

Friedrich Schlegel and the Character of Romantic Ethics

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Abstract Recent years have witnessed a rehabilitation of early German Romanticism in philosophy, including a renewed interest in Romantic ethics. Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) is acknowledged as a key figure in this movement. While significant work has been done on some aspects of his thought, his views on ethics have been surprisingly overlooked. This essay aims to redress this shortcoming in the literature by examining the core themes of Schlegel’s ethics during the early phase of his career (1793–1801). I argue that Schlegel’s position stands out against both the dominant Kantianism of his era, as well as against some of fellow Romantics. I show how Schlegel anticipates contemporary philosophers such as Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, John McDowell, and Stanley Cavell in both his criticisms of traditional moral theory and in his attempts to develop a positive position.

Keywords Stanley Cavell · Ethics · Harry Frankfurt · Immanuel Kant · John McDowell · German Romanticism · Friedrich Schlegel · Bernard Williams

Recent years have witnessed a rehabilitation of early German Romanticism in philosophy. Scholars from a variety of distinct perspectives have been busily dismantling timeworn stereotypes of Romanticism, including the common assumption that Romanticism is a purely “literary” rather than strictly philosophical phenomenon, and that the hallmark of Romanticism is escapist nostalgia or enervated otherworldliness. Manfred Frank and Frederick C. Beiser, despite important divergences in their interpretations, have played a central role in this welcome

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intellectual development.¹ Both emphasize the central role of Schlegel (1772–1829) in the formation of the early Romantic circle. Indeed, the short-lived periodical *Athenäum* (1798–1800), edited by Friedrich and his elder brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, publicized the core ideas of the movement through pieces by both brothers as well as by other luminaries such as F. D. E. Schleiermacher and Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis). The very appellation “Romantic” was most likely first applied to this group and its ideas by Friedrich Schlegel.²

Various aspects of Schlegel’s thought have been given careful attention within the context of this wider reassessment of Romanticism. In particular, Schlegel’s metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, views on mythology, and political theory have received lengthy examinations.³ Considerably less work has been done exploring his moral philosophy. This is not to say that the contributions of Romanticism more generally to this domain have been overlooked. On the contrary, Romanticism has been explored as both an alternative to and a rich expression of some of the main principles of modern moral theory.⁴ On a more particular level, Friedrich Schlegel’s erstwhile friend and collaborator, Schleiermacher, has been recognized as a moral theorist of importance and originality.⁵ Schleiermacher’s criticisms of Kantian moral philosophy are widely regarded as incisive and path-breaking. Scholars have recognized the degree to which Schlegel encouraged Schleiermacher in this respect, even going to far as to plan a joint critique of moral philosophy *tout court*.⁶

With respect to moral philosophy, however, Schlegel ought not to be viewed as simply standing in the shadow of Schleiermacher. Moreover, Schlegel’s contributions in this domain depart in important ways from the common store of ideas associated with Romantic moral theory. In particular, Schlegel’s thought does not fit neatly into the Romantic mold presented by Richard Eldridge in his recent monograph on Romanticism and ethics. On Eldridge’s reading, the Romantic position (typified in this case by Hölderlin) includes two characteristic moments: (1) a whole-hearted acceptance of a Kantian conception of practical rationality,

¹ Beiser (2004), Frank (1997). The essays collected in Kompridis (2006) include valuable historical studies as well as a number of interesting efforts to develop Romantic themes in contemporary philosophy.

² Schlegel’s works are cited parenthetically in the body of the paper using the following abbreviation: *KA Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, Behler (1958).

Individual volume numbers are indicated with Roman numerals. Letters are cited according to their numbering in this edition. Individual fragments are indicated with a §.

³ On metaphysics, see Beiser (2002); on epistemology, see Frank (1997) and Millan-Zaibert (2007); on aesthetics, see Bowie (1996, 2003); on mythology, see Frank (1982) and G. Williams (2004); on political theory, see Beiser (1992). For an excellent overview of Schlegel’s conception of philosophy, with particular focus on his critical reception of Fichte, see Frischmann (2006).

⁴ See, for example, Larmore (1996); Taylor (1991); and Eldridge (2001). Cavell (1994) has explored Romanticism in some depth, though primarily in what he calls its “American mode,” i.e. transcendentalism.

⁵ Sockness (2003) offers the most noteworthy recent reconstruction and defense of Schleiermacher’s ethics.

⁶ Wallhauser (1989).

according to which moral reasons are reasons that swing free of contingent features of individuals and so could be accepted by anyone; and (2) the recognition that, while this kind of rationality is inescapable for agents like us it is coupled with an insistence that our lives be our own in some important sense. The result, according to Eldridge, are the characteristically Romantic tropes of longing, infinite striving, and a fascination with tragedy.⁷ As I will show in what follows, Schlegel does not share this unhesitant endorsement of Kantianism. Instead, Schlegel thinks that what most importantly characterizes agents like us is the capacity to form and pursue ideals that are irreducibly individual and pluralistic. In this respect, Schlegel comes closer to Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism than to Kantianism. Schlegel's views also anticipate important recent criticisms of dominant strains of moral theory. In particular, Schlegel seems to share John McDowell's insistence on the non-codifiability of morality and Bernard Williams' concerns about the ways in which some moral theories violate agents' integrity.

My aim in this paper is to explore the most important aspects of Schlegel's moral philosophy during what is arguably the most productive and original period of his career, beginning with his studies in Leipzig and culminating with his lectures on transcendental idealism in Jena (1791–1801). Naturally, an article of this size cannot possibly treat every aspect of Schlegel's thought, even within the confines of this relatively circumscribed period of his career. For example, many aspects of his aesthetics, as well as his anti-foundationalism (vis-à-vis Reinhold and Fichte) will not be touched on here in any depth. Fortunately, much of this material has been treated with skill by other commentators. Another important point to bear in mind is that Schlegel underwent rapid intellectual development during this period, shifting from an earlier classicism to Romanticism. In my discussion, I largely avoid scholarly controversy about the precise periodization of Schlegel's thought. Instead, I will explore three phases, none of which are rigidly defined, and all of which overlap in various important ways. Following an introductory discussion establishing the importance of moral philosophy in Schlegel's overall endeavor, as well as the precise nature of his criticisms of dominant forms of it (ca. 1790), I will turn to the earliest phase (1791–1796), characterized above all by a combination of classicism and moral exemplarism. The next phase (roughly 1796–1798) coincides roughly with Schlegel's first residence in Berlin and his contributions to the *Lyceum der schönen Künste*, as well as the early numbers of the *Athenäum*. The primary features of this phase include (1) individualism, (2) the development of the literary form of a "characteristic," and (3) an emphasis on literature in general as a vehicle of moral formation. Here, of course, some words about Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* will be in order. The final phase (1798–1801) coincides roughly with Schlegel's close association with Schleiermacher, with the publication of *Ideen*, and with the lectures on transcendental philosophy. This phase is marked by a reworking of the Kantian conception of an "ideal" and the introduction of a new concept of "religion," inspired above all by Lessing, as a replacement for the sorts of moral theory that Schlegel rejects.

⁷ Eldridge (2001).

The Place of Moral Philosophy in Schlegel's Thought

In the spring and summer of 1798, as the *Athenäum* project was fully underway, Schlegel began to outline plans for a far-reaching criticism and re-thinking of morality. In two letters to his brother August Wilhelm from February and March 1798, Friedrich discusses plans to publish material from his notebooks on morality, including an identifiable group of fragments entitled “moral sketches” (Number 51, KA XXIV, p. 88; Number 59, KA XXIV, p. 117). His interest in the subject seems to have been piqued by an address by Schleiermacher to the famous “Wednesday Society” in Berlin on the “immorality of morality [*Immoralität der Moral*]” (Number 24, October 1797, KA XXIV, p. 28). Indeed, Schlegel was working closely with Schleiermacher in the ensuing months in developing an extensive criticism of Kantian moral philosophy in particular. He alludes to this project in his correspondence throughout the summer of 1798 (Number 69, to Novalis, May 28, 1798, KA XXIV, p. 134; Number 80, to Schleiermacher, July 1798, KA XXIV, p. 147; Number 89, to Schleiermacher, Aug. 9, 1798, KA XXIV, p. 158; and Number 91, to Schleiermacher, August 1798, KA XXIV, p. 161). For his part, Schlegel tells Schleiermacher that morality is now his “master” in July 1798 (Number 81, KA XXIV, p. 148).

However, Schlegel's interests in moral philosophy in general, and in Kantian moral philosophy in particular, date from before this period of intensive engagement. In a letter from April 3, 1793, he confesses to his brother (who was funding his law studies in Leipzig) that he has been neglecting law for, among other things, “morality” and “Kantian philosophy” (Number 38, KA XXIII, p. 88). During this same period, Schlegel first made the acquaintance of Novalis, another key player in the early Romantic movement. In a letter of July 3, 1793, he alludes to a conversation between the two about “ethics [*Sittlichkeit*] and its relation to Kant's theory” (Number 49, KA XXIII, p. 107). A month or so later, he discusses his own (unrealized) plans for contributing to a leading Kantian “moral weekly,” edited by C. C. E. Schmid (Number 53, KA XXIII, p. 118).

