

Idealism and Realism in Early German Romanticism

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Declaration

I, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The early German romantics Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel were united in their attempt to combine idealism and realism. However, contemporary interpretations of early German romanticism have, as far as idealism and realism is concerned, found two major strands of interpretation in Manfred Frank and Frederick C. Beiser that respectively characterise the romantics as epistemological and metaphysical realists and as absolute idealists. Against both of these interpretations I will argue that we both can and should interpret the *Frühromantiker* as finding some middle path between idealism and realism. In order to motivate this claim I will begin by summarising what I take to be the main features of the positions of the three major early German romantics (Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel) as well as making it apparent that finding some way of combining idealism and realism was in fact their goal. In light of these features I will then critique both Frank and Beiser's one-sided interpretations as well as offer an interpretation that does take into account the romantics' self-proclaimed aim. Having gone through Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel in turn, summarised the major elements of their philosophy, shown how the three can be interpreted as neither idealists nor realists, and rejected any absolute idealist readings, as well as having given a reading of these philosophers consistent with their attempt to combine idealism and realism, I will end by concluding that we both can and should interpret the *Frühromantiker* as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

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Introduction

Contemporary interpretations of early German romanticism have, as far as idealism and realism is concerned, found two major strands of interpretation in Manfred Frank and Frederick C. Beiser. While Manfred Frank interprets Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel as epistemological and metaphysical realists Beiser's interpretation locates the early development of absolute idealism in the early romantic movement. Against both of these interpretations I will argue that we both can and should interpret the *Frühromantiker* as finding some middle path between idealism and realism. In order to motivate this claim I will begin by summarising what I take to be the main features of the positions of the three major early German romantics (Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel) as well as making it apparent that finding some way of combining idealism and realism was in fact their goal. In light of these features I will then critique both Frank and Beiser's one-sided interpretations as well as offer an interpretation that does take into account the romantics' self-proclaimed aim. Insofar as Beiser and Frank's interpretations do not take into account the aims of the movement they attempt to characterise, and insofar as an interpretation that takes into account this aim and sees the romantics as in some way accomplishing this aim is possible, I will conclude that we both can and should take the early German romantics as finding some middle ground between idealism and realism.¹

Although the early German romantic movement is mostly characterisable in

1 Although there exists a wide range of interpretations of the Early German Romantics I will be focusing mainly on the interpretations of Frank and Beiser while making references to additional secondary literature on the subject. The reason for this is twofold. First of all, in recent years the interpretations that Frank and Beiser provide have emerged as two opposed but major poles of thought regarding the *Frühromantiker*; and therefore represent two distinct but widely regarded ways of interpreting Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel. Second, both of these interpretations, stressing either the realist or idealist aspects of romanticism, get something wrong in their interpretations in a way that helps us to better understand their philosophical aims and texts. By understanding the shortcomings of any interpretation that does not take into proper account the romantics' aim of finding a middle path between idealism and realism we can better understand how they attempted to do so.

terms of the originality of its writers, there are some features that remain consistent across the three writers we will be looking at. The first of these is a commitment to the absolute. Whether it was as a pre-supposition of consciousness or of reality, or even merely a regulative ideal, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel all held some conception of the absolute as ultimate reality. This commitment was accompanied by a scepticism about our ability to know this absolute as either the condition of consciousness which can therefore not appear to consciousness itself, or as that which, as infinite, can never be adequately represented by a finite intellect. Because of this scepticism the romantics also held that the philosophical process itself could only be one of infinite approximation. If knowledge of the absolute is impossible all we can ever hope to do is to approximate such knowledge in a never-ending process. Most importantly, the early romantics were also unified in their attempt to combine what they saw as the partial viewpoints of idealism and realism, the explicit statements of which we will see in the next few chapters.

It is on this basis that we will critique both Frank and Beiser's interpretations. Frank's interpretation stresses the realist aspect of early German romantic thought at the expense of both this aim and the idealistic aspects that we also find in their writings. However, as we will see, Frank's interpretation is based on definitions of idealism that prejudice the issue against any attempt to combine the two and as such do not engage properly with the self-proclaimed aims of the movement he attempts to characterise. In addition, the grounds on which Frank establishes the realism of the *Frühromantiker*, namely their rejection of the self-sufficiency of consciousness, rests on an asymmetry between idealism and realism, and consciousness and Being, whose exposition precludes the possibility of ascribing the movement a realism based purely on its rejection of idealism. Furthermore, Frank's account also relies on a mischaracterisation

of the notion of reality found in the writings of the *Frühromantiker*.

On the other hand, Beiser's interpretation, which stresses the organicist, Platonic, and absolute idealist aspects of the movement, while not entirely guilty of ignoring the aims of the movement, falters instead in his strong anti-sceptical and absolute idealist interpretation. As we will see, the consistent scepticism across the three early German romantics speaks entirely against their characterisation as absolute idealists precisely because the possibility of absolute knowledge, an essential feature of absolute idealism, is categorically rejected by all three. Since they expressly distinguished themselves from absolute idealism in its most basic position they therefore can not be subsumed under the general development of this movement. Even in the philosopher whose affinities most closely resemble the organicist characterisation that Beiser provides, namely in Novalis, we will see that such claims are to be taken with reservations that again speak against such a characterisation in absolute terms.

