the middle ages, because it repeats his own inspiration about differentiation and communality in Greek culture. The Greek had also lived in very differently organised city-states, while at the same time they were united in a shared (though equally pluriform) mythology that allowed them to band together whenever external threats, such as the Persians, demanded it. As this understanding of Greek culture provided him with political inspiration, so might Novalis’ reading of the middle ages.

To further characterise this state, formed through the organisation of individual interactions and for the communality of humanity as such, Schlegel describes another triad of historical constitutions to represent the different positions at play in the republican state as he envisions it. This republic should be monarchical, aristocratic and, in contrast to Kant’s state, also democratic. Like mysticism, empiricism/eclecticism and scepticism, these three seemingly incompatible constitutions represent positions which combined can guarantee an ongoing dynamic of state formation that is needed for a well functioning republic, progressively realising the freedom, equality and, above all, communality of all individuals. Taken separately every position is a deviation [*Abart*] of politics, since it fails to achieve its goals and represent a form

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>46</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 293, [1173].

<sup>47</sup> Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Pauline Kleingeld, “Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis’s ‘Christianity or Europe,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* vol. 46 no. 2 (2008): 269-284.

of despotism, respectively tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy. They consist in the inability to allow internal contradictions to exist as productive forces of continual state development and therefore attempt to arbitrarily fixate the virtual unity of the state by identifying it with its monarch, with an specific yet arbitrary positive property, such as a family, caste of class, or with the resistance against any positive determination of the state, as in mob rule.<sup>49</sup>

Together, this triad forms a process of continual unification and diversification by which the development of the state can be understood as a progressive development towards ever greater freedom, equality and communality. In such a process aristocracy represents the necessity of appreciating the cultivation of particular individuals. Every community provides a space in which individuals can cultivate themselves and learn to formulate and dedicate themselves to a communal will. The interaction with other communities then helps them, and thereby the communities, to develop a notion of a general will. This presupposes a degree of ethical development, an understanding that the reciprocity of freedom extends to all individuals and all communities.<sup>50</sup> Schlegel's use of the notion of aristocracy is clearly idiosyncratic. It clarifies that a democratic republic can acknowledge a specific group as providing the best representation of the general will, not on the basis of heredity or some other arbitrary property, but because of the degree that their learning and experience (cultivation) has allowed them familiarity with and an insight into the shared knowledge and lives of the whole community. These individuals, as it were, provide the organised material of politics, their "votes should not only be counted by number, but also by weight."<sup>51</sup> Such an aristocracy can only exist when it is supported by the majority of the people and this support should remain retractable on the basis of the actions of the aristocracy. Like the eclectic and empiricist syntheses, their formulation of the general will should always remain preliminary. For such a political aristocracy to function it therefore needs democracy, active citizens who are also able to cultivate themselves (including ethically<sup>52</sup>) in order to criticise the aristocracy, to keep demanding the interaction between communities and the aristocracy, to point out the limits of their actions and decisions, to foster a healthy scepticism towards the aristocracy and to demand the cultivation of the whole community. Thus Schlegel becomes the first thinker in Germany who explicitly advocates democratic politics as preferable to rational politics, because the general will is better expressed in the wills of a

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<sup>49</sup> Schlegel, "Versuch," *KSA VII*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

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<sup>52</sup> Schlegel makes a particular point of the need for ethical cultivation for political renewal in his review of Condorcet's *Esprit*.

Schlegel, "Über Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain," *KSA VII*, 5.

self-critical majority, than in any rational formulation of the common good. Schlegel also provides the concept of monarchism with an idiosyncratic meaning. It does not refer to the idea of a state being ruled by a single individual, which would not actually be politics in Schlegel's sense of the word. Just as mysticism, monarchism (from the Greek *μονοσ* (solitary) and *αρχη* (origin, first, ruler)) represents first of all a virtual affirmation of the original unity of the state, with all its internal diversity and contradictions, and simultaneously represents the goal of the state to be realised concretely through aristocracy and democracy. Instead of referring to 'ruling by the will of a single individual', monarchism is used to refer to the representation of the state as an individual, as having a single, but composed (general) will, polemically determined between individuals and the communities they form.<sup>53</sup>

Schlegel acknowledges that in almost all historical constitutions some form of despotism has preceded the republican form of state. There are even times when some form of despotism might be politically necessary, for example when it seems the only way to preserve the safety of the community during a political crisis, as was the reason for the institutionalisation of dictatorship in Roman law or can be the reason for a rebellion. Although necessary, these forms must be at all times understood as an interruption of the republic, never as its continuation. They are therefore only politically acceptable if they also work on their own abolishment, to resolve the crisis in order to return to republicanism.

In contrast to Kant's emphasis on individual morality, the examples above show that Schlegel wants to be able to learn from historical examples of political constitutions, such as the Athenian democracy, the Roman republics and even the complex constellations of medieval Europe, such as the Hanze and other forms of guilds.<sup>54</sup> These examples can guide the cultivation of communities, since they are earlier experiments of communality and have contributed to the development of the ideals of freedom, equality and communality. The breath of the polemical exchanges within society should always be informed by the diverse examples from experience, literature and the history of human communities.