The roots of Schlegel's interests in moral philosophy, however, date from even earlier than his friendship with Novalis. Beginning in 1791, his letters, especially to his brother, are filled with allusions to contemporary developments in moral philosophy as well as nascent criticisms of the same. These criticisms are particularly important in that they signal Schlegel's growing discomfort with moral philosophy as currently practiced, and so explain the motives behind his own efforts to develop a new perspective. As will become clear below, these dissatisfactions ultimately issue in Schlegel's abandonment of the term “morality” altogether, preferring instead to discuss “religion” as a program of self-culture. In this early phase, however, three basic points can discerned. First, Schlegel is dissatisfied with the abstractness of various moral ideals as well as with the generality and remoteness of the sorts of ends that are taken to be valuable. Second, Schlegel expresses concerns about what might be called the underdetermination of practice by theory in morality. Finally, Schlegel ridicules attempts to treat morality “mathematically,” i.e., by relying on the derivation of universal rules.

By the “remoteness” of moral ideals I mean their distance from actual human beings, from their real motivations and characteristic ends. One way to state this

concern is that Schlegel sees something inhuman about moral theory, in that it posits goals that do not reflect our psychology. The remoteness of commonly held moral ends shows up in a letter of July 21, 1791, where Friedrich tells his brother that a morally perfect person is as unlikely to be found in reality as a perfectly spherical body, and that true “genius” is not equivalent to “infallibility [*Fehlerlosigkeit*]” (Number 7, *KA XXIII*, pp. 13–14). A short time later, he makes a similar point, arguing that “Morality furnishes only ideals the intuition of which is impossible, and which can only be considered *in abstracto*” (Number 8, August 26, 1791, *KA XXIII*, p. 22). The force of these worries becomes more apparent later, in a letter of November 1793 to August Wilhelm. Here, Friedrich concurs with F. H. Jacobi that “If this drive [i.e., for clear concepts in moral philosophy] is unnaturally strong, it results in heartless rationalists with no character [*herz- und marklose Vernünftler*]; a countless heap of our Enlighteners, etc. in our country could serve as examples” (Number 78, *KA XXIII*, p. 158). Schlegel’s worry about typical moral ideals is that they are detached from the real motivational structures of actual agents. Pursuing these ideals (which remain anonymous at this stage) requires giving up central aspects of our humanity. Schlegel’s concern with an “unnaturally strong” urge for conceptual clarity suggests that what we are forced to give up in this instance includes what might be called the non-rational, appetitive, sensitive, and conative dimensions of our personalities. The reference to Jacobi here is significant, for Schlegel is elsewhere quite critical of Jacobi’s “hatred” of reason. For Schlegel, Jacobi errs in the same way that the “heartless rationalists” do; that is (again, according to Schlegel) both Jacobi and the rationalists excise some crucial part of our nature.

Some of Schlegel’s other objections to moral theory as commonly done surface in this letter. “Moral greatness,” he maintains, is a quality that perennially outstrips concepts and “theories [*Lehre*],” for “one can only teach someone who is already familiar with it about virtue” (*KA XXIII*, p. 158). Schlegel’s worry here is in the neighborhood of John McDowell’s more recent concerns with rule-based moral theory. McDowell argues that morality is not codifiable, that particular circumstances outrun moral decision procedures.⁸ As a result, McDowell proposes a revival of an Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom. In place of an unwieldy and largely unhelpful code, McDowell suggests the development of a faculty of judgment that amounts to an ability to “see,” as it were, what is morally called for by a particular situation. That Schlegel shares something close to these sentiments is evident from the passage quoted above. There is no algorithm for morality that one can simply adopt; instead, one must already possess the faculty required for the exercise of sound judgment.

A related concern on Schlegel’s part is also found in this important 1793 letter. Immediately after the passages above about the teachability of virtue, Schlegel suggests that virtue is an absolute concept, i.e., one with no magnitude, no more or less:

Greatness is really only a very indefinite designation for excellence of every kind; there is no comparison or common measure of it, as with the ranks

⁸ See McDowell (1979). Moral particularists share some of the same concerns about attempts to derive a moral code. See, for example, Dancy (2004).

[*Größe*] according to which grenadiers are evaluated in Prussia. Innocence, love, pure conscience, justice; these are something absolute and admit of no degrees [...]. The degree of courage, of understanding, of life cannot be thoroughly measured, for there is no common measure; and thus all application of mathematics to morality is a vain attempt (KA XXIII, pp. 158–159).

There are some puzzles about Schlegel's view in this passage, to be sure. The so-called "absolute" nature of moral qualities seems to suggest the sort of rigid moralism that Schlegel is otherwise concerned to combat. Be that as it may, the point seems to be that morality cannot be formally codified into a straightforward ranking system, like that of Prussian civil service. Here, the problem is not so much that theory underdetermines practice, but that the nature of evaluative concepts somehow eludes formalization. As he puts it a bit further on, "we cannot reach infallibility though a method" (XXIII, p. 159). If there is no more or less to virtue, then it is not attainable by degree. Schlegel seems to think that this implies that there is no procedure, no formal process of practical reason of any kind, that can lead a person securely to "moral greatness." Perhaps this thought underlies Schlegel's remark, in a 1797 fragment, that "It is much more necessary to protect ethics against philosophy than against poetry; the former wants to degrade [*verdrängen*] it and play the despot; the latter merely despises it" (§ 697, KA XVIII, p. 87). At any rate, his worries about a formal approach to morality continue beyond the 1793 letter quoted at length above. In one of the fragments published in June 1798 in *Athenäum*, he once again refers to "the impossible moral mathematics and science of the fitting that so many philosophers have sought in vain" (§ 89, KA II, p. 178).

One difficulty with the texts discussed so far is that their target is somewhat indefinite. Which moral theories, which "heartless rationalists," is Schlegel attacking? While this is probably not true of all the comments presented above, it is reasonable to suppose that many of these concerns are directed against Kantianism (if not against Immanuel Kant himself). As mentioned previously, Schlegel enthusiastically received Schleiermacher's criticisms of Kant's ethics beginning in the winter of 1797. However, his interest in Kant begins much earlier. By his own account, Schlegel had been studying Kant's philosophy since 1789.⁹ The earliest explicit reference to Kant that I have discovered, which indeed shows some familiarity with central concepts of the critical philosophy, is found in a letter to August Wilhelm of October 16, 1793 (Number 69, KA XXIII, p. 140).¹⁰ A few years later, also in a letter to August Wilhelm, in the course of discussing various projects of a broadly moral and political nature, Friedrich mentions his plans to write a "supplement, correction, and completion of Kant's philosophy" (Number

⁹ In a letter of April 7, 1797, to the publisher Cotta, Schlegel describes his plans for a "*historical characteristic* of the Kantian spirit," ensuring him that he has "already studied Kantian philosophy for 8 years" (Number 192, KA XXIII, p. 356).

¹⁰ Schlegel tells his brother that "Kant's theory was the first of which I understood something, and it is the only one [*einzig*] from which I still hope to learn a great deal. Yet I do not agree with what is nonetheless fundamental to it, intelligible freedom, the regulative use of ideas in general, pure lawfulness as the driving force of the will, etc." (KA XXIII, pp. 140–141).

111, January 20, 1795, *KA XXIII*, p. 226). In the summer of 1795, Schlegel writes that he is planning to set aside his massive study of Greek culture for “an old plan ... the criticism of Kant’s philosophy” (Number 119, July 31, 1795, *KA XXIII*, p. 242). Writing to Novalis on March 10, 1797, Schlegel alludes to some material from his notebooks, including a planned “lengthy characteristic of Kant for Germany” (Number 187, *KA XXIII*, p. 350). In the fall of the same year, he mentions plans for a review of Kant’s *Kleine Schriften*, including many of his popular essays on politics, history, and morality (Number 11, to August Wilhelm, September 19, 1797, *KA XXIV*, p. 18).

Whether or not 1789 is a correct date for the beginning of Schlegel’s study of Kant, it is beyond doubt that he was deeply interested in Kant’s philosophy in general, and his moral philosophy in particular, throughout the fertile decade of the 1790s. There is, then, some reason to suppose that many of the criticisms of moral philosophy described above are aimed at Kant. Fortunately, one is not forced to rely entirely on conjectural reconstruction in this respect. There is no lack of criticisms pointed directly and explicitly at Kant from Schlegel’s published and unpublished writings during this period. In at least one case, i.e., the claim that practice is underdetermined by theory, the anonymous criticisms overlap with those that are clearly meant for Kant. In a collection of unpublished fragments dating from 1798, Schlegel remarks that “In critical [i.e., Kantian] morality there remains an eternal gap between theory and practice, as well as irresolvable knots [...]” (§ 41, *KA XVIII*, p. 200).¹¹ To be fair, this is a “gap” that did not go unnoticed by Kant himself, who addresses himself to the question of how pure principles of practical reason can become “subjective” at some length in the final part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Schlegel, evidently, was unimpressed.