As we will see, it is precisely in the equiprimordiality of the subjective and the objective, the respective starting points of idealism and realism, entirely unified in the *Frühromantiker* notion of Being, that we locate the romantics' attempt to combine idealism and realism. For Hölderlin the subject-object distinction finds its original ground in the Being that precedes it and out of which the division first occurs. We also find that reality itself is a product of this division and this opposition such that reality is as independent as it is dependent on both consciousness and objects, meaning his philosophy could neither be said to be a form of idealism or realism, but only a combination of the two. In Novalis, we will find that the incompleteness of both idealism and realism, and their necessary completion in each other, and thus their relativisation, is an essential feature of our attempt to understand the absolute. By this relativisation Novalis shows how neither idealism nor realism can be subsumed under

the other, and how neither can be said to be primary to the other. This, in combination with their being the primary elements of philosophy, means that Novalis could only be said to be providing a philosophy which combines the two. Lastly, in Schlegel, we again find that reality itself is only found in the indifference point of the equiprimordial elements of philosophy, namely, the infinite and consciousness, requiring a combination that also means a combination of both of idealism and realism.²

Having gone through Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel in turn, summarised the major elements of their philosophy, shown how the three can, due to the equiprimordiality of the subjective and the objective, be interpreted as neither an idealist or realist, and rejected any absolute idealist readings, as well as given a reading of these philosophers consistent with their attempt to combine idealism and realism, I will conclude that we both can and should interpret the *Frühromantiker* as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

2 Although the identification of the starting points of idealism and realism as the subjective and objective places the *Frühromantiker* in the context of Fichte's definitions of Dogmatism and Idealism (wherein an attempt is made to make the basis of an explanation of experience the thing-in-itself or an intelligence respectively), the attempt of the *Frühromantiker* to combine idealism and realism places them also within the context of contemporary debates of realism and anti-realism, and offer an original insight into the nature of reality and the relation between mind and world (I, 426). Contemporary realism can broadly be defined as both an *existence* and an *independence* claim. To be a realist about X is to take X to both exist and be independent of our thoughts about it (Miller, 2014). On the other hand anti-realists about X would admit its existence but not its independence (Miller, 2014). There are also forms of non-realism which dispute the existence claim itself, such as eliminativism and non-cognitivism (Miller, 2014). Insofar as the early romantics were committed to a belief in the absolute they clearly fit into the existence element of realism. However, the question of just how independent ultimate reality is of our thoughts about it is not as clear. As we will discuss in the chapter on Hölderlin, and which applies equally to Novalis and Schlegel, we find that the world of objects is as dependent on mind as mind is on it, as subjectivity and objectivity can only arise in opposition to each other. In a strict sense this is a form of dependence, however it is not the sort of dependence that is characteristically thought of in relation to idealism, as it is not simply a one-way dependence.

Chapter 1 - Realism and Idealism in Hölderlin

In this chapter I will show why Hölderlin both can and should be read not as a realist or idealist, but instead as finding some middle ground between the two. I will begin with some excerpts which make it clear that it was in fact Hölderlin's aim to find some way of combining idealism and realism. We will then turn to the texts in full. The foundation of Hölderlin's philosophy is found in his short essay "Über Urtheil und Seyn." Since this text must be seen as a response to Fichte we will begin with a short summary of the relevant sections of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. As we will see, Hölderlin argues that absolute Being cannot be attributed to either objectivity or subjectivity alone, since both stand in a reciprocal relation to each other. Being must therefore be conceived as a foundation transcendent to both. It is from this central thesis that Hölderlin develops many of the other elements of his philosophy, for example our inability to know Being itself, the notion of infinite approximation, and the role of the aesthetic. We will at this point turn towards some of Hölderlin's other works to see how these ideas develop out of this foundational text. Having given an account of what I take to be the main elements of Hölderlin's philosophy I will then turn to two major interpretations of Hölderlin as far as idealism and realism are concerned, namely Beiser and Frank respectively. Beginning with Frank's realist interpretation of Hölderlin I will argue that his characterisations of idealism and realism prejudice the issue against the early romantic aim of finding a middle point between idealism and realism and should therefore be rejected. I will then argue that rather than being able to ascribe a realism or idealism to Hölderlin, we find that insofar as he takes subjectivity and objectivity to be equally primitive he exemplifies exactly the kind of position we would expect from someone attempting to combine the two. I will then turn to Beiser's

absolute idealist interpretation and argue that, due to Hölderlin's scepticism regarding absolute knowledge, we can not assimilate Hölderlin, or any of the early romantics, into the canon of absolute idealism. Having rejected both idealist and realist readings of Hölderlin, along with absolute idealist interpretations, and given an interpretation proper to Hölderlin's own aims, I will conclude that we both can and should interpret Hölderlin as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

Hölderlin on Philosophy

Hölderlin's explicit claims to be finding a middle ground between idealism and realism are not as plentiful as they are in Novalis and Schlegel. There are however some places in his texts in which he makes this apparent. In a letter to Niethammer, dated February 24, 1796, Hölderlin writes of his aim to find “the principle ... which is also capable of making the conflict disappear, the conflict between the subject and object” (EL:68)³. To Sinclair Hölderlin makes explicit his conviction that “everything made, every product, is the result of the subjective and the objective” (EL:117). To Schiller he writes that “the unremitting demand that must be made of any system” is the “union of subject and object in an absolute” (EL:62). Furthermore, his rejection of Fichte and Schelling's identification of the absolute with the I, in the *Grundlage* and *Vom Ich* respectively,⁴ tells of a dissatisfaction with attempts to overcome the subject-object opposition from within idealism, which is overcome, as we will see, by the positing of an absolute that is neither subjective nor objective, neither idealistic nor realistic. Finally, in his June 18, 1799 letter to Steinkopf, the Stuttgart bookseller who agreed to publish Hölderlin's journal, Hölderlin writes of the project he intends to carry out in his

3 **Note on referencing throughout the thesis.** Where possible references will be made to the relevant critical editions. If these are unavailable due to a lack of margin pagination in the translations used then I will instead cite the specific fragment numbers. If these are also unavailable the page numbers for the translation itself will be used. A key to the in-text citations is available in the bibliography.

4 I focus Hölderlin's critique of Fichte. For a discussion of his rejection of Schelling's *Vom Ich*, see chapter five of (Frank, 2004).

journal that

“the union and reconciliation of theory with life, of art and taste with genius, of the heart with the understanding, of the real with the ideal, of the cultural (in the broadest sense of the word) with nature – this will be the most general character, the spirit, of the journal” (Own emphasis)
(EL:142)

It becomes clear then, that Hölderlin's philosophy was concerned with finding some way of combining idealism and realism.