The ideal of communality, which Schlegel emphasised in criticism of Kant, points beyond these historical examples and cannot but evoke the idea of the community of all of humanity, as science points towards omniscience. It is not something outside humanity that necessitates

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<sup>53</sup> Schlegel, "Versuch," *KSA II*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> As Marmasse has observed as well: "*Schlegel, à l'opposé [de Kant], s'intéresse aux formes de la république dans leur diversité historique et dans leurs degrés variables de conformité à l'idéal. En outre, il admet l'impossibilité de principe de réaliser parfaitement l'idéal.*"

Marmasse, "Le jeune Friedrich Schlegel," in *Revue de métaphysique*, 561.

world peace, nor is it achieved through technical skill, but it is from within humanity itself, from its capacity of communication, that the necessity of the community of all of humanity, in other words of world peace, should be developed. For this to be realised Schlegel sees the need for a growing community of republican states, joining together into a federation towards a universal republicanism.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the community of humanity, which already forms the virtual basis of every human community, can be brought about politically.

Just as science, politics is not founded on the political imperative, ‘there should be human community,’ but derived from the imperative of self-realisation. As individuals want to share their lives, realise their capacity for communication, they will interact with others, and if these others follow the same imperative they communally give rise to the political imperative, which has its realisation in the state (and ultimately global) community. The development of the human community is therefore grounded in the cultivation of individuals and communities that allow all individuals to follow this imperative and maybe even evoke it.

At the same time, however, it is clear that not all individuals develop these capacities in the same way and to the same degree, determining different ways and levels of participation in this community. These differences can, however, not be determined in advance of their cultivation and actual interaction with the community, referring to hereditary classes or positions, nor in religious or political opinions. As Schlegel gives his readers to think about: “we do not know what a human being is, until we understand from the essence of humanity, why there are human beings that have a sense for meaning [*Sinn*] and spirit [*Geist*], and others who lack them.”<sup>56</sup> The notion of self-cultivation and individuality is therefore crucial to properly understanding the communal projects of humanity as outlined above.

## Individual cultivation

Schlegel’s understanding of what it means to be an individual is analogous to his understanding of the communal projects described above. Just as these developed through a polemic of different theories and communities the individual too needs an internal diversity to cultivate himself, as Novalis puts it: “Every human is a small community.”<sup>57</sup> Through developing different perspectives on the world the individual becomes capable of having an internal polemic about new experiences it encounters and of developing its own position. This allows the individual to

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<sup>55</sup> Schlegel, “Versuch,” *KSA VII*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Schlegel, “Die Ideen,” *KSA II*, 261, [51].

<sup>57</sup> Novalis, “Blüthenstaub,” *Novalis Schriften, Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs, bd. 2* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 431, [44].

escape a simple causally determined life, both in action and in thought, for the internal multiplicity mediates this development by taking it up into an internal conversation between its different perspectives. Thus, for Schlegel, the ideal individual is always a critic, who “ruminates and shall therefore have more than one stomach.”<sup>58</sup> This positioning, however, does not only mean that the individual forms an opinion, but gives form to its own life according to the experiences it has and the internal conversion by which it understands them. This also means that Schlegel expects a high level of self-awareness from the individual, allowing it to enjoy its own process of self-formation. “Elegance,” Schlegel writes in the same set of fragments, “is the right life; sensuality [*Sinnlichkeit*] which views itself and forms itself,”<sup>59</sup> and in the *Athenaeum Fragments*: “Sense which views itself becomes spirit, spirit is internal sociability.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than mere theoretical perspectives, these perspectives make up the individual’s way of being in and experiencing the world. Only when the individual develops a multiplicity of being in and experiencing the world does it become capable of cultivating itself in this way.

To describe this self-cultivation, Schlegel again turns to the triad, whose positions are here described as self-creation [*Selbstschöpfung*], organising the material of individuality, self-negation [*Selbstvernichtung*], doubting and critically examining this organisation, and self-delineation [*Selbstbeschränkung*], affirming the virtual unity of the individual as composed of this multiplicity. Just as in the earlier formulations the individual positions can separately be understood as failures to be an individual, while together forming the dynamic of self-cultivation. Self-creation does not, as Kierkegaard seems to have thought,<sup>61</sup> refer to a position in which the self could somehow be its own ground, create itself, as if out of nothing. In contrast, Schlegel associates self-creation with discovery and enthusiasm, it represents a being exposed to and absorbed by something, which completely determines the sense one can make of his own individuality and the world one lives in. Rather than describing a creation *by* an individual, it refers to the externally originating creation *of* an individual. An individual that would restrict itself to self-creation would continually lose itself in his objects of interest. One moment it would, for example, develop a sense for Plato’s *Symposium* and see itself and the

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<sup>58</sup> Schlegel, “Lyceums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 149, [27].

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, [29].

<sup>60</sup> Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 225, [339].