Many of Schlegel’s explicit criticisms of Kant are ill-defined, but their tone clearly suggests a highly critical attitude. For example, in a series of unpublished fragments titled “The Form of Kant’s Philosophy,” Schlegel writes that “On account of his vanity and formality, Kant must base morality upon such wretched academic authority [*Kathederrherrschaft*] and feels himself very fortunate in this respect, supposing that he possesses such objectivity” (§ 398, *KA XVIII*, p. 59). Or again, in a remark published in the *Lyceum der schönen Künste*, he observes that “Maxims, ideals, imperatives and postulates have now been for some time the common currency in ethics” (§ 77, *KA II*, p. 156). The former remark calls to mind a more common worry about Kant’s legendary (and no doubt apocryphal) Prussian rigorism. The latter seems to imply that Kantianism (again, perhaps Kant himself is exempt from this) brings about a sort of debasement of moral discourse, or at least that it has done so.

¹¹ A fragment from 1797–1798 seems to echo Schlegel’s anonymous concern, expressed so clearly in the 1793 letter to August Wilhelm discussed at length above, with the search for a formal principle of practical deliberation or a decision algorithm for virtue. It begins with the comment that “Kant is a geometer, and what’s more, an algebraist in morality” (§ 398, *KA XVIII*, p. 59). However, the thrust of the fragment seems to be a criticism of Kant’s philosophical style, rather than of the content of his moral theory. Schlegel continues: “Even *Voltaire* merely *affected* him; he did not *study* [*Voltaire*] in the way that *Fichte* did *Rousseau*, in order to make [*Rousseau*’s] form is own. He is missing ease—flexibility, elegance in philosophy.”

Other criticisms are much clearer and more pointed. Commenting on Schleiermacher's own planned critique of Kant, Schlegel argues that a proper moral theory can only be based on "a construction and constitution of the whole, complete humanity" (Number 80, July 1798, *KA XXIV*, p. 147). The import of this comment is more clear in a fragment from the "Form of Kant's Philosophy," where he remarks that "In practice, [Kant] still denies the human being a place in the center, and sets him against himself in a state of siege" (§ 435, *KA XVIII*, p. 200). The implication of the first of these comments is that Kant does something less than found a theory on the "whole, complete humanity." This echoes Schlegel's above-mentioned invocation of F. H. Jacobi, according to which the fatal flaw of most philosophers is a narrow fixation on reason as the only important element of human nature. It also recalls Schiller's attempts to challenge Kant's dualism of reason and inclination and to champion an ideal of "grace" or moral beauty. This dualism also seems to be behind the second comment, which envisions the Kantian agent as irreparably divided against herself or at war with herself.

One reason for this is surely because, by Schlegel's lights anyway, Kant makes duty, or acting on principle, the sole relevant factor in moral deliberation. For example, in an early group of fragments from 1796 to 1797, Schlegel writes that "Kant is a hyper-moralist who sacrifices truth for *duty*" (§ 12, *KA XVIII*, p. 20). In the first group of fragments published in 1798 in *Athenäum*, Schlegel observes that "Duty is Kant's one and all. He says that we must defend and honor our elders from a duty of gratitude; and he himself has only become a great man out of duty" (§ 10, *KA II*, p. 166). To say that duty is a person's "one and all" is to say that one makes no room for other concerns that give a life purpose and import *for the people who are leading them*. Of course, both Kant himself and various contemporary Kantian ethicists have various ways of deflating this charge of narrowness. Nevertheless, like most of his contemporaries, Schlegel is quite struck by the centrality of duty in Kant's picture of practical deliberation, and it is this that he is trying to problematize. Schlegel's examples, in the remarks from *Athenäum*, are meant to drive home this point. In both cases, the word "duty" sounds like a redundancy. In the first instance, one may care for one's elders out of gratitude *simpliciter*; in the second, the notion that there is a duty to achieve greatness seems off the mark, in that duty evokes something more like a moral minimum than a gratuitous effluence of genius. This general worry with Kant's moral theory is expressed much more forcefully in *Ideen*, a collection of fragments completed in about August 1799 and published at the beginning of the following year. Schlegel writes that "The duty of the Kantian is related to the precept of honor, to the voice of vocation and the divinity within us, like the dry plant to the fresh flower on the living stem" (§ 39, *KA II*, p. 259). In other words, by making duty the most important consideration in life, Kant seems to sever our connections with the deeper motives that allow us to flourish and realize our potential more fully.

Throughout the 1790s, then, Schlegel develops several identifiable lines of criticism against dominant moral theories, with Kant's coming in for particular scrutiny. Unsurprisingly for someone influenced by Schiller and steeped in Greek and Roman classics, Schlegel unfavorably contrasts the flexible, non-codifiable virtue of the morally great with the narrow, calculating deliberation of the modern.

Indeed, he seems willing to reject the whole notion of a method of practical reasoning. Schlegel also sharply attacks the abstractness and remoteness of concerns, such as duty, that occupy center stage in modern moral theories. For Schlegel, such theories pit a person against herself in a virtual “state of siege.” Even worse, they substitute narrow principles for the rich texture of concerns and ideals that give people a real stake in their lives. Impelled by these dissatisfactions, Schlegel began to work out an alternative approach to morality from the very beginning of his intellectual career.

Phase One (1791–1796): Classicism and Exemplarism

As I have shown above, one of Schlegel’s principal worries about morality from early on concerned the abstractness and remoteness of the ends commonly regarded as morally worthwhile. As a way of overcoming this feature of moral philosophy, Schlegel begins to develop an exemplarist approach to value. That is, rather than postulating impossible ideals of “infallibility,” of abstract virtue, he begins to look for depictions of valuable ways of life in the lives of actual historical individuals. This move develops alongside of Schlegel’s well-known fascination with classical antiquity. The earliest pointers to this attempt to resolve the shortcomings of moral theory are found within the context of Schlegel’s project of a study of Greek and Roman culture [*Bildung*], which, though ultimately unfinished, bore fruit in his first major publication, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, published in 1797, and in a later installment, *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer*, which was not finished until 1798.

In a letter of July 21, 1791, he describes to August Wilhelm his plan for a study of the history of Rome. The key to understanding the “greatness” of a particular nation, he suggests, is to study the influence of individuals who demonstrate “paradigmatic excellence [*Vortrefflichkeit in Vorbild*],” in this case, Caesar, Cato, and Catiline (Number 7, KA XXIII, p. 16). A few weeks later, he again discusses his intention of composing a study that will amount to a “work of art” rather than a dry academic treatise, the aim of which is to depict the “individual [*eigenthümliche*] character of this nation [i.e., Rome]” in one of its “heroes” (Number 8, to August Wilhelm, August 16, 1791, KA XXIII, p. 20). The basic idea is “to provide the character of a nation in the highest perfection, to the extent that this can be presented *in concreto*, in order to lead the spirit ever higher through the consideration of the most diverse perfections” (KA XXIII, pp. 20–21). The key phrase in this passage is “*in concreto*.” I have already described Schlegel’s concern with the abstractness of the sorts of “perfection” articulated in various moral theories, particularly Kant’s. By presenting the lives of great individuals who somehow encapsulate the distinctive excellence of a particular nation or period of history, Schlegel hopes not merely to inform the understanding but rather to elevate the spirit. This is clear from his choice of models, namely studies of the Roman Republic by Montesquieu and Ferguson. Montesquieu’s *Consideration of the Grandeur of the Romans and the Cause of Their Decline* (1734) seeks to challenge a fatalistic view of history, in part by highlighting the role played by significant

personalities in the fortunes of a nation. Ferguson's *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1785) combines historical and sociological analysis with moral instruction. The idea implicit in all of this is that we can learn a great deal more about morality from studying history and the lives of individuals than from impossibly abstract ideals of perfection.

Schlegel therefore envisions a massive study of Greek and Roman culture, aimed at presenting valuable ways of life. He describes his primary concern as achieving "definite knowledge of the *spirit* of the Greeks," by which he means "the history of the ethical men among them" (Number 96, to AW, April 5, 1794, KA XXIII, p. 188). Indeed, during his time in Dresden (1794–1796), he repeatedly references his plans to study Greek moral philosophy in detail. For example, he tells his brother on May 9, 1794 of plans to lecture on the "practical philosophy" of the Greeks from Socrates to Carneades (Number 100, KA XXIII, p. 195). Writing to Novalis in July of the same year, he discusses plans for a "history of Greek morality, especially from Socrates on," alongside a "system of Greek politics (history and spirit of the state and constitutions, political philosophy)" (Number 105, July 1794, KA XXIII, p. 204).

The character of Schlegel's classicist exemplarism during this phase is apparent from two of his essays, the published "Über die Grenzen des Schönen," which appeared in *Der neue Teutsche Merkur* in May 1795, and the unpublished "Vom Wert des Studiums der Griechen und Römer," which Schlegel apparently hoped to submit to Schiller's *Die Horen*. In introductory remarks to "Über die Grenzen," Schlegel makes clear the purpose of his study of classical art. The "Greek idea of beauty" is the harmony of nature, love, and artistic production (KA I, p. 34). Or, to put it a slightly different way, beauty is not to be separated from truth and goodness, where goodness means "ordered love." Indeed, love is the key to achieving the harmony of art and nature on Schlegel's view. As will be examined more fully below, love becomes a central feature of Schlegel's effort to re-think moral philosophy in the later 1790s. The important point at present is that this harmony is not an "external" or artificial unity, but rather the "inner unity of the soul." The implication of this, as Schlegel sees it anyway, is that "order and proportion in this sense are not limited only to art, but rather are the ordering spirit that guides and determines all culture [*Bildung*], consciously or unconsciously, and is itself its essence" (KA I, p. 34). In other words, Greek art is viewed as an exemplification or depiction of moral perfection. This applies not only to art, however, but to Greek culture [*Bildung*] as a whole (KA I, p. 35). The harmony exhibited by the Greeks, who were "human beings in a higher style," contrasts with the "fragmentation" and "petty confusion" of Schlegel's German contemporaries (KA I, p. 35). The Greeks, as well as the Romans, were not, however, without their peculiar excesses. Thus, Schlegel concludes his rather rhapsodic essay by asserting that "*measure* [*Maß*] is the pinnacle of the art of life" (KA I, p. 44).