Let us turn to how Hölderlin attempts to accomplish this aim. In his short essay titled “Über Urtheil und Seyn” Hölderlin lays the foundation for his philosophical works. Since the text must be understood as a response to, and critique of, Fichte, we will begin with a short summary of the relevant section from Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte begins this text with the search for a principle expressing the act that “lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible” (I, 91). Before finding this however, Fichte begins with what he deems to be a universally accepted truth, the truth of the proposition 'A is A' ($A = A$) (I, 93). For Fichte, this proposition does not posit the existence of A, but rather the necessary connection between A in the subject position and A in the predicate position such that if A is posited then it is necessarily true that it is A (I, 93). Fichte marks this necessary connection 'X.' For Fichte, this X must be found in the self that judges the proposition to be true according to law. That is, its necessity comes from the self-sufficiency of reason as the source of its own laws, (one of) the basic presupposition(s) of transcendental philosophy. Fichte continues, since this X is found in the self and it bears a relation to each A as that which makes the latter necessarily follow the former by the assertion of the former, A must also be in the self (I, 94). In other words, the affirmation of A implies the absolute positing of A for the self. However, the absolute positing of an entity based on its affirmation is exactly what happens in self-consciousness. In self-consciousness

the I, in positing itself, makes itself a reality (absolutely posits itself) on the basis of the law of which it has already been found to be the source (X). This law is neither prior to nor the result of the I. Instead the I's self-positing and this law are the same. 'I am I' = X (I, 94). X, as establishing the necessary connection between the absolutely valid judgement 'A = A,' is itself as valid as 'A = A,' and therefore 'I am I,' the activity whereby the I posits itself, must also be absolutely valid (I, 95). Moreover, this principle, 'I am I,' or simply 'I am,' expresses the act that lies at the ground of all consciousness (I, 96). This principle is both the essence and cause of the self, or as Fichte puts it, the self “*posits* itself by merely existing and *exists* by merely being posited” (I, 97). Fichte now reverses the previous relation. The absolute validity of the 'I am I' was originally derived from the absolute validity of 'A = A,' but now it is the absolute validity of the self in positing itself which grounds the validity of the absolutely valid judgement 'A = A' (I, 98). Not only that, but 'A = A' now expresses the basic condition of existence, now defined by Fichte as an “inference from being posited to being” (I, 99). Finally, insofar as the I is absolutely posited, and with it the necessity of the basic proposition of logic (X), and with X the relation of all possible positing (A) to the self, Fichte concludes that “everything that exists does so only insofar as it is posited in the self, and apart from the self there is nothing” (I, 99). In other words, Fichte identifies the absolute, or Being, with the absolute ego.

In his foundational text “Über Urtheil und Seyn” Hölderlin rejects this identification of the absolute ego with Being. This rejection is made on the basis of an exposition of a further necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge, of judgements, and ultimately, of consciousness. Hölderlin subscribed to what was at the time a popular (although erroneous) etymological account of the German word for judgement (*Urtheil*). According to this account *Urtheil* is a composition of the prefix

ur-, meaning original or primal, and the verb *teilen*, meaning division. For Hölderlin, insofar as the most basic division is that between subject and object, the concept of judgement therefore expresses a division which originally makes possible the opposition between subject and object (US:516). In addition, insofar as subject and object are the opposed terms of an original division they also necessarily pre-suppose a whole which is prior to their creation out of this division and of which they must be considered parts (US:516). For Hölderlin the opposition between subject and object is an absolute one. The subject is what the object is not, while the object is what the subject is not. However, since these are absolutely opposed, but also related, as stipulated both by the copula in the judgement and the fact that opposition is still a form of relation, there is also a necessary presupposition of a third term through which this opposition-relation can be made possible.

So far so good, as for Fichte the absolute ego is that third term of which the ego and the non-ego must be considered parts and out of which they compose the original opposition between subject and object. However, this Being cannot for Hölderlin be the identity that Fichte finds in self-consciousness. As we saw, Fichte's argument for the absolute reality of the I stems from the absolute validity of the judgement of self-consciousness ('I am I') which it originally derives from the absolute validity of the proposition 'A = A' based on the identification of self-consciousness with the (absolutely valid) necessity of the proposition. As Hölderlin points out however, it is not that the nature of self-consciousness is such that it expresses an absolute identity between the subject (reflective consciousness) and the object (reflected consciousness) (US:516). Instead it is essential to the very structure of self-consciousness that there is a division between consciousness insofar as it reflects upon itself and consciousness insofar as it is reflected upon, as in self-consciousness I oppose myself to myself in order to recognize

myself in this opposition (US:516). Since self-consciousness relies on an essential division between itself as subject and itself as object self-consciousness (and therefore the absolute ego) is incapable of providing the unity necessary for the original division between subject and object, as it is not a unitary reference point through which two absolutely opposed terms can stand in a relation to each other, and is in fact itself dependent on such a pre-supposition. Instead, absolute Being can only be found “where Subject and Object are absolutely, not just partially united [*vereiniget*], and hence so united that no division can be undertaken, without destroying the essence [*Wesen*] of the thing that is to be sundered [*getrennt*], there and not otherwise can we talk of an absolute Being” (US:515-6). Hölderlin therefore rejects Fichte's identification of Being with the absolute ego and instead takes consciousness to be dependent on a foundation transcendent to it.

It is however unclear why Hölderlin takes his argument to be an argument against Fichte's absolute ego. After all, the need for a prior unity only arises with intentionality (wherein in the opposition between subject and object first comes about). It is only at the level of the empirical ego that a relation to an object arises (and with it intentionality), and the absolute ego therefore does not have the intentional character that would presuppose such a prior unity. In addition, the judgement of self-consciousness, which Hölderlin has shown to rely on an opposition instead of an identity, is not one that the absolute ego itself makes but is rather the judgement through which the empirical ego becomes aware of the identity within the absolute ego, and this identity does not have the cognitive character of a judgement but is instead an act.