<sup>61</sup> “*This collapsing into an esthetic stupefaction that actually comes out in the whole of Lucinde as a sign of what it is to live poetically and, as it lulls the deeper I into a somnambulant state, gives the arbitrary I free rein in ironic self-satisfaction.*” “*By starting from the freedom and the constitutive authority of the I, one does not arrive at a still higher spirituality but comes only to sensuousness (...) and thereby falls under the laws of the flesh and of drives.*”

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates* (\*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 295-296 & 301.

world as totally explained by it, while another moment it seems only fully grasped through the French Revolution and the next totally determined by its love for its lover, without developing any persisting perspectives, in other words without cultivating itself. Within the triad, however, this sensibility for experiences that might inspire new perspectives is crucial as providing the positive building blocks, the material of individuality. The position of self-negation, in contrast, holds on to its independence through separation. It separates the perspective of Plato's Symposium, the French Revolution and the love for its lover as distinct, and concludes that none of them define the individual, thereby it evades being defined by any perspective. Such a position, on its own, provides as little opportunity for cultivation as the former. A fitting example of both can be found in the *Critical Fragments*, when Schlegel speaks of the difference between Cynical and Sapphic poetry. The poems of Sappho are expressions of an intimate interaction with and adoration of the lover, which is its only subject and perspective. In contrast, the cynic searches for independence and speaks of all human affairs with the same disdain and message of freedom by separation. Both positions lack a way of allowing self-difference, of taking part without losing a sense of self. This is what Schlegel introduces with the third position of self-delineation, which, like mysticism and monarchism, virtually affirms the unity within which senses and separations can develop into an internal polemical conversation. At some point a one-dimensional identification becomes an active exclusion of exposure and hindrance to development. It becomes necessary to draw a new, wider line, creating the space within which different senses can be cultivated, introducing the ideal of harmonious development from different perspectives. And yet, on its own self-delineation can also be a mere failure of individuality, when it remains a virtual gesture. Such an abstracted individual defines itself as a composed totality of senses and perspectives in theory, but does not cultivate any new sensibilities in practice, nor identifies the distinct perspectives they may provide. The formal claim to unity in diversity, self-delineation, has to be realised in a dynamic of continual self-creation and self-negation, just as the individual can say that it is free, but this freedom is a mere formality as long as his actions remain determined by his surroundings, "for wherever one does not limit himself, he will be limited by the world."<sup>62</sup>

This cultivation of internal sociability, however, cannot happen in isolation. Individuality too learns through example and experiment, the example of other individuals and experiment with one's own individuality in interaction with equals. The primary context in which the individual cultivates himself is through coherently presenting his own position to equals, that is, friendship. Friendship, for Schlegel, is not like-minded people sharing their likeness, as some

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<sup>62</sup> Schlegel, "Lyceums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 151, [37].

families, dogmatic communities or even love affairs may be, but the harmonious coexistence and exchange between equals who take different positions, in other words, a community of individuals.<sup>63</sup> This harmony allowing for differences creates the space where one learns what it means to be an individual: “Friendship could be thought of as the school of independence. It is more than love.”<sup>64</sup> The imperative of self-realisation, ‘*I shall be,*’ thus immediately evokes what is beyond the individual: the social level or friendship, ‘*I shall relate to others as others.*’ The individual as a small community demands a community of perspectives both within and between individuals and thereby already points towards the cultivation of the communal projects, as described in science and politics.

However, if on the one hand communality is based on the interaction between individuals, while on the other individuality is based on the interaction in a community of others, how can the individual and the community arise? If both exist in the communication (unity) of difference, who guarantees the communication? Here the urgency of the progressive aesthetic of Schlegel becomes clear. It is presupposed in each given conceptualisation of cultivation and it is impossible to form individuality or community without this communication of difference. Thus, the aesthetic assignment Schlegel sets himself in his works and in *the Atheneum*, to create a space of critical exchange of ideas and perceptions and to convey the demand of self-cultivation, can be derived from the conceptualisation of cultivation. The way in which this can be done remains more ambiguous. The next part will first look at how Schlegel writes about what has here consistently been called aesthetics and then turn to how his works attempt to promote this aesthetic, which is through irony.

### 3. Conditions of cultivation: aesthetics and irony

#### Aesthetics and art

Schlegel’s early writings all try to find ways to convey this progressive aesthetic, this way of approaching, experiencing and valuing the world that promotes interaction between difference and freedom for self-cultivation. This is expressed, for example, in his preference for the already popular notion of criticism and his opposition to giving a blueprint of the ideal philosophical theory or explicating what should be taught in rational enlightened education. The whole

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<sup>63</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 69, [486].

See also Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 26, [86] & 28, [111].

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 216, [257].

Athenaeum project (and especially Schlegel's writings) can be seen as experiments in what forms of writing best contribute to the aesthetic among their readers: explicitly encouraging opposing perspectives within the same journal,<sup>65</sup> trying out collective writing, approaching important writers through characteristics that present their individuality through the contradicting inspirations they embody, developing philosophical positions through fragments or even in the form of a conversation between friends, and, of course, the use of irony. They were experiments in ways to present positions in such a way that they may evoke their readers to not only increase their knowledge, but also awaken an investigative attitude, join the conversation, developing and introducing their own preliminary ideas and principles. The experiments with the form of writing should be seen as the artistic side of *the Athenaeum*, not that they turn the journal into a beautiful object to be pondered upon because of its beauty and hung in a gallery, but because they make it promote its own aesthetic in contrast to any other.