The principal thrust of this essay is that moral goodness is a sort of harmony, proportion, or due measure between human faculties, between human beings, and between human beings and nature. As will be seen below, Schlegel regards ideals as playing a crucial function in achieving this sort of unification. Art is particularly valuable in this context in that it provides a concrete, focused representation of this

sort of moral goodness. At the same time, the *study* of ancient culture as a whole, not just the art of antiquity, serves the purposes of moral formation by providing one with real, concrete images of the elusive quality that Schlegel typically calls “greatness.” This idea is much more explicit in “Vom Wert des Studiums.” In his opening discussion, Schlegel writes:

Here [i.e., in the study of ancient culture] appears the best refuge against the temptation and depressions of the age: here appears what is necessary to humanity as a whole and individually in every age, shining in the most beautiful purity and in the highest perfection, and there are neither few nor insignificant voices for whom studying the Greeks and Romans means nothing but dedicating one’s life to beauty, humanity, and *greatness* (KA I, p. 623).

Schlegel’s central claim is that “[The history of the Greeks and Romans] is the commentary of philosophy, the eternal codex of the human mind, a *natural history of moral and spiritual man*” (KA I, p. 637). As such, the study of antiquity is meant as a corrective to the abstractness of moral theory. Rather than to pure concepts, Schlegel suggests that we look to the lives of the great personages of antiquity, to depictions of ideals in art and literature, and to the course of Greek and Roman history in order to fashion our lives according to their examples.

Phase Two (1796–1798): Individuality and the Tools of Self-Formation

An important impulse at work in Schlegel’s studies of classical culture is insistence on the value of individuality and his rejection of attempts to exclude individual motives and concerns from the domain of moral deliberation. He takes the lives of historically significant individuals to be clues to investigating the entire culture of the nation to which they belonged. The lives of these individuals represent moral perfection *in concreto*. As Beiser and others have pointed out, an important feature of early German Romantic moral thought is an emphasis on the importance of individuality. For Schleiermacher, for example, this is something that is lost sight of in Kantian moral theory, which tends to abstract away from the particular concerns and motivations of actual individuals in order to achieve an impartial deliberative perspective. Scattered comments from Schlegel’s writings during the period of his closest association with Schleiermacher indicate that he shares these concerns. For example, he writes that “Precisely *individuality* is the eternal in a human being and only this can be immortal. Not much depends on personality. The opposite and generally valid manner of thought esteems the office more than the human being” (§ 146, KA XVIII, p. 134).¹² Given the intellectual context of this remark, “personality” here should probably be read in the technical Kantian sense of “rational nature,” a general feature of agency that anchors moral considerations. Kant famously holds that rational nature *as such* is an end in itself. Schlegel individualizes this claim in a collection of fragments entitled “Zur Religion,” dating

¹² This comment interestingly anticipates Bernard Williams’ emphasis on the importance of individual projects in giving worth and significance to individuals’ lives. Williams (1973a) makes this point, and elsewhere.

probably from 1799, where he observes that “Every spirit [*Geist*] has its value; the two are inseparable” (§ 1117, *KA XVIII*, p. 289). In other words, it is precisely in one’s uniqueness, one’s irreducible *haecceity* (with apologies to Scotus), rather than in one’s membership in a class, that one has moral dignity.

For Schlegel, as for other Romantics, individuality is not simply a *fact* about human beings that is unfortunately suppressed or shunted aside by Kantian moral philosophy (though it is at least that). Instead, individuality is also, and perhaps more importantly, an *achievement*, a *virtue*, something to be striven for and valued as an attainment.¹³ The structure of individuality in this sense involves several elements: harmony or integration, a sort of self-awareness, and what might be called internal richness or “many-sidedness [*Vielseitigkeit*].” This ideal is best thought of as a Romantic successor to earlier eighteenth-century conceptions of the “beautiful soul.” Indeed, Schiller’s championing of this ideal over against what he saw as the “monkish” narrowness of Kantianism was an inspiration to many of the early Romantics, Schlegel included.

Traces of this *normative* sense of individuality can be found as early as 1791, in Schlegel’s correspondence. Attempting to comfort his brother, who was toiling as a private tutor in the Netherlands, Schlegel writes:

[These events] really should only have strengthened and perfected the enthusiasm in your soul, the object of which, as among the more manly ancients, could be the will and the thought of your own *better* self; this is not egoism, but rather it means being one’s own God (Number 7, July 21, 1791; *KA XXIII*, p. 13).

Schlegel’s basic idea in these remarks is that the circumstances of life should be taken as occasions for self-integration and for renewed commitment to one’s personal ideal. Importantly, this ideal is called one’s “better self,” suggesting that Schlegel is talking about an individual commitment, not a generic principle. To say that one should be one’s *own* God just means that one’s picture of one’s better self should be emphatically *one’s own*. Importantly, this way of putting the claim links these early comments with some of Schlegel’s thoughts from the later 1790s. In a 1797 fragment, he asserts that “The highest virtue is to strive for one’s own individuality as one’s ultimate end,” calling this ideal “divine egoism” (§ 147, *KA XVIII*, p. 134). In *Ideen* (1799–1800), he publishes a revised version of the comment cited above regarding the value of individuality over abstract personality: “Precisely individuality is the original and eternal in human beings. Personality is not so important. To pursue the cultivation [*Bildung*] and development of this individuality as the highest calling would be a divine egoism” (§ 60, *KA II*, p. 262). Comments such as these make it clear that individuality is not simply a fact, but rather an ideal, a moral imperative, something admirable and worth striving for. This is also clear in another comment from a 1799 collection of fragments, that

¹³ In this respect, the Romantic ideal of individuality is much closer to Harry Frankfurt’s notion of “wholeheartedness,” which is clearly meant to be a sort of virtue or valuable trait of certain individuals, than to Williams’ analysis of integrity in terms of basic commitments that constitute identity. The contrast between these two accounts is presented clearly in Cox (2003). Frankfurt (1987) is the locus classicus for his view. For Williams’ account, see Williams (1973b).

“Originality and individuality are moral concepts” (§ 1076, *KA XVIII*, p. 286). As such, the ideal of individuality is clearly intended as the primary *desideratum* of morality. “One lives,” writes Schlegel, “not in order to be happy, nor in order to do one’s duty, but rather *in order to cultivate oneself*” (§ 697, *KA XVIII*, p. 87). This aspect of Schlegel’s position also comes out in a more sketchy remark from 1799:

Instead of the virtues—*one* virtue. Instead of regulations [*Vorschriften*], maxims, duties—*one ideal*. There is only one *duty*, to cultivate oneself. *Culture* [*Bildung*] is the highest good for this life and for any (§ 1075, *KA XVIII*, p. 286).

There is certainly the danger that this ideal of “divine egoism” could seem narcissistic, self-indulgent, and, well, egoistic. Schlegel tries hard to stave off this appearance. He insists, first of all, that the pursuit of this ideal of individuality can actually lead to social engagement and to dedication to something larger than oneself: “One can totally devote oneself to the beloved, to art, to the age, from egoism; from the awareness that this is our calling” (§ 148, *KA XVIII*, p. 134). Perhaps more suggestively, he notes that friendship is the “*school of independence* [*Selbständigkeit*],” that is, that one develops one’s individuality in relationship with others. This is a thought that clearly links up with the Romantic ideal of “symphilosophy,” of constructing a cultured society through dialogue. These two poles, independence or individuality and love, constitute the core of Schlegel’s vision of the moral life at this stage (§ 203, *KA XVIII*, p. 203).

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Romanticism is this insistence on love and friendship as inseparable from moral formation. Schlegel is no exception to this rule. Comments from his philosophical notebooks during the late 1790s make this abundantly clear. “[E]thical humanity,” he remarks at one point, encompasses “infinite love, infinite selfhood, infinite harmony” (§ 216, *KA XVIII*, p. 140). Indeed, he goes so far as to say that love is the “principle” or foundation of morality (§ 901, *KA XVIII*, p. 270). It is at once an expression of, and a vehicle for, moral formation of the individual. In the former instance, Schlegel calls love a “miraculous growth [*Hervorbringen*] from the great and small blossoms of life into a whole” (§ 283, *KA XVIII*, p. 147). In the latter case, he asserts in *Ideen* that “[o]nly through love and through the consciousness of love does a human being become a human being” (§ 83, *KA II*, p. 264). Similarly, in his 1800–1801 lectures in Jena, Schlegel ascribes to love a special sort of “causality,” an ability, both in nature and in human lives, to affect reconciliation and unification (*KA XI*, p. 52). And, as in *Ideen*, love is styled the source of moral formation (*KA XI*, p. 56). Naturally, Schlegel explores many of these ideas more fully in the novel *Lucinde* (which will be examined in more detail below). The long section of the work entitled “Apprenticeship in Masculinity” relates how Julius forms himself through a series of relationships with women, each of whom has different characteristics. Clearly, then, Schlegel does not see the pursuit of self-culture as being possible without deep relationships with other people, best characterized as “love.”¹⁴

¹⁴ These observations suggest the basis for a defense of Schlegel’s Romanticism against some well-known criticisms of it, such as that leveled by G. W. F. Hegel, to the effect that the Romantic individual is narcissistic. For two recent efforts to respond to this critique, see Norman (2000), Rush (2006).