However, Hölderlin has a response to this possible objection which can be found in his January 26, 1795 letter to Hegel in which he discusses and critiques the nature of the absolute ego. In this letter, Hölderlin writes, that Fichte's

“absolute 'I' ... contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it there is nothing; hence there is no object for this 'I,' for otherwise not all reality would be within it; however, a consciousness without object cannot be thought, and if I myself am this object, then I am as such necessarily restricted, even if it were only within time, hence not absolute; therefore, within the absolute 'I,' no consciousness is conceivable; as absolute 'I' I have no consciousness, and insofar as I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, hence is the absolute 'I' (for me) nothing”
(VI, 155)

Hölderlin's challenge is simple but effective, if consciousness only arises for Fichte once the absolute ego opposes the non-ego to the empirical ego then by what right can he call the absolute ego an ego at all? If the absolute ego itself has no characteristics that could be ascribed to empirical consciousness, which it would presumably not as it would then be limited and not absolute, then what we have stumbled upon is not something which could be described as an ego but rather we have found absolute Being itself, that non-determinate unity which must be pre-supposed in the basic opposition between subject and object.

That Being is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity which must be presupposed by consciousness leads Hölderlin into a scepticism regarding the possibility of knowledge of the absolute. Following Fichte, Hölderlin takes it that the basis of all knowledge is the subject-object distinction (EL:68). In other words, we can only have knowledge of those things that can stand as objects for our consciousness. However Being, as a condition of the possibility of such knowledge and such an opposition, can itself never enter into that relation. If it could, another Being on which the new relation between a subject and its object would have to be pre-supposed and our object would not then be absolute Being itself. The idea of such knowledge of Being itself is also incoherent. We can only know Being as an object, whereas Being is supposed to be exactly that wherein no division between subject and object can occur without destroying its essence. We can therefore have no knowledge of Being itself.

The fact that we can have no knowledge of the absolute does not mean we can entertain any beliefs regarding its non-existence however. Even though we can never have any knowledge of something unconditioned or infinite, we can still have *negative* knowledge of its reality. The grounds for this knowledge is laid out in an earlier essay of Hölderlin's titled "On the Concept of Punishment," as well as a letter written to his half-brother Karl Gok on the 13th of April 1795. In the essay Hölderlin attempts to describe how the infinite moral law can appear to consciousness, and how to avoid ending up in a circular definition of a good will. It is the former which interests us most at present. Hölderlin's solution to this problem is that we can have a negative awareness of the infinitude of the moral law insofar as it appears precisely in those instances in which it is transgressed (IV, 215). In acting against our moral imperative, taken from Kant's categorical imperative, that "a human being should always act in such a way that the conviction that forms the basis of his action could be a valid law for everyone," we transgress the moral law and feel its resistance (EL:49). But how do we transgress Being itself in order to feel its resistance and so gain negative knowledge of its existence? By transgressing its most essential feature, its unity. Precisely because elements are able to contradict each other they point to a greater unity out of which they can count as non-compatible determinations of one and the same thing. We can thereby know that Being itself must exist based on our ability to find things which are antithetical. Moreover, the first and original opposition that would give us such negative knowledge is the very opposition on which our consciousness depends, that between subject and object, such that we have negative knowledge of the existence of absolute Being purely by our experience of the world.

Although negative knowledge of Being is possible, the fact that we can have no theoretical knowledge of Being means we can never hope to furnish a complete system

of knowledge. First of all, our knowledge can never transcend the subject-object opposition on which it depends. Since Being is exactly that wherein the elements of such an opposition are absolutely united knowledge of it would depend on being able to know it not as an object, but as a unity of subject and object. Since our knowledge depends on that very opposition we are unable to do this. Being itself can therefore never become one element among every other in our system of knowledge, which would be required for its completeness. Secondly, the unity that Being affords to the system of its products and the coherence that holds internal to those products as well as between those products and Being itself is a unity which, although it represents the ideal of knowledge, we can never hope to achieve. Since it would be knowledge of something unbounded and undetermined such knowledge would have to be an unconditioned form of knowledge. However, we only ever have access to knowledge determined by the subject-object opposition, which is, as such, a form of conditioned knowledge, meaning that along with the impossibility of achieving systematic completeness, we can never achieve the systematic unity required of absolute knowledge either.

But Hölderlin does not on the basis of this recede into wholesale scepticism. Rather, just as we can only ever hope to approach moral perfection in an infinite progression, so, does Hölderlin write to Schiller, that “the unremitting demand that must be made of any system, the union of subject and object in an absolute ... is theoretically possible only through endless approximation, like the approximation of a square to a circle” (EL:49-50, 62). While we can never achieve philosophy's 'unremitting demand' of both the union of subject and object (as well as of complete knowledge), that does not mean that we should give up on any attempt to do so. Rather, as philosophers who aim to maximise our knowledge we should continue in our aim while also being aware that the infinite nature of that aim will only result in an unending process. Although

progress in this task *is* entirely possible its completion is, theoretically speaking, not. In each moment of the process we can overcome more contradictions or expand our knowledge to range over more content, thereby more closely approximating the whole in both completeness and unity, although we will never reach that ideal. Hölderlin thereby establishes the notion of infinite approximation which we will find essential to the philosophies of all three of the major *Frühromantiker*.