Up to this point, aesthetics has been used to refer to a way of approaching, experiencing and valuing the world, suggesting that there are different ways to do so, expressed in different works of art and forms of life. Such a notion of aesthetics did not exist in Schlegel's time. Aesthetics meant, and can still be used as meaning, the science of sensation, which studied the nature of beauty as it is experienced and expressed by human beings. From the rationalist perspectives of his time, this meant that there could only be one aesthetic, whose principles were to be derived from a rational deduction of beauty and should account for all of reality. When Schlegel still uses the term in his earliest works on the history of art, such as his study on Greek poetry (1797), he already points out that the contemporary aesthetics was a chaos of different standards and perspectives, without rigorous method, let alone valid and widely shared results.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, he already claims that what is commonly called art, which he calls the presentative art [*darstellende Kunst*], should itself not be reduced to the beautiful, but just as much strive for the truth and the good.<sup>67</sup> And thus, Schlegel afterwards no longer speaks of aesthetics, only returning to the concept a couple of times to criticise it. As he explains in his *Kritische Fragmente*, published later in the same year as the study on Greek poetry: "Aesthetic, with the meaning that has been invented in Germany and as it is being used in Germany, is a word that, as one knows, betrays both a complete ignorance about the intended subject and the intended language. Why is it still being used?"<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, "Vorerinnerung," in *Das Athenaeum bd. 1 st. 1* (Berling: Friedrich Vieweg, 1798), III-IV. Accessed via: <http://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/index.php?obj=1874-44783&lan=nl>.

<sup>66</sup> Schlegel, "Griechischen Poesie," *KSA I*, 221.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 242 (footnote 3).

<sup>68</sup> Schlegel, "Lyceums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 151, [40].

The 'invented' and 'being used' refer to two major aesthetic systems of his time. First, there is the rationalist aesthetics, 'invented in Germany' by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten,<sup>69</sup> which was foundationalist and sought to describe a system of beauty, in which sensations and their causes could be categorised, leading to the perfection of form towards the idea of beauty, analogous to logic providing the perfection of content towards the idea of truth.<sup>70</sup> It thus suggested an absolute subject position and objective measure of beauty, which contradicted Schlegel's conception of dynamic thought, and thereby the historicity of art, in short, the whole project of the cultivation of humanity. Second, there is the critical aesthetics, under influence of Kantian philosophy, which was 'being used in Germany'<sup>71</sup> and had a whole other problem. Schiller's *Letters on the aesthetic education of mankind* (1795) is its most influential example. In it, Schiller argues that aesthetic education is the crucial condition enabling individuals to live their lives morally. As such, beauty has a role to play in reality, namely to compensate for the daily experiences of people. There should be beauty that is stimulating and energising for those whose daily activities are mainly intellectual, while there is also need for beauty that is soothing and comforting, for those whose activities are mainly physical.<sup>72</sup> As such, art can provide a balance to bring about harmonious individuals, not as something intervening in, but complementing the world. The most complete works of art, for Schiller, detach themselves from reality, to reach a condition of free play in which alone it is possible to make something that is beautiful in itself. In this "aesthetic condition" it becomes possible to create something that does not appear to humans outside of art, namely a harmony between what is beautiful and what is moral.<sup>73</sup> And thus, art provides the experience of freedom and bliss needed for an individual to conform to the moral law only by not participating in reality.

Although such an ideal point of departure, similar to what has above been called the unconditioned, could fit Schlegel's approach to art, the separation between reality and the virtual playfulness of art is for him unacceptable. First of all, because of what Schlegel means by art: "art is the potentiality of form and science the potentiality for content; any absolute philosophy needs both."<sup>74</sup> Art is about experimenting with the possibilities of form, be it the form of politics, scientific research, works of art or individual lives, and so, Schlegel can speak of

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<sup>69</sup> Schlegel, "griechische Poesie," *KSA I*, 364.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2020 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-german>.

<sup>71</sup> Schlegel, "griechische Poesie," *KSA I*, 364.

<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Schiller, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen" *Sämtliche Werke* *bd. 5* (München: Hansen, 1962), 620-621.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 637-643.

<sup>74</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 106, [924].

experimental scientists as artists,<sup>75</sup> of the creation of an ordered world as the artwork of philosophers,<sup>76</sup> of moral art and political art,<sup>77</sup> of religion as the nameless art<sup>78</sup> and, of course, of the art of life.<sup>79</sup> It is a recognition that all these elements have their historically developed form, that these forms can change and thus intervene in the world they bring forth. Art, in this broad sense, comes to denote that which is artificial, which is not organised by nature, but by humanity or its individuals, the human world.<sup>80</sup> Art is thus by definition an intervention in reality, like those booklets mentioned earlier, that altered the direction of human history, not something separate from it to complement the individual's need for beauty. In the mythological metaphor, which he takes from Greek mythology and returns to throughout his work, it is the chaos that needs to give birth to an ordered world, but what that world is and whether it will be brought about is not predetermined.

If this is the case, the projects described above by the triads, both individual and communal, and the experimentation with forms in *the Athenaeum* are also artistic projects, since they all describe such processes of giving form and express a particular aesthetic. Every triad eventually turned into creative experimentation and polemic interaction through which the cultivation of humanity is determined. The study of these processes loses its meaning as soon as it is understood prescriptively, as rules that can be followed.<sup>81</sup> The project of aesthetics as the attempt to determine what beauty is, to find a set of principles by which to judge art and to guide artists towards formal perfection, simply cannot exist within Schlegel's project, and thus his rejection of aesthetics makes sense.