Structurally, the ideal of independence or individuality espoused by Schlegel involves a kind of doubling of the self, a split between one's "better self" or ideal and one's actual self. Importantly, this is not an irremediable dualism. The "better self" is not a creation of pure reason or an inhabitant of an opaque, metaphysically closed "intelligible world." As will be explained below, Schlegel insists that our drives and inclinations are the sources of our ideals. The important point here is that the process of achieving individuality involves progressive integration of these two selves. This is, as is well known, the point at which one of Schlegel's most well-known contributions, viz., the notion of Romantic irony, comes into its own. Less familiar is Schlegel's likening of this process of doubling and progressive integration to a dialogue, or, more specifically, an inner "symposium," e.g. in a letter to Schleiermacher from early August 1798 (Number 92, *KA XXIV*, pp. 161–163). The aim of this process is a "harmony of all powers" (§ 440, *KA II*, p. 253).¹⁵ Schlegel links this notion of harmony, in the guise of "moral beauty," with his concept of "higher" or "divine" egoism in a 1798 fragment, dating from a period of intense collaboration with Schleiermacher on a critique of Kantian moral theory. He writes that "Moral beauty arises from higher egoism, and to that extent originality must belong to aesthetics; only a purely original human being can form himself [*sich ... ausbilden*] in his full humanity" (§ 828, *KA XVIII*, p. 263). In other words, in pursuing one's ideal, a person achieves a level of integration that can best be captured in aesthetic terms.

Alongside this notion of doubling and progressive integration, Schlegel also stresses the internal plurality or diversity of the ideal state of a cultivated self. This is another point at which Schlegel views himself as diverging from Kant, as well as from Fichte. In a long fragment from a 1799 collection, he writes:

According to Fichte's system there is only *one* sense, only *one* spirit [*Geist*]; the particular direction depends merely upon development. That is good, but the development must be equally large on all sides. That is genuine culture [*Bildung*]. One should not want to determine the particular through mere reason. If reason alone guides this development, the philosopher will get news of nothing else [...] (§ 1501, *KA XVIII*, p. 317).

Schlegel's concerns with the one-sidedness of "heartless rationalists" stem from the earliest period of his career. Over against this tendency, he stresses that an integrated individual avoid monomania for a kind of capacious embrace of diverse talents and ideas. That is, integration is not to be achieved at the cost of narrowness. This is, however, something that few really achieve. In the first body of fragments published in *Athenäum* in June 1798, Schlegel observes that "Most human beings are, like Leibniz's possible worlds, only equal pretenders to existence" (§ 27, *KA II*, p. 170). "Every uncultivated human being," he quips, "is a caricature of himself" (§ 63, *KA II*, p. 174). Like other Romantics, Schlegel ascribes some of the blame for the prevalence of one-sided, trivialized lives to society (§ 5, *KA II*, p. 166); indeed, *Lucinde* is in part an indictment of the constricting nature of bourgeois morality. But "heartless rationalists" surely cannot escape blame entirely.

¹⁵ Elsewhere Schlegel observes that "*Harmony* is the center of ethics" (§ 320, *KA XVIII*, p. 221).

In the same group of published fragments, Schlegel applies this conception of a well-rounded and integrated life to a literary work. He writes:

A work is formed [*gebildet*] when it is everywhere sharply delineated [*begrenzt*], but within its limits is boundless and inexhaustible, if it is completely loyal to itself, everywhere the same, and yet beyond itself. The highest and most ultimate thing is, as with the education of a young Englishman, *le grand tour*. [The work] must have traveled through three or four continents of humanity, not in order to smooth out the edges of its individuality, but rather in order to expand its view and to give its spirit more freedom and inner versatility, and thereby more autonomy and self-sufficiency (§ 297, *KA II*, p. 215).

This application of the moral ideal of an integrated and inwardly diverse self to a work of literature is not only illustrative of the structure of this ideal, but also provides an important clue regarding Schlegel's understanding of the means for achieving it. Indeed, as a remark published in *Lyceum* in 1797 makes clear, Schlegel sees a close correspondence between the structure of a literary work and the internal structure of an integrated, well-rounded individual. He writes that "Some of the most excellent novels are compendia, encyclopedias of the whole spiritual life of an individual of genius. [...] Every human being who is cultivated and who cultivates himself contains a novel within himself. It is not necessary that he express it or write it" (§ 78, *KA II*, p. 156). Again influenced by Schiller, Schlegel advocates a view of the value of art that places this firmly within the project of self-culture.¹⁶ In a May 1793 letter to August Wilhelm, he asserts that the function of a poem is to "exercise and sharpen all powers of knowledge, to satisfy the spirit through beauty and purposiveness, and to put the drives in play" (Number 44, *KA XXIII*, p. 98). In the same letter, he avers that "The highest activity, perfection, and harmony of all our powers, the deepest enjoyment of our most personal [*eigensten*] self, elevation, and even bliss can be the effects of a work of art" (*KA XXIII*, p. 98). "The soul of my theory," he writes on October 16, 1793, "is that humanity is the highest, and art is only present for its sake" (Number 69, to August Wilhelm, *KA XXIII*, p. 143). Schlegel's basic idea is that literature, and art in general, is an instrument of self-culture. The best artworks typify the sort of many-sidedness that he regards as a structural feature of the ideal of individuality. They speak not only to the reason beloved of the "heartless rationalists," but to all the parts of our being. As such, Schlegel maintains that artworks, particularly literary narratives, are better than philosophical treatises in promoting and affecting human culture. He makes this point explicitly in a 1799 fragment: "the entire human being ought to define himself, rather than pure reason. The whole human being must present and compose [*dichten*] himself in NARRATION [*ERZÄHLEN*]" (§ 1342, *KA XVIII*, p. 306). In a fragment published in 1797 in *Lyceum*, Schlegel calls novels "the Socratic

¹⁶ In a letter of July 4, 1792, to August Wilhelm, Friedrich discusses Schiller's "Anmut und Würde," which he describes as an "application of Kantian philosophy to the art of poetry" according to which the "value of an artwork according to the degree to which it activates freedom, i.e., ethics [*Sittlichkeit*]" (Number 21, *KA XXIII*, p. 55).

dialogues of our age,” observing that “the wisdom of life has fled into this liberal form from the wisdom of the school” (§ 26, *KA II*, p. 149).

Like other Romantics, Schlegel did not simply theorize about the philosophical and moral place of literature; he actually carried out his theory in the controversial novel, *Lucinde*. Literary critics have naturally analyzed this work in countless ways, and this is not the place for either a detailed summary of its contents nor a full-blown analysis. Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects of the novel that bear reflection in the present context. First, the work characteristically blends a number of genres in a rather unconventional manner: dream-like fantasies, letters, character sketches, obscure allegories, dialogues, and even a kind of miniature *Bildungsroman*. The central male character of the work, Julius, explains this eclectic mixture when he tells Lucinde that he aims to imitate “the most beautiful chaos of sublime harmonies” (*KA V*, p. 9), the “romantic confusion” of their lives together (*KA V*, p. 7). Doing so, he argues, requires that he dispense with “what we call order or arrangement” (*KA V*, p. 9). The resulting “chaos,” however, reveals a good deal of artistic control. While *Lucinde* does not have a plot in any conventional sense, it is nevertheless *about* something, and is fairly successful in conveying the underlying ideas. As such, the novel itself embodies Schlegel’s ideal of a cultivated self, of a person who is internally coherent and yet who avoids the vice of narrowness.

The second important point about *Lucinde* for the present discussion is that the work itself contains a number of fairly lucid portrayals of this ideal character as embodied in actual people (albeit fictionalized ones). To take a few examples, this ideal appears in Lucinde herself (*KA V*, pp. 11, 52–54), a young girl named Wilhelmine (*KA V*, pp. 14–15), and two unnamed female friends (*KA V*, pp. 47–49, 50–51). The character Julius also provides, at least in the earlier periods of his life, a kind of contrast case (*KA V*, pp. 45–46). Finally, and above all, *Lucinde* is obviously a vehicle for Schlegel’s conception of the role of love, that is, of relationships that combine individuality and harmony, in making possible character formation. It is precisely through his relationships with various people, above all Lucinde, that Julius is able to overcome his inner division and his one-sided rigidity.