The notion of infinite approximation is given more determinate form in the conflict found within what Hölderlin calls the “eccentric path.” The short account of self-consciousness given in “Über Urtheil und Seyn” lays the foundation for an internal conflict within consciousness between two tendencies whose nature is fleshed out in *Hyperion* and the *Thalia* fragment.⁵ As we saw, in self-consciousness we distinguish ourselves from ourselves insofar as reflection is dependent on the subject-object distinction, while also recognising our unity with this distinguished element in spite of this distinction. This double relation is the manifestation of two distinct tendencies, namely a striving for unity and a striving for difference, both of which are active within consciousness and its relation to nature and which lay the foundation for the “eccentric path” (Larmore, 2006, p.148). This path is marked by an initial striving for difference. In order to assert our freedom we distinguish ourselves from nature to establish our independence (Larmore, 2006, p.148). However, such distinctions can never be made absolutely. The subject always requires an object in order to be a subject at all, and our striving for independence can never be completed in such a way that it would destroy the very source of that striving. We are therefore forced to remain rooted in the same nature which our assertion of freedom distinguished us from, which represents our second tendency, the tendency towards unity (Larmore, 2006, p.148). We must therefore attempt to find some way of reconciling these opposed tendencies by placing them

5 Since no translation of the fragment is available I will be referencing Charles Larmore's summary.

within an ever more encompassing unity, within a unity of difference and identity. However, insofar as that unity within which oppositions such as that of difference and identity can both be dissolved and arise as oppositions in the first place (Being itself) can never be an object of cognition, as that which makes cognition possible in the first place, the recognition of such a reconciliation will itself be impossible.

Such a reconciliation can instead only ever be infinitely approximated. This infinite approximation is accomplished through the realisation that these opposing tendencies form the basis for human life. This process of realisation is illustrated in Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion*. Throughout this text, which takes the form of a retelling of a number of events in Hyperion's life in a series of letters to his friend Bellarmin, Hyperion continually finds that the comfort brought on by a new-found sense of unity is ultimately destroyed until the angst induced by separation is again overcome, *ad infinitum*. The novel begins with Hyperion lamenting his loss of childlike innocence and the subsequent attempt to return to that unity with nature through the characters Adamas, Alabanda, and Diotima. First, with Adamas' longing for the Greeks Hyperion attempts to reclaim this unity through nostalgia (Hyp:7-8). However, such delight at “flinging ourselves into ... any other world” could not provide for Hyperion the unity he desires with his own world, and so Hyperion and Adamas depart (Hyp:10). With Alabanda Hyperion's enthusiasm is stoked by the prospect of achieving morality in and for the world (Hyp:21). However, this enthusiasm for the prospect of a moral unity in the world is destroyed both in Hyperion's encounter with Alabanda's friends who, in the name of principle, have committed grave misdeeds, and the failure of the Greek revolt that Hyperion joins (which should have led to freedom) to reduce to anything but barbarism (Hyp:23, 25-6, 96-7). Finally, through Diotima's unreflective unity with nature Hyperion attempts to reclaim his own unity (Hyp:45). However, even Diotima, as

a result of Hyperion's enthusiasm for morality, becomes alienated from her unreflective unity and finds herself unable to return to it (Hyp:122). At the end of the novel, Hyperion again feels his unity with nature, when it seems he has heard Diotima's voice after her death. At this stage for Hyperion, it seems that "like lovers' quarrels are the dissonances of the world. Reconciliation is there, even in the midst of strife, and all things that are parted find one another again." (Hyp:133). Of course, this is merely another stage of his life in which one tendency has become dominant, suggested by the reversal found in the last line: "so I thought. More soon" (Hyp:133).

Inevitably, either of the two tendencies that are essential to consciousness will be dominant and life proceeds in an alternating rhythm between the two. While we could never hope to reconcile these opposed tendencies we can approximate this reconciliation by reconciling ourselves with this very fact as Hyperion does. By not striving against these tendencies we allow their harmony as two contradictory determinations of one and the same thing, ourselves, to become greater, and thus further approximate the unity of Being.

A presupposition of the possibility of such approximation highlights a positive aspect of our knowledge of the absolute which I earlier referred to as merely negative. This is a presupposition which does not appear in positions that are merely sceptical or pessimistic concerning knowledge of Being itself. The most appropriate example of this is Kant's transcendental idealism (at least as far as the theoretical is concerned). For Kant knowledge of the constitution of things in themselves is impossible for our discursive intellect as the forms of our intuition, space and time, through which the manifold of sensibility is given to us and unified by the categories, are merely the subjective forms of our sensible intuition (A26/B42, A32-33/B49-50). In this sense we are, at least as far as the theoretical is concerned, separated from Being (conceived as

things in themselves) since the possibility of knowledge of things in themselves is discounted entirely. In Hölderlin however, we must be cognitively 'closer' to Being than in Kant. For example, for Hölderlin we know Being to be ground of the division of subject and object which constitutes both our existence and our thought and we also know that it is both absolute unity and absolute. Most importantly however, for Hölderlin we must stand in a relation to Being itself that is not merely one of having something as one's ground since this relation to Being is that which enables us to approximate it at all. If we did not stand in some relation to that which we approximate then the notion of approximation as a determinate task would not be intelligible. In order for approximation to be possible some knowledge of the goal, that standard by which two separate moments of the process of approximation can be judged and understood as accomplishing this approximation to a greater or lesser extent, must be presupposed. Therefore, for Hölderlin, we are not entirely isolated from Being as Kant takes it that we are from things in themselves, and our knowledge of Being itself is not merely negative, but must have a positive aspect which does not entail cognitive or theoretical knowledge and which grounds the possibility of that approximation. As we will see, Novalis will later dub this relation 'feeling.'