To Schlegel's own question why German philosophers keep using the notion of aesthetics, the question could be added why it is still being used so often in secondary literature on Schlegel. Using the notion of aesthetics, while Schlegel does not, can easily lead to the idea of a rational objective measure of beauty or, more likely in the present use of the term, an isolation of art as a separate realm with its own intrinsic value, art for art's sake. Schlegel agrees with neither of these claims. To take up aesthetics can and is in this article even expected to be fruitful, but only through using the anachronistic definition of aesthetics as a way of approaching, experiencing and valuing the world. Schlegel himself hints at the possibility of a different understanding of aesthetics, when he speaks of "sophistic aesthetics", suggesting that something as a socratic

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<sup>75</sup> Schlegel, "Athenäums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 236, [381].

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 192, [168].

<sup>77</sup> Schlegel, "griechischen Poesie," *KSA I*, 242 (footnote 3).

<sup>78</sup> E.g. Schlegel, "Athenäums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 225-226, [339].

<sup>79</sup> E.g. *Ibid.*, 201, [225]. & Schlegel, "Ideeën," *KSA II*, 264, [89].

<sup>80</sup> Schlegel, "griechischen Poesie," *KSA I*, 242 (footnote 3).

<sup>81</sup> Schlegel, "Athenäums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 177, [82].

aesthetics (something more polemically oriented and in opposition to the sophists) might exist: “The fundamental mistake of sophistic aesthetics is that it takes beauty to just be a given object, a psychological phenomenon. Beauty is not just the empty thought of something that should be created, but at the same time the issue [of creation] itself, an original mode of action of the human spirit; not just a necessary fiction, but also a factuality, that is an eternal transcendental factuality.”<sup>82</sup> Speaking of Schlegel’s aesthetics would, therefore, need a clear introduction of how the term is intended to be used and, to counter the present and Schlegel’s own contemporary linguistic habits, a disclaimer that what is at play is not merely artistic objects, but the creative activity of human individuals, the way individualities form themselves and, cooperatively, the world. Whenever this disclaimer is absent, as it is in much of the secondary literature, the focus on aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty is a misleading reading of Schlegel’s work.

Most devastating, in this respect, has been Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s work between 1800 and 1809. Schelling had left the Jena group at the end of *the Athenaeum* period to pursue his own system. Friedrich Schlegel, however, became more and more convinced that Schelling’s contribution to philosophy was restricted to copying other people’s thoughts without clearly mentioning them, especially those of Fichte, his brother August Wilhelm and himself. Because Schelling works out many of the themes already introduced in *the Athenaeum*, he is now often understood as providing a philosophical system for the thought of early romanticism. At first instance, Schlegel’s accusations that Schelling was stealing the ideas of him and his brother supports this interpretation. Schelling’s works are clearly more organised than the writings from the Schlegel brothers in *the Athenaeum*, so if they convey the same ideas they might seem to be an improvement. However, in the same letters in which Friedrich Schlegel accuses Schelling, he also calls Schelling’s philosophy pathetic and his disgust is specified with regard to two elements. First, in his rejection of the “academic stiffness” in which Schelling has forced the ideas of *the Athenaeum* and, second, in ascribing Schelling’s interest in him and his brother as guided by “a great urge to be able to ramble about art.”<sup>83</sup> Schlegel does at times remain unclear about the way in which he uses the term ‘art’, he never defines it and often takes examples from the history of presentative art, even several times speaking of a realm of art as if this might be something separate from the rest of the world. Schelling, however, takes this ambiguity in a direction opposite to Schlegel’s intentions. He is very clear about what he means by art, and it is

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 209, [256].

<sup>83</sup> Schlegel, “Friedrich von Schlegel an August Wilhelm von Schlegel, 26.03.1804,” *Krisenjahre*, <https://august-wilhelm-schlegel.de/version-10-20/briefid/31>.

Schlegel, “Friedrich von Schlegel an August Wilhelm von Schlegel, 24.02.1808,” *Krisenjahre*, <https://august-wilhelm-schlegel.de/version-10-20/briefid/202>.

this very clarity that more than anything troubled the water for any later Schlegel interpretation. The three major differences between Schlegel's and Schelling's account of what art is, would be that (1) Schelling focuses on the artwork as the product of art, rather than the process, (2) he (thereby) restricts the activity of art to the narrow sense of the word, as aesthetic production, and (3) introduces a hierarchy in which art exceeds philosophy as the highest expression of human self-realisation, since "art is simultaneously the only true and eternal organon and document of philosophy."<sup>84</sup> Even though Schelling himself eventually nuances this formula in later writings, it has had a major impact on the interpretations of the early romantics and their ideas about art. It introduces the idea that art would have replaced philosophy as the ultimate means even for arriving at the truth, obscuring Schlegel's aesthetic vision. Furthermore, even after his later nuances, Schelling's system remains an architectural philosophical system. He neglects the experiments in form and the goal of evoking creative individuality in the reader. His academic stiffness is not just a stylistic deficiency, but also a philosophical set back from the perspective of the romantic project.