This exploration of the role of literature in moral self-formation is not exhausted by Schlegel’s considerations of common forms such as poetry and the novel. Instead, throughout the period under consideration here, Schlegel develops his own unique literary style as a vehicle for the expression of his individualistic moral view, which, from as early as 1791, he calls “characteristic.” Scholars have long recognized the importance of the development of this form to Schlegel’s work as a literary critic. Most recently, Beiser has described the development of characteristic as a response to Schlegel’s growing doubts, around 1797, regarding the availability and applicability of absolute standards of aesthetic judgment.¹⁷ Beiser correctly captures the essence of characteristic as a judgment of a work according to the internal standards of its author. However, he misses the fact that characteristic is much more than a vehicle of literary criticism. In a 1797 fragment written in Berlin and published in a slightly altered form the following year in *Athenäum*, Schlegel describes characteristic as “criticism, namely moral [criticism] or the theory of the

¹⁷ Beiser (2004, 126ff).

art of living” (§ 641, *KA XVI*, p. 141).¹⁸ Characteristic is the literary form that corresponds to Schlegel’s individualist and exemplarist moral outlook.¹⁹ It is the exploration of the unity of life and literature in the works of great individuals, and the critical principles it employs are meant to be internal to the individual subject.

The term “characteristic” first appears in a July 21, 1791 letter to August Wilhelm, in which Friedrich discusses plans to compose a “characteristic” of recent literature, including Bouterweck and Voltaire (Number 7, *KA XXIII*, pp. 15–16). It reappears shortly after this in a letter discussed previously that outlines Schlegel’s plan to depict the “highest perfection” of a nation “*in concreto*,” that is, in the persons of its most significant citizens (Number 8, to August Wilhelm, *KA XXIII*, pp. 20–21). The nature of this sort of project, however, is much clearer in connection with Friedrich’s plans regarding Voltaire. He aims at a reconstruction of Voltaire’s character from a survey of his extant writings. As to the ultimate payoff of this attempt, and the peculiarities of this approach, he observes:

In general I think that I can gain an expansive taste from this sort of reading—comparing the writings and the life of a great man together, and forming [*bilden*] for myself a whole from these. [...] In each case the peculiarity [*Eigenthümlichkeit*] and mood of the observer is brought along with this. This observation [*Betrachtung*] elevates the observer himself, and effects him more powerfully [*thätiger*] than morality or the ideal beauty of the arts. Morality furnishes only ideals the intuition of which is impossible, and which can only be considered *in abstracto*. [...] The life of an extraordinary man on the contrary shows a perfection [...] that elevates our own lives more than the highest of the sciences and the most beautiful of the arts (*KA XXIII*, p. 21).

The literary form of a characteristic is meant precisely as a replacement for the detached abstractness of other forms of moral philosophy. As with his studies of Greek and Roman culture, Schlegel intends his “characteristic,” in this case, of Voltaire, as a weapon in the arsenal of self-formation. Gaining an understanding of the inner coherence of the life and work of a genius both inspires our own pursuit of perfection and gives us a model upon which to base our quest.

The primary feature of a characteristic is the attempt to relate the totality of a person’s life and work to a unique inner core. This emerges, for example, in Schlegel’s discussion of *Hamlet*. The unifying “heart” of a work consists in its “mood,” in its “completely unique [*eigenthümliche*] view of the human condition [*Bestimmung des Menschen*]” (Number 44, to August Wilhelm, May 1793, *KA*

¹⁸ This fragment reappears in a modified version in the June 1798 issue of *Athenäum* (§ 225, *KA II*, p. 201).

¹⁹ It is also clear from ancient authors on whom he patterns himself in developing the notion of a characteristic that Schlegel regards this genre as more than just a vehicle for literary criticism. In *Athenäum*, he describes Tacitus as a writer of “characteristics” (§ 166, *KA II*, p. 191). Tacitus’ *Annals* and *Histories* were taken as models of what eighteenth-century literati called “pragmatic history,” i.e., history that analyzes the causes of major events and the characters of the main players in them in order to derive a moral or political lesson for the present. Around this same time, Schlegel also cites Seutonius and Cicero as models (§ 601, *KA XVI*, p. 135; § 636, *KA XVI*, p. 138). Finally, he calls Aristotle’s study of different constitutions a “characteristic” (§ 683, *KA XVI*, p. 142). This application of the term no doubt reflects the influence of Herder’s conception of nations as historical individuals.

XXIII, p. 97). Unpublished fragments from 1795 contain considerably more information regarding the nature of a characteristic:

The essence, the substantial part (the heart of its life) of an artwork is that to which everything else points, from which it arises, the reason why it exists, the ultimate purpose and the first ground of the whole. The characteristic requires (1) as it were a *geography*, an easy and correct skeleton (2) a spiritual and aesthetic *architectonic* of the work, of its essence, its *tone*; and finally (3) a *psychological genesis*, the coming to be [*Entstehung*] from its occasion, through laws and conditions of human nature (§ 24, *KA XVI*, p. 9).

A characteristic, then, integrates the life and the works of an individual in order to capture that person's peculiar outlook. Rather than imposing critical principles on the subject matter, a characteristic should articulate its own internal "architectonic." As he puts it in a 1797 fragment, "A characteristic should not be systematic at all, but rather should be a work of art" (§ 934, *KA XVIII*, p. 107). More to the point, in a fragment from 1798, Schlegel insists that "In order to judge the growth [*Wachstum*], one must know its origin and its coming to be" (§ 290, *KA XVIII*, p. 218). In some of his published fragments from *Athenäum*, Schlegel shifts the metaphor from botany to chemistry (§ 439, *KA II*, p. 253). Just as a chemist analyzes a substance into its component elements, so too a characteristic produces a "chemical decomposition of an individual into his pure, simple elements" (§ 83, *KA II*, p. 178). In other words, rather than changing an individual into something else (which would be alchemy), a moral critic examines the internal structure of that person's life and works. In this way, a characteristic of a person, such as the ones Schlegel published of Georg Forster, Herder, Goethe, and Lessing, respects that person's individuality, in the sense of the shape or pattern that he has achieved in his own life and work. Indeed, there is a close connection between the concept of a characteristic and this emphasis on individuality. In a 1797 fragment, Schlegel asserts that each individual is a "system," a kind of unity-in-diversity, and that only an individual, conceived as such, can be appropriately "characterized" (§ 715, *KA XVIII*, p. 89).²⁰

Phase Three (1798–1801): Ideals and the New Religion

The final phase in the development of Schlegel's moral philosophy that I will consider coincides with the apogee of early Romanticism, his own close association with Schleiermacher, and his lectures on transcendental philosophy in Jena. As in the two other phases discussed so far, there is a considerable overlap of ideas between phases, so the chronological marker should not be taken as exclusive. Still, the distinctiveness of this third phase is secured by the appearance of a new (and much-misunderstood) idea, that of a "new religion." As will become clear below, this idea grows out of a much earlier interest in the nature of ideals, in the Kantian sense of goals posited by reason that shape theoretical and practical activity

²⁰ In a 1798 fragment, he presents a similar conception of an individual as a "microcosm" (§ 488, *KA XVIII*, p. 69).

(e.g., the unconditioned, the *summum bonum*). “Religion” turns out to be Schlegel’s term in this period for the regime of self-culture with which he means to replace the inadequate moral theories of his predecessors (i.e., Kant and Fichte). Ideals, in Schlegel’s reworking of the Kantian notion, provide a focal point for self-integration. Schlegel’s conception of religion is simply of a life dedicated or consecrated to an ideal. By dubbing his own conception of moral life in this way, Schlegel no doubt aims to avoid the misleading associations of the term “morality [*Moralität*],” which was almost universally associated during this period with Kantian ethics.

Not only does this concern with ideals help to explain Schlegel’s admittedly mysterious pronouncements about a “new religion,” but it also helps to situate his position with a broader range of post-Kantian theoretical positions. In particular, paying attention to the role that ideals play in Schlegel’s account of moral agency reveals his position to be a strong alternative to Kantian moral theories. Richard Eldridge makes a persuasive case for reading Romanticism as an intensification and reflective appropriation of a Kantian conception of agency. Following Onora O’Neill’s exposition of Kant’s “fact of reason,” Eldridge argues that the essence of the Kantian position is that all agency, whether in theoretical or practical contexts, requires the adoption of a “critical *standpoint* on what one does,” which amounts to “trying to make what one does transparently endorsable (in the given circumstances of judgment) by rational agents as such who act as such.”²¹ Romanticism, according to Eldridge, involves the recognition that this fact about our agency is “irreputable” and yet not easy to live up to in practice.²² Eldridge’s reading clearly has the advantage of linking Romanticism, typically neglected (or worse) by philosophers as a merely “literary” phenomenon, with some of the central debates in contemporary moral philosophy. He explicitly aligns the Romantics with contemporary Kantians like Onora O’Neill, and contrasts their common position with what he calls the “ethical naturalism” of Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt.²³ The latter, he argues, opt for a “more modest” or “domesticated” view of practical reason, one that does not accept the Kantian dualism between living according to “reasons” and “being driven always only by impulse.”²⁴ Eldridge seems to suggest that the Romantics, in aligning themselves with Kant, adopt the more heroic, if difficult route, while Williams and others take the easy way out by capitulating to life in the face of the stringency of the Kantian ideal. Indeed, Williams quite explicitly rejects this Kantian dualism, which he labels the “purity of morality.”²⁵ Moreover, Williams sees no clear reason to accept the idea that all of our particular obligations must be straightforwardly derivable from some alleged *general* obligation somehow binding on all agents, at all times, and in all places. Williams famously depicts this worry in the “one thought too many” example of the

²¹ Eldridge (2001, p. 17).