Although we can theoretically never hope to complete the infinite approximation that aims at knowledge of Being, this approximation can be accomplished aesthetically. This occurs particularly metaphorically in tragic poetry.⁶ This is intimated in Hölderlin's letter to Schiller quoted above wherein Hölderlin writes that although the union of the subject and object is "theoretically possible only through endless approximation" it is still possible aesthetically (EL:62). An account of this possibility is given in Hölderlin's short essay *On the Difference of Poetic Modes*. First, however, we must go back to

6 For a more in-depth discussion see Françoise Dastur's "Tragedy and Speculation" and Jean-François Courtine's "Of Tragic Metaphor" in (Beistegui & Sparks, 2000)

“Über Urtheil und Seyn.” Here we saw that the most basic division of thought and existence is that between subject and object.⁷ This division must also not only be a division of Being but must come *from* Being itself since at the level of Being itself there is nothing else which could be the author of this division. Therefore, one of the ways in which Being reveals itself, and the primary way it reveals itself to us, is as the author of division (or of judgement). Intellectual intuition, the non-theoretical source of our awareness of the original unity, reflects this, as it is based on “the impossibility of an absolute separation and individuation” (IV, 268). When the parts of which Being is the source reach their extreme form of part-hood, of determinacy, differentiation, and separation, without losing their shared unity, unity appears at its strongest, as at that very moment the “impossibility of an absolute separation and individuation” is demonstrated by each element being shown to still be “a state of the primordially united” (IV, 268). This is re-iterated in Hölderlin's “The Significance of the Tragedies,” where he writes that “original matter appears not in original strength but, in fact, in its weakness” (IV, 274). The strength of the unity of Being shows itself not in appearances of unity but in the parts whose separation and differentiation nears absolute. That unity still exists at separation's strongest possible point attests to its ultimate power. Since it appears at separation's strongest possible point it must itself also appear at its own weakest point. Therefore, “original matter can only appear in its weakness” and the sign through which we represent the original must be “posited as insignificant = 0” (IV, 274). This is exactly what occurs in tragedy. In the tragic poem the tragic hero, aware of his fate, attempts to affirm his freedom against this fate, an attempt which ultimately leads to the hero committing the act they wished to avoid. At this point a paradox arises between freedom and fate, between the hero taking responsibility for something they

⁷ That the division between subject and object concerns existence and not merely thought is made clear in Hölderlin's February 24, 1796 letter to Niethammer.

perpetrated despite having willed to avoid it. At this point we find that the hero's death, the taking of responsibility for their actions, reduces the hero (the sign) to insignificance, and therefore maximally represents the unity of freedom and necessity, and the unity of Being itself. The tragic is therefore both the metaphor and effector of intellectual intuition (IV, 266).

Hölderlin and Frank on Realism and Idealism

So what can we say about realism and idealism in Hölderlin? While Manfred Frank ascribes to Hölderlin a strong form of realism Beiser characterises Hölderlin as an absolute idealist. First, let us look at Frank and Hölderlin's realism. Going back to the argument presented in Hölderlin's "Über Urtheil und Seyn" we can see how Hölderlin's account of judgement stands in direct opposition to idealism. If the source of absolute reality is attributed to consciousness then we get an extreme form of idealism but it is just this that Hölderlin rejects. The question that remains is whether that in turn allows us to ascribe to Hölderlin an adherence to realism. In respect to that we could take the view that ascribing reality and independence to anything outside of consciousness by definition opposes itself to idealism and thus is a form of realism. In this way we would play on the historical opposition between idealism and realism and committing ourselves to the view that to negate a position is the same as affirming its direct opposite. This is Frank's conviction regarding the *Frühromantiker* as a whole. In his series of lectures,⁸ Frank gives three definitions of what he takes realism to be. There is the general position of realism, which Frank takes to be the belief that "that which has being ... cannot be traced back to determinations of our consciousness" (Frank, 2004, p.28). In addition, this basic conviction can be split up into two major types of realism,

⁸ Although we will be focusing on the interpretation of the Early German Romantics given in (Frank, 2004), his writings on the romantics extend beyond this and anyone interested should also look at (Frank, 1997) from which these lectures are taken, as well as (Frank, 1989) and (Frank, 1972).

the metaphysical and epistemological, which respectively take it that reality exists independent of consciousness and that we do not possess adequate knowledge of reality (Frank, 2004, p.28). In applying these definitions to Hölderlin, Frank's basic argument is this: "they [Hölderlin and Novalis] claim that the relation of self-consciousness indicates conditioned knowledge, which obtains its Cartesian certainty (literally, then, its unconditioned-ness) only under the presupposition that is not presentable in knowledge. This presupposition is unconditioned Being. This is closely tied to a basic position of realism, which from its very roots, lies in opposition to absolute idealism" (Frank, 2004, p.75). For Frank, and as we saw above, Hölderlin rejects the self-sufficiency of self-consciousness on the basis that the duality found in the form of judgement through which we represent the unity of self-consciousness contradicts the unity that is actually experienced in self-consciousness such that self-consciousness can not be the source of this unity but instead unified Being must be pre-supposed as its condition (Frank, 2004, p.107). Since self-consciousness itself presupposes a prior unity this means that Being cannot be 'traced back to determinations of it.' Additionally, insofar as consciousness is a result of the original division of this Being this Being must also exist independently of consciousness. Lastly, insofar as Being precedes the division into subject and object upon which knowledge depends we can also never have adequate knowledge of it. Hölderlin therefore qualifies, by Frank's definitions, as a realist.

There are however some problems with Frank's account. The first is general and concerns a discrepancy in Frank's definitions of idealism and realism. Frank defines idealism as "the conviction - made especially compulsory by Hegel - that consciousness is a self-sufficient phenomenon, one which is still able to make the presuppositions of its existence comprehensible by its own means" (Frank, 2004, p.178). According to this

definition only someone who takes consciousness to not be a product of the world or things in the world and who simultaneously bears no sceptical beliefs about the limits of our knowledge will count as an idealist. However, no such absoluteness arises out of Frank's definitions of realism, in which there is a certain ambiguity or scope for what is to count as a realist. For example, there is no ambiguity about what it is to be able to make the presuppositions of the existence of consciousness comprehensible (one either can or can not), but there is a large ambiguity about what it is to not possess adequate knowledge of reality. There are after all a wide variety of ways in which non-adequacy of knowledge might manifest itself. For example, it might be a naïve realism with the addition of an indeterminacy of certain features of quantum entities, or it might be a wholesale scepticism about any claims to knowledge (bar the claim that Being is not reducible to determinations of consciousness). There is therefore, as far as these definitions are concerned, an absoluteness or narrowness about what it is to be an idealist and an ambiguity or breadth about what it is to be a realist. In this way Frank prejudices the issue against the attempt of all the *Frühromantiker* to combine idealism and realism, as it is far too easy, using Frank's own definitions, to identify someone as a realist and far too difficult to identify them as an idealist.