Speaking of aesthetics is therefore justified, not to emphasise Schlegel's interest in art and literature, but his interest in the relation between (and necessary reciprocal determination of) content and form. Art and science, poetry and philosophy needed to communicate to exchange the forms and content of the modern culture. In their separation and dogmatic slumber, rather than communication and critical polemic, they would stifle the cultivation of individuals and the community. Schlegel's experimentation with form is therefore not only concerned with expressing this progressive aesthetic, but also with countering dogmatism. It is Socrates who provides Schlegel with a form that works against dogmatism and its sophistic aesthetics, without developing its own dogmatism: irony. It does not only separate, but also juxtapose, hinting at the possibility and necessity of communication between differences in knowledge and positions: producing a conversation that lives from the exchange of differences between individuals that take part in it. "In irony self-delineation unifies itself with participation in all that is living. - independence is the life of life."<sup>85</sup> To understand the way in which irony does this, the distinction has to be made between the Socratic and the Aristotelian understanding of irony.

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<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, "System des Transzendentalen Idealismus," *Sämtliche Werke Band 2*, Leipzig 1907, 302.

<sup>85</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 218, [291].

## The character of the Socratic tradition of irony

Irony has been a divisive and morally controversial concept from its first appearance in western thought. Its ambiguity already nestled itself in between the two classical landmarks from the early days of western literature: the embodiment of irony in Plato's descriptions of Socrates' method of conversation and the moral rejection of irony as a means of communication by Aristotle. In Plato's Socrates irony expresses itself as an unquenchable thirst for linguistic clarification. It continually forces Socrates into polemical experiments in the hope of discovering some shared knowledge, independent and often critical of the conventional moral and intellectual norms of his age. In contrast, Aristotle qualifies irony not as an invitation to an intellectual polemic, but as a form of lying. Thus, he lays the basis for Quintilian's more neutral definition of "saying the opposite of what is meant." The Aristotelian-Quintilian perspective seems to have won out in determining the definition of the concept of irony in western history. During the middle ages Quintilian's definition reigned supreme and irony was mostly understood as a morally deficit form of communication. Nonetheless, the socratic use of irony has never completely vanished and could thus be taken up by Schlegel.

What is characteristic about Socratic irony, according to Schlegel, is its emphasis on the unresolved contradictions that remain within every use of language. It continually asks the interlocutor whether he understands what he is saying and demands of him to take position without relying on the comfort of the authority of conventions. This other continually has to reposition, rephrase and experiment with his ideas in order to develop them coherently. This can be a frustrating experience, as Euthyphro expresses, when Socrates continually shows how his arguments lead to contradictory conclusions: "You are the Daedalus who puts my arguments in motion. Not I, for sure, but you make them move and walk around, because for my part they would not have moved at all."<sup>86</sup> However, the goal is not confusion, but exposing the deeper misunderstanding a confusion points out and encouraging the dynamic motion of thought. Irony probes the individual's communications in order to see if the individual understands his own role in positioning himself. Only on the level of this positioning does it become possible to find a common ground between individuals founded on their own cultivation and positioning, independent of any external authority. It disrupts direct communication, because it is simultaneously dedicated to truth and individuality.

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<sup>86</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 11c-d.

The figure of Socrates also brings to mind the resistance his irony encountered. Instead of one dissenting view, Socrates' irony bred independent thought and was thus understood to lead to a whole generation questioning the accepted norms and order. The rejection of any other authority over thought than the common ground developed through the exchange, makes this irony inherently irreverent and subversive towards conventional norms and order. Together with the frustration and confusion, this might trigger the moral rejections fitting to the Aristotelian tradition. Even Plato mitigates the radicality of this irony by his theory of remembrance (anamnesis) by which thought discovers something that can function as an authoritative foundation: the ideas. For Schlegel, however, this common ground is only found in the shared cultivation of all individuals participating in the conversation. A common ground becomes a ground because it is held in common, rather than the other way around.

Schlegel describes the radicality of his reading of Socrates' irony in the same set of fragments in which he introduces his own notion of irony. This characterisation of irony is at the same time the introduction of his own ideal of communication and its accommodation under the Socratic tradition: "The Socratic irony is the only completely inevitable and yet completely intentional dissimulation. It is equally impossible to enforce it or to betray it. To those who do not have it, it will remain a riddle even after the most explicit confession. It will deceive no one, except those who take it to be a deception, and who take pleasure in the joyfull mischievousness, messing around with the whole world, or get angry when they feel they are implicated in it. Everything in it shall be jest and everything serious, everything honestly open and everything profoundly disguised. It is born out of the unification of sense for the art of life and scientific spirit, out of the encounter between a complete philosophy of nature and a complete philosophy of art. It includes and evokes a feeling of the unresolvable contradiction of the unconditioned and the conditioned, the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication. It is the most free of all licences, for through it one places himself beyond himself; and yet also the most lawful, since it is unconditionally necessary. It is a very good sign when the harmonious simpletons don't know how to take this self parody, again and again believing and distrusting it, until they go dizzy and take the jesting seriously and the solemn word for a joke."<sup>87</sup>