²² Eldridge (2001, p. 20).

²³ Eldridge (2001, p. 19).

²⁴ This latter turn of phrase is Eldridge’s own. Eldridge (2001, p. 18).

²⁵ B. Williams (2004).

drowning wife.²⁶ Whether or not one views this as a capitulation depends, among other things, on whether or not one finds Kant's transcendental account of agency plausible (which of course many do). Eldridge clearly does, and he is certainly right in maintaining that at least *some* of the early Romantics shared this assessment.

There are, however, strong reasons to resist assimilating Schlegel to Eldridge's picture of Romanticism. Indeed, Schlegel's views seem quite close to those of Williams and of other critics of Kantianism. Schlegel's concerns with Kantian ethics have been amply documented above. In some respects, these anticipate some worries that are familiar from Williams. In particular, Schlegel seems to share Williams' concern that moral theories such as Kant's violate the integrity of individuals by forcing their own projects to be subsumed under a model of abstract agency in general that Williams calls at one point "the point of view of the universe."²⁷ That Schlegel has something like this objection in mind is suggested by his statement, discussed above, that Kantianism places an individual in a state of inner "siege."

Besides sharing such criticisms of Kantianism with Williams, there is no suggestion that he accepts the Kantian conception of agency discussed by Eldridge. If anything, the weight that he places on the value of individuality, and his suspicions of generalizations, suggest that Schlegel rejects the claim that agency commits us inexorably to making our reasons and motives "transparently endorsable" on pains of falling prey to blind impulse. Moreover, Schlegel is overtly suspicious of Kantian appeals to the so-called "fact of reason," a worry that travels together with his general anti-foundationalism, as has been noted by numerous recent scholars. The Kantian view certainly maintains that, as rational agents, we are faced with a stark dilemma, either to act upon reasons that would be endorsed by all, or be driven onward by the brute mechanism of nature. Schlegel does not accept this dilemma; following Schiller on this point, Schlegel holds that framing agency in this way forces us to disregard constitutive elements of our natures if we are to act morally.²⁸ This may, he suggests, be a useful formula for producing "heartless rationalists," but is not at all the proper path to "moral greatness."

Schlegel provides an importantly different account of the structure of human agency. In his lectures in Jena on transcendental philosophy, he introduces the claim that agency (in the complete sense of theoretical and practical activity) is shaped by a complex interaction between "feeling" or receptivity and "striving." Specifically, the roots of human agency lie in a "feeling of the sublime" and a "striving for the ideal" (*KA XII*, p. 7). In other words, our agency is anchored not in pure reason but in the sensitive and conative-appetitive sides of our nature. The notion of a "feeling of the sublime" suggests Schleiermacher's influence, and refers to the sense of belonging to a larger, organic whole. The "striving for the ideal" is obviously the

²⁶ Williams (1982).

²⁷ Eldridge (2001, p. xi). Herman (1993) has offered an important reply to Williams' criticism on behalf of the Kantian position.

²⁸ For two recent discussions of Schiller's critique of Kant's ethics, see Beiser (2005) and White (2002, Chap. 1).

crucial element for Schlegel's developing moral theory, as he makes clear in a later passage from this lecture series (see below). Not only do these comments point to the centrality of the concept of the "ideal" in Schlegel's thought, but they also indicate something unique about his conception of ideals as such. At the beginning of the second part of the lectures, Schlegel writes that "there is no general vocation of the human being [*Bestimmung des Menschen*], because every human being has his own ideal, and only striving for his ideal will render him moral" (KA XII, p. 44). Morality, for Schlegel, is not a matter of coordinating one's reasons for action with a representation of the reasons that any agent would endorse. Instead, morality is an enterprise of self-culture. Thus, "a human being ought to strive to be himself. Each person has then his own highest good" (KA XII, p. 47).²⁹ Schlegel stresses that each individual's unique "highest good" can only be attained in an objective situation best thought of as a free community. The important point for present purposes, however, is that Schlegel explicitly rejects what he takes to be Kant's attempt to make "universality" the "highest principle" of morality; for his part, Schlegel opts for "individuality [*Eigenthümlichkeit*]" or "originality [*Originalität*]" (KA XII, p. 48).

Schlegel's position is thus much more closely aligned with Stanley Cavell's "Emersonian perfectionism" than with mainstream Kantianism. Indeed, in an important articulation of his view, Cavell explicitly refers to Schlegel (along with Spinoza, Schiller, and Goethe) as forerunners.³⁰ For Cavell, the core of perfectionism is a sense of dissatisfaction with one's present self, an aspiration for "a further or eventual position of the self now dissatisfied with itself."³¹ Cavell discerns the parallel between this Emersonian conception and the Kantian notion that we are citizens of "two worlds," one ideal, the other actual.³² Yet, the ideal is precisely an ideal *self*, oneself to a "higher power" (to borrow a locution popular with the early Romantics), "represented" both in one's writings (in Emerson's case), one's forerunners, and one's friends. Consecrating oneself to one's better self is not the same thing as committing oneself to act only on reasons that would be endorsed by any rational being. Like Schlegel, Cavell tries hard, in an effort to dispel the whiff of elitism surrounding such perfectionism, to show that such a commitment requires a commitment to promote the self-reliance (to use the Emersonian phrase) of one's fellow citizens. Whether or not either of them succeeds is, of course, an important question; still, the primary point here is that Schlegel would feel much more at home with Cavell than with contemporary Kantians.

For Schlegel, then, what is most important about human agents, which distinguishes human agency from that of animals, is this capacity for "striving for the ideal," where the ideal is relentlessly individualized (KA XII, p. 7). The importance of ideals is something that emerges fairly early in Schlegel's career, as evidenced by a letter of August 28, 1793 to August Wilhelm. The two brothers had been debating the principles of criticism, with August Wilhelm apparently taking

²⁹ Cf. the comment from *Ideen*: "The highest good, and the only useful thing, is culture [*Bildung*]" (§ 37, KA II, p. 259).

³⁰ Cavell (1988).

³¹ Cavell (1988, p. 52).

³² Cavell (1988, p. 58).

the side of the *Sturm und Drang* cult of sensibility and genius, and Friedrich defending a more regimented, classicist conception. In an attempt to both clarify his position and mollify his brother, Friedrich recognizes the foolishness of “wanting to construct a poet *a priori* according to concepts,” and he shares August Wilhelm’s scorn for the “misuse” of the notion of an ideal by “insensitive and soulless rationalists” (no. 61, *KA XXIII*, p. 129). In order to preserve the value of ideals (in this case, in literary criticism, but also, surely, more generally), Friedrich offers the following account of their nature and origin:

The source of the ideal is the burning thirst [*heiße Durst*] for eternity, longing for God, and what is most noble in our nature. [...] What then is our dignity [*Würde*] besides the power and the resolve to become like God, to have the infinite always in our sight? The regular striving of action and the highest criterion of judgment do not exclude all virtues of sensibility [*Empfänglichkeit*], but rather can only exist with them (*KA XXIII*, p. 130).

For a Kantian, “dignity” is the special quality that rational agents possess in virtue of their capacity to recognize and act from motives of duty, or from reason, rather than impulse or inclination. There is no trace of this conception of dignity in Schlegel’s remarks to his brother. Instead, he seems to locate the origin of ideals precisely in our *drives*, and so our dignity consists in the quest to realize these ideals.³³ As to the function of such ideals, Schlegel suggests to his brother that they provide focus, unification, harmony, or what he here calls “system” to works of art, to actions, and to characters (*KA XXIII*, p. 130).

As might be suggested by this more naturalistic conception of the origin of ideals, Schlegel pulls back from the Kantian insistence on their universality. For Kant, the “ideals of pure reason” are the *same* for each and every rational agent. How could it be otherwise, since “pure reason” is itself universal? For Schlegel, on the other hand, there are at least as many ideals as there are individuals. In a remark from a collection of fragments entitled “Zur Philosophie,” Schlegel asks “Is the number of categories somehow *definite* [*bestimmt*]?” Even if it is, he insists that “[the number] of ideas is *infinite*” (§ 1248, *KA XVIII*, p. 298). This element of Schlegel’s position is also quite clearly present in the remarks from his lectures on transcendental philosophy discussed above. And, in *Athenäum*, he asserts that ideals are “infinite,” that there are as many of them as there are individuals striving to live up to them (§ 406, *KA II*, p. 242).

As is suggested by Schlegel’s position of the source of ideals in the “longing for God,” he often employs notions of divinity as a kind of stand in for ideals. For example, in *Athenäum*, he asserts that “If every infinite individual is God, then there are as many gods as there are ideals” (§ 406, *KA II*, p. 242). In a 1797 collection of fragments, Schlegel calls God the “*ens idealissimum*” (§ 935, *KA XVIII*, p. 107). Another fragment from the beginning of 1799 links this equation of God with ideals and Schlegel’s insistence on the plurality or individuality of ideals:

³³ In a subsequent letter of October 16, 1793, Schlegel suggests that reason, “the capacity for ideals,” should not be conceived as merely “the pure part of the faculty of representation” but rather as a “basic drive [*Grundtrieb*]” (Number 69, *KA XXIII*, p. 143).