Moreover, Frank, who takes the early romantics to be calling for a 're-Kantianization' of philosophy ignores the possibility of the romantics employing a strategy that can be traced back to Kant's antinomies in which philosophical positions that can be formulated as logical contradictions can be overcome, which is exactly what Hölderlin is attempting to accomplish. This is the strategy found in Kant's dynamical and teleological antinomies as well as in Fichte's "Deduction of Presentation." That Hölderlin was concerned with this method becomes clear from two facts.⁹ Firstly, in a letter to Hegel Hölderlin writes that "the way in which he [Kant] combines the

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion see (Waibel, 2010).

mechanism of nature (hence also of destiny) with its purposefulness seems to me to contain indeed the entire spirit of his system,” adding later that Fichte has a 'remarkable notion' concerning the antinomies” (VI, 156) . Secondly, in a letter to Sinclair Hölderlin makes a specific attempt to overcome the opposition between mechanistic and teleological explanation that occupied Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, the solution of which, as we will see, takes a Fichtean form.

Let us quickly look at the development of the antinomical methods employed by Kant and Fichte as Waibel outlines them in her excellent article on just this topic. In the antinomies in which Kant does not merely reject both the thesis and antithesis his solutions take two forms. Either the conflicting elements are found to arise out of independent sources such that they can not be mutually exclusive in relation to each other, or the question posed by their opposition is exposed as one which neither understanding nor reason can adequately answer (Waibel, 2010, p.312). The former can be seen in the third antinomy found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which the opposition between determinism (or mechanism) and agency is overcome by limiting mechanical explanations to empirical phenomena while extra-mechanical forms of causation, that is, freedom, are ascribed to the intelligible 'realm' (Waibel, 2010, p.309). The latter solution can be seen in the teleological antinomy found in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. This antinomy concerns the cognitive validity of purely mechanical and teleological explanations. To solve this antinomy Kant gives teleological judgements a merely regulative validity. While mechanical laws are constitutively valid for all objects of nature, some natural objects can not be adequately explained in accordance with merely mechanical laws, thereby requiring the use of teleological explanations which can only be regulative insofar as we are incapable of determining the idea to which the teleological process conforms (Waibel, 2010, p.305-

6). In addition, due to the limits of our human cognition, we are incapable of discovering the 'common root' of these forms of causality (Waibel, 2010, p.306).

In Fichte's *Grundlage* the problem of Kant's third antinomy is repeated but the solution is changed. The *Grundlage* centres around the two propositions, corresponding to the theoretical and practical respectively. These are, “the self posits itself as determined by the not-self” and “the self posits the not-self as limited by the self” (I, 125-6). In other words, the self can be seen as both determined by its objects or free to determine those same objects. The solution is given in a passage that refers explicitly to Kant's antinomies, in which Fichte writes that “self and not-self are reciprocally related; if one is finite, the other is infinite, and *vice versa* ... (here lies the ground of the *antinomies* expounded by Kant)” (I, 245-6). Fichte's solution then, is not a limitation of the scope of the antinomy's underlying notions but rather an account of the way in which the two principles interact and relate to each other (Waibel, 2010, p.312). This differs from Kant's solution as not only can reason adequately answer for the opposition itself insofar as it is shown to be a reciprocal determination, but this antinomy does not even arise out of the independent sources of each element, since both are grounded in (and their interaction mediated by) the activity of the imagination. For Fichte, it is through the imagination that the self's infinite activity reaches outwards, meets its check and becomes finite, and continues to oscillate between these two states.¹⁰

Back to Hölderlin. Waibel, *in lieu* of a discussion of Hölderlin's approach to teleology and mechanism, due to a lack of any in-depth discussion of this on Hölderlin's part, opts to connect Hölderlin's thought with Kant's in the antinomies through his discussion of punishment. However, we get a much stronger connection if we consider Hölderlin's letter to Sinclair dated 24 December 1798. In this letter Hölderlin attempts to overcome the opposition between teleology and mechanism. He begins by rejecting

¹⁰ Thus, “all reality ... is brought forth solely by the imagination” (I, 227).

mechanism, on the grounds that it would have no object. Hölderlin argues that 'absolute monarchy' or complete determination is a self-defeating notion since anything which is completely able to determine its object will no longer have such an object opposed to itself (EL:117). Insofar as a universalised mechanism would represent just such an 'absolute monarchy' we should reject it as internally incoherent. Instead teleology is found to be necessary for mechanism to be true, as any object must be a result of “the individual and the whole ... and that together they make up *one* living whole which ... *consists of parts which are entirely independent but at the same time intimately and indissolubly interconnected*” (LS:117-8). This form of explanation does not remove the need for mechanistic explanation since one can still consider, from limited perspectives, certain forces to be dominant and to cause their effect according to the laws of mechanics (LS:118). Clearly then, Hölderlin was preoccupied not only with the issues of combining mechanism and purposefulness which seemed to him to contain the entire spirit of Kant's system but also with Fichte's 'remarkable notion,' namely his solution to the antinomy of freedom and mechanism that does not invoke some form of dualism.

Interestingly, we can also see Hölderlin's sublation of subjectivity and objectivity in absolute Being as following the structure of the resolution of an antinomy. First of all, we have the basic constituents of reality, subjectivity and objectivity, and their corresponding metaphysical thesis and antithesis, sketched as “we can only adequately explain the world according to subjectivity” or “we can only adequately explain the world according to objectivity.” Hölderlin can then be seen to be offering a Fichtean solution to this antinomy since he shows the necessary interaction of the notions underlying the thesis and antithesis as well as attributing them to a common source. First of all, insofar as subject and object must, by their opposition, be related through some third term, we are entitled to consider the existence of that term through which

this relation can be made possible, namely Being. We thereby establish their common source. Furthermore, insofar as absolute Being, *qua* absolute, has no determinate existence, the world does not arise at the level of Being itself. Instead, the world arises only out of the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity which itself is a result of the original division of Being, and it is only through the reciprocal determination of subjectivity and objectivity that the world itself arises. We therefore have some basic knowledge of the relation in which subjectivity and objectivity stand to each other. Hölderlin's notion of Being thereby overcomes the antinomy of metaphysical explanation: the world can only be adequately understood in the interaction of subjectivity and objectivity.