## Irony as instrument of individuation

Throughout the writings up to 1800, after which Schlegel almost completely stops using the concept of irony, he speaks of irony as a necessary form of writing whenever one wants to invite

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<sup>87</sup> Schlegel, "Lyceums-Fragmente," *KSA II*, 160, [108].

and challenge readers to think beyond their frameworks and to develop and take responsibility for their own positions. Schlegel even turns irony into a moral obligation of the philosopher speaking in public, when he writes in a fragment: “Sacrifice to the graces!, which means for a philosopher, create irony and cultivate civility.”<sup>88</sup> The graces, as the mythological personifications of civil duty, show that Schlegel perceives it to be a civil responsibility of the philosopher to sacrifice some of one’s own cultivation in order to help the cultivation of others, through accessibility on the one hand and irony on the other. Where accessibility demands a certain simplification and the use of examples, irony demands that what is being taught is not presented as the ultimate perspective which one has to accept, but expresses itself in a juxtaposition of different contradictory perspectives.

The function of this use of irony is to pull those to whom it is addressed into the conversation, to evoke speculation as to what perspective and intentions give rise to such juxtapositions. The addressee is supposed, not to discover the hidden message, but to reconstruct the (internal) conversation to the unconditioned, the point at which the self-positioning is supported by nothing but the individual itself, its assumptions or convictions without further ground. It is at this point that it can learn to acknowledge the individuality of the other for what it is, an individual equal to itself (although possibly more cultivated, i.e. possessing more knowledge and/or experience). Irony tries to lure one-dimensional thought into the space from which it can start to cultivate his own individuality, take a position and allow itself to develop its own internal conversation. This enables it to examine its own assumptions and convictions, in order to be able to deliberate with itself and position itself within the external conversation. Irony is the only form of communication, the only philosophical instrument that simultaneously identifies the limits of communication and opens it up for each individual as the playing field and space of cultivation. No teacher can force its students to cultivate their individuality, but only point towards it.

Two often cited characterisations of irony provide illustrations from art in the narrow sense of the word to describe the working of irony as an instrument. In them Schlegel speaks of irony as “permanent parabasis”<sup>89</sup> and “the mimetic style of an averagely capable italian buffo.”<sup>90</sup> The parabasis refers to a device from Athenian tragedies, in which the choir simultaneously remains in character (for example an army or the population of a city) and directly addresses the jury and the audience. It often comments on the play both from the character’s perspective and from the

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<sup>88</sup> Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 251, [431].

<sup>89</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 85, [668].

<sup>90</sup> Schlegel, “Lyceums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 152, [42].

outside perspective, making allusions to the writer's life or argueing why the play should be awarded with the first prize. The buffo refers to a typical role in italian operas from the 18th century, where a contrabas directly addressed the audience to make witty asides that shed a new light on the scene's unfolding on stage. Both are performances that juxtapose two contradictory perspectives, breaking the fourth wall and forcing the spectator to relate himself anew and self-consciously to the goings-on on stage.

Schlegel does not only conceptualise and characterise irony, but continually uses it to bring about a critical conversation. Although he evades asking the socratic questions for linguistic clarification, such as what is justice, he does introduce idiosyncratic use of common terminology, such as monarchy and aristocracy. On the one hand, he uses these notions to identify what is useful in their common usage (unity and particular excellence), while simultaneously juxtaposing to them a perspective contradictory to their common usage. Thus Schlegel rejects direct questions such as the existence of god, the choice between monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, or the immediate judgement on the merit of a work of art. He both points towards the underlying assumptions and convictions that make these questions seem meaningful and to the way they limit what can be said about a given topic, what problems can be posed and what elements invoked to resolve them. Only conscious of the existence of these assumptions and convictions can the decisive questions be answered: whether everyone understands these assumptions and convictions, its consequences and limitations, and whether everyone agrees on them.

So, on the one hand, irony functions as a threshold, opening individuals to the possibility to take responsibility for their convictions and deduce their own measures of progress; to create, negate and cultivate themselves. Irony provides an introduction into the actual conversation of humanity and co-determine reality through communal projects of science and politics. On the other hand, irony must also be internalised.<sup>91</sup> Irony is not a riddle that can be solved once and for all, it needs to take hold of the internal conversation of the individual and of a community. Every individual and community continuously sustains and develops implicit differences, both internally and in relation to its outside. Irony provides the way by which one can make oneself and others conscious of these incongruencies. The intentional estrangement of irony remains the only foundation of all renewal of coherence and harmony, the fertile soil for ever new perspectives, syntheses and ideas. To remain open to the perspectives others might bring or

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<sup>91</sup> Schlegel, *KSA XVIII*, 203, [76].

ideas that may be fruitful for new problems, one needs to remain conscious of the fact that all coherence and harmony is preliminary.<sup>92</sup>