God is nothing but the individual in the highest power; only individuals can have a God, which therefore is completely subjective, not merely with respect to constitution [*Beschaffenheit*] but also to existence. But the world, too, is of course an individual—that can be known—and so it too must have a God, and this is the paradigm [*Urbild*] (§ 605, *KA XVIII*, p. 243).

This conception of the nature of ideals recalls Schlegel's defense of their importance in the August 1793 letter to his brother quoted previously. An ideal brings order or "system" to a domain of objects, be this "what we call *soul* in works, actions, and artworks," "heart" in "poetry," "spirit" and "ethical dignity" in human beings, or "God" in creation (*KA XXIII*, p. 130). At each of these different levels, an individual ideal provides unity or coherence, in much the same way that God has traditionally been regarded as creating and sustaining the order of nature.

The interchangeability of "God" and "ideal" in Schlegel's presentations of his basic position sheds light on one of the more perplexing and controversial aspects of early German Romanticism, viz., the notion of a "new religion." Particularly in light of Schlegel's conservatism and alliance with Hapsburg Austria after 1808, Romantic discussions of religion have often been read as advocating medievalist nostalgia (at best) or political reaction (at worst). More recently, there has been a gradual shift of scholarly opinion towards the recognition that Romantic "religion" is an extension of a progressive and liberal (for the time) social program.³⁴ It is clear that Romantic "religion" has its origins in Lessing's call for a "new, eternal Gospel," the essential content of which has little to do with cults or ecclesiastical institutions, but which is rather essentially a system of disinterested morality.³⁵ This is certainly the case with Schlegel, who studied Lessing intensively and wrote a "characteristic" of his work. Indeed, in describing his own ambition to "establish a new religion" in a letter of December 1798 to Novalis, Schlegel writes that "If Lessing were still alive, I would not need to begin this work," and that "No one has intimated more of this new, true religion than he" (Number 122, *KA XXIV*, p. 206).³⁶ This Lessing-inspired plan for a "new Bible" and a "new religion" is made public in *Ideen* (§ 95, *KA II*, p. 265).

It is important to see Schlegel's call for a "new religion" (along with a "new Bible" for it) during this period not only as an appropriation of Lessing's

³⁴ This shift can be seen most clearly in two path-breaking studies: (1) Timm (1978) and, especially, (2) Frank (1982). Manfred Frank makes his case particularly well in connection with the anonymous "Oldest System Program of German Idealism." He argues that the discussion of religion and mythology in this text (various attributed to Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel) is not a call for restoration, but rather for a correction of the one-sided, market-oriented structure of society through an "ethics of mutual recognition that is oriented towards cultural values" (Frank 1982, pp. 168–169). Frank maintains that the early Romantics were forerunners of twentieth-century critical theorists who describe the shortcomings of a culture that privileges instrumental reason (Frank 1982, pp. 192–193).

³⁵ This phrase comes from Lessing's epochal essay, *The Education of the Human Race*. See Nisbet (2005). For an exceptionally thorough, balanced, and innovative interpretation of Lessing's philosophy of religion, see Yasukata (2002).

³⁶ There are also several unpublished fragments from roughly this same period in which Schlegel compares the theological systems of Leibniz and Lessing. See § 273, *KA XVIII*, p. 45; § 309, *KA XVIII*, p. 49; § 329, *KA XVIII*, p. 51; § 331, *KA XVIII*, p. 51.

theological liberalism, but also as growing out of his own dissatisfaction with Kantian moral theory. This is an aspect of Romantic religion that has been overlooked in Beiser's recent reconstruction of it, which concentrates instead on the aspiration to fuse Fichte and Spinoza into a coherent (!) whole. It emerges clearly by tracing the development of Schlegel's thought between the summer of 1798, when he was collaborating with Schleiermacher on a critique of Kantian ethics, to December of that year, when he enlists Novalis in his new project. After an approving discussion of Schleiermacher's own reservations about Kantianism, Schlegel admits that "It is my highest literary wish to *establish* a morality and to provide a prelude for this great purpose through my essays in *Athenäum*" (Number 80, July 1798). In October, his focus has begun to shift from morality to *religion* (Number 107, to Caroline Böhmer Schlegel, October 20, 1798, KA XXIV, p. 186). Finally, in December 1798, he tells Novalis that, through his "Bible project" he wants "to establish, or rather to help proclaim, a new religion," the core of which remains as yet unrealized within historic Christianity (Number 122, KA XXIV, pp. 205, 208). Unpublished fragments from the same year indicate that Schlegel envisions "religion" as a replacement for "the morality that is often the homeland of nullity" (§ 376, KA XVIII, p. 226). The opening fragment of *Ideen*, composed in 1799 but published the following year, also suggests this reading of the import of Schlegel's calls for a new religion:

The demands for and anticipations of a morality that would be more than the practical part of philosophy have become ever louder and clearer. Already there is talk even of religion. It is time to tear the veil of Isis, and to reveal the mystery. Whoever cannot bear the sight of the goddess should flee or perish (§ 1, KA II, p. 256).

Given the provenance of the idea, one should not be surprised to learn that Schlegel's religion is essentially a program of self-culture, of dedication to an individual ideal. This emerges already in the *Athenäum* fragments from June 1798. The following remark, quoted in part above, makes this clear:

If every infinite individual is God, then there are as many gods as there are ideals. Even the relation of the true artist and the true human being to his ideal is religion through and through. The priest is one to whom this inner service of God is the goal and occupation of his whole life, and everyone can and should become this (§ 406, KA II, p. 242).

Unpublished fragments, some dating from the period during which *Ideen* was composed (1798–1799), also reveal the tight connection between self-culture [*Bildung*] and this conception of religion. For example, Schlegel asserts that "Religion is what resolves all the antinomies of culture [*Bildung*] and brings them into unity" (§ 1288, KA XVIII, p. 301). Or, more clearly, "Religion is the art of wisdom, the science of living and the higher politics that I have previously sought" (§ 1439, KA XVIII, p. 313). "Religion," he writes, "is the element, the oxygen [*Luft*] of higher human beings" (§ 1482, KA XVIII, p. 316). In other words, religion, in Schlegel's sense, nourishes the project of attaining one's higher self. Religion is, as it were, the "atmosphere" that sustains self-formation.

In keeping with Schlegel's insistence on the individuality and plurality of ideals, he elsewhere maintains that there are "infinitely many religions" (§ 916, *KA XVIII*, p. 271). That is, there are as many religions as there are individuals who dedicate themselves to their higher or better selves. This is an idea that Schlegel seems to be adapting from Schleiermacher, for whom there are as many religions as there are ways of intuiting the universe. The difference, at least in many of his discussions of this subject, is that Schlegel links religion more with the ideal, with the center or focal-point of self-formation, than with the sense of belonging to an infinite whole.³⁷

It is worth pointing out here that Schlegel's discussions of religion from 1798 onward do not represent a radical departure from his earlier ideas. To the contrary, Schlegel's conception of religion seems to be a more developed, or at least publicly articulated, version of the notions of "divine egoism" and "striving for God" that can be found in his correspondence with August Wilhelm from the early 1790s. Religion, in Schlegel's special sense, is a generic term for the regime of self-culture that he intends as a replacement for Kantian ethics. This is the sense of Schlegel's reversal of the Kantian priority of morality over religion in *Ideen* (§ 73, *KA II*, p. 263). There is no suggestion of political or theological reaction. Instead, Schlegel means to replace what he sees as an overly narrow, one-sided Kantian ethics with a radically individualistic, capacious program of self-culture. Perhaps "religion" seemed to Schlegel to be a suitable designation for this program with its overtones of dedication, enthusiasm, and comprehensiveness.

The preceding discussion by no means exhausts the content of Schlegel's innovations in moral philosophy, but it does serve as a solid beginning for further exploration of this neglected feature of his thought. The ultimate conclusion that I want to draw is the fairly modest one that the recent revival of interest in the contributions of Romanticism to post-Kantian moral theory needs to incorporate Schlegel. Schlegel's criticisms of then-dominant moral theories, especially of Kantianism, have a surprisingly contemporary ring to them. Perhaps, then, those who share these concerns might also look to Schlegel to see how an alternative conception of moral life might be developed. As it is, Schlegel's reflections are largely fragmentary and often underdeveloped. Yet, to borrow another favorite Romantic trope, the "spirit" of Schlegel's moral philosophy is unmistakable. Against the drive for codification in ethics, Schlegel advocates a kind of exemplarism shaped by his study of classical sources. Against the urge for universality, Schlegel champions the moral value of individuality and the importance of self-formation. Against the rigid dualism of reason and inclination, Schlegel defends a more naturalistic and holistic picture of the constitutive elements of human agency. Philosophers inclined to any or all of these positions can look to Schlegel as an ally in their attempts to construct new alternatives in moral philosophy.

³⁷ There is some evidence that Schlegel is also inclined to a view closer to Schleiermacher's, especially in the second part of his lectures on transcendental philosophy (*KA XII*, pp. 53–54). Here, Schlegel describes religion as a sense of identification with the organic, progressively forming totality of nature. Another suggestion of a link with Schleiermacher comes from *Ideen*, where Schlegel writes that "Only one who has its own religion, an original intuition of the infinite, can be an artist" (§ 13, *KA II*, p. 257).

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