Schlegel ultimately accuses his contemporaries for trying to neglect this difficulty both in educating others and in developing an open and free philosophical discourse. They often seem to let go of irony too early, suggesting to have reached something akin to absolute clarity or calculated some insurmountable limit. For Schlegel education and philosophical discourse are not merely about conveying knowledge, but also about stimulating contradictions and conversations. It is for the latter that irony is indispensable. Referring to Heraclitus,<sup>93</sup> one of his favorite mystics, he states in the *Athenaeum Fragments*: “However, Apollo, who neither keeps to himself, nor speaks out, but signs, is no longer worshipped and wherever a muse shows itself people immediately want to interrogate its protocol.”<sup>94</sup> The same point is one of the core claims defended in *On Incomprehensibility*: that the project of the enlightenment, of bringing absolute clarity to the world, also carries within itself a self-destructive threat, that it might attempt to subvert the creativity that has given rise to it in the attempt of too hastily subduing it to reason. Schlegel describes this threat as: “losing that power [of creation] in the same instance that one tries to resolve it into comprehensibility. Truly, you would fear it if the whole world, as you demand, would once seriously be completely comprehensible. And is this infinite world not itself cultivated through comprehension out of chaos?”<sup>95</sup> The unconditioned and the individual positioning that it necessitates, cannot be stated in such clarity and demanding clarity, thereby, inevitably excludes the unconditioned and the responsibility for the individual to position himself. It demands developing a sense for the meaning [*Sinn*] of a unity that (as of yet) still exceeds one’s limits, it is not ‘the unknowable’ per se, but rather the consciousness of and sensitivity for the meaning of what for now remains unknown. This is what stimulates cultivation and makes the individual and communal life worthwhile.

Irony, then, is a celebration of this ‘as of yet unknown’, through which individuals objectively acknowledge and embrace the differences between individuals. Not, however, to merely coexist, but to engender a willingness to understand one another and engage in a friendly, free and if necessary fierce polemic in order to continually develop each other’s scientific, political and

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<sup>92</sup> Schlegel, “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” *KSA II*, 367.

<sup>93</sup> “The lord, that resides in Delphi, does not speak out [legei] or hide [kruptei], but signifies/signs [semainei].”

Mansfeld, “Heraklit,” *Vorsokratiker*, 253, [26].

<sup>94</sup> Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente,” *KSA II*, 221, [325].

<sup>95</sup> Schlegel, “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” *KSA II*, 370.

religious perspectives and lives in search for harmony. Yet, irony only remains a beginning, the fertile ground, on which processes of individual cultivation and communal exchange can grow.

## Conclusion

Inspired by the creative intellectual atmosphere among him and his friends, Schlegel sought to redefine the outlook of the philosophy of his age, to demand a new art, a new politics and a new science which all interacted through the communication between inquisitive and broadly interested individuals. And, lo and behold, it did not become manifest reality. Nonetheless, many of his ideas and suggested transformations have established themselves in contemporary philosophy or can be seen as prefiguring contemporary ideas. This is especially clear in topics, such as, the search for a new aesthetics and the subsequent reconsideration of the form of philosophy, the rejection of cartesian foundational philosophy and representational theory of language, the meaning of the historicity of knowledge, the interdisciplinary development of science and popularisation of scientific culture, and the questions about the meaning of human individuality in a more and more individualised world.

Furthermore, Schlegel's aesthetic retains its relevance, because contemporary societies have still not been able to adequately address the ideals of the French Revolution and its promise of liberty, equality and fraternity of all of humanity. Instead, it has only become clearer that the organisation of contemporary societies is heading for economic and ecological disintegration, which only deepens the inequality and further polarises humanity. A continual effort of individuals to intervene in that organisation in order to achieve the progressive aesthetic transformation that Schlegel was searching for is of undiminished importance. His works provide an understanding of individuality that does not let the individual simply adhere to, vote on or work for some ideal or its official representation, but that demands of the individual to position himself and be involved in the giving form of both himself and the knowledge and organisation of the community he takes part in. Both the triad of cultivation and irony are means of demanding individuals to develop their own convictions and ideals by not merely looking at the present, but also looking at what is different, such as historically and geographically distant examples. Such ideals and convictions will at the same time be fictional and unattainable, unique to the one who has them, but also concrete and meaningful to others, since they are derived from realities. In such a community it is the parallel growth of all individuals, rather than a technical invention of organisational model, that ennobles humanity as a whole and produces answers to the crises it faces.

A new reading of Schlegel might also make up for the lack of progressive conceptualisations of community in much of 20th century philosophy, caught between conservative notions of community predetermined by some inherent trait on the one hand and raging individualism of market capitalism on the other. As a philosopher he does not presuppose a common ground, founded on some shared trait between people, nor deny the possibility of a common ground altogether, but believes it to be in the capacity of individuals to form and when necessary reform it within relationships of understanding. Beyond dogmatic fanaticism and defeatist cynicism, he envisions the self-positioning and involving oneself in the formation of community itself as the basis of the community.

There is, therefore, more than enough reason to return to Schlegel's work and understand the social and political engagement and the progressive ideals of the romantic project in their own time, as this article has tried to do. Schlegel's ideas offer no simple solutions or quick fixes, but productively alienate us from the frameworks that support the status quo in order to question and redefine them. His own interventions create the space to respond to the complexity of contemporary society, not by joining an existing narrative, but to learn for oneself and experiment in a shared search for truth, community and individuality. Schlegel's writings demand every reader to not only be interested in Schlegel's significance for the history of philosophy, but also in themselves and their individuality, to understand their own time from their experiences and historical examples, to cultivate their own individuality.

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