Frank's characterisation can not be right then. First of all, while it would be a stretch to say that Hölderlin in actuality *is* employing the very same method that Fichte develops from Kant, it is clear that firstly, we should interpret Hölderlin as attempting to combine idealism and realism, based on his own claims, and secondly, that the conceptual tools that would enable such a task, as well as a belief in our intellectual ability to combine contradictory positions, is present in the very philosopher that Frank sees Hölderlin, and the other romantics, as in some way returning to. Second of all, Frank's argument trades on a symmetry of opposition between idealism and realism that is not shared with the term that Hölderlin introduces in his rejection of the self-sufficiency of subjectivity. Specifically, the opposition between idealism and realism, through which the negation of idealism would lead to realism, is not symmetrical to the opposition between subjectivity and Being in Hölderlin. The term that would be symmetrically antithetical to subjectivity is objectivity. If Hölderlin rejected the self-sufficient status of consciousness in favour of grounding it in objectivity then Hölderlin could be interpreted as a realist. Of course this can not be the case for Hölderlin since

the move away from the subjective, with regards to ultimate reality, does not for Hölderlin bring us into the objective, that is, into realism. Instead, we find that Being, in Hölderlin's sense, is exactly that which can neither be traced back to determinations of consciousness or to whatever is opposed to consciousness. In other words, the ground of reality is found in Being that is prior to and which perfectly unites the opposed terms whose focus within a philosophical position would allow us to ascribe to it either idealism or realism. Now Frank does not think that Hölderlin is attributing ultimate reality to objectivity. However, this is what would have to be the case if his negation of consciousness is to necessarily lead to realism. Frank therefore prejudges the issue against Hölderlin insofar as his definitions make it far too easy to identify someone as a realist, he does not see the possibility of Hölderlin employing a similar framework as we find in Kant, and finally, he relies on an asymmetrical opposition between idealism and realism as well as consciousness and Being.

Frank could seemingly reply that such asymmetries do not matter since Hölderlin undoubtedly takes reality to be transcendent to consciousness. However, once we have a proper account of what reality is for Hölderlin we see that Hölderlin's notion of reality is not in fact entirely transcendent to consciousness, and that, in this way his position embodies exactly what we would expect from someone attempting to combine idealism and realism. So why is Frank wrong to claim that Hölderlin posits a reality transcendent to consciousness? Because the only 'thing' transcendent to consciousness is Being, which is not a candidate for reality. This is because Being, as absolute, is that ground which exists before any determination, or opposition, whatsoever, and therefore can not be determinate or differentiated. It is only with the introduction of difference and distinction that reality first arises out of the undetermined, or pure, existence of Being. And, as we know, the first division and opposition that result from this Being is

subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense, the world is as much dependent on mind as it is on objectivity, or in other words, reality is for Hölderlin not entirely transcendent to consciousness as Frank claims, as it is partially dependent on it. Frank must be wrong therefore to characterise Hölderlin as a realist since the Being that Hölderlin presents as an alternative ultimate ground in place of consciousness is not determinate enough to say whether it entails that Hölderlin's philosophy is grounded in realism or idealism. In addition, once we do get to the level of explanation in which such an ascription is possible, that is, the level of reality, we find that, insofar as the terms which now appear, namely subjectivity and objectivity, are equiprimordial, since neither can be discounted or favoured over the other, we find that, rather than providing us with a realism or idealism, which grounds one element in the other or discounts it entirely, Hölderlin's philosophy exemplifies exactly what we would expect from a position which attempts to overcome the opposition between realism and idealism.

Hölderlin and Beiser on Absolute Idealism

However, another form of idealism still remains. This is the idealism which Beiser ascribes to Hölderlin which is less concerned with whether or not being is grounded in consciousness and more concerned with the notion of a rational organising principle or idea. Beiser interprets Hölderlin, along with the other *Frühromantiker*, as an absolute idealist. First of all, for Beiser, absolute idealism is characterised by a commitment to the existence of the absolute, that which is understood through itself and exists in-itself and only for-itself (equivalent to Spinoza's substance) (Beiser, 2008, p.351-2). The absolute idealists are, for Beiser, also united in a reaction against and part rejection of Fichte coupled with a sympathy for Spinoza and monism (Beiser, 2003, p.133). This rejection of Fichte takes its form as a stronger realism. The absolute idealists are more realist than Fichte insofar as they take it that Being cannot be reduced

to subjectivity since the absolute contains all being (including material physics objects) (Beiser, 2008, p.356). Furthermore, absolute idealists are also Platonists insofar as they accept the theory of forms. Absolute idealism is also, for Beiser, characterised by its vitalism, the identification of the universe with an organism in a constant process of development according to some determinate purpose or idea (hence it is also a form of rationalism) (Beiser, 2008, p.352). Alongside this vitalism we find an adherence to naturalism. Insofar as the absolute idealists are monists they must therefore also hold that everything is a part of the absolute and must therefore be explicable according to its laws (Beiser, 2008, p.355). Furthermore, according to Beiser, absolute idealists see the mental and material as “different degrees of organization and development of a single living force” rather than distinct substances (Beiser, 2008, p.367). In the sense that the absolute idealists identify the absolute with a force in constant development in accordance with some ideal, and the mental and the physical are both appearances of this single living force, absolute idealism must be a form of idealism (Beiser, 2008, p.353). With this in mind Beiser offers a short definition of absolute idealism: “absolute idealism is the doctrine that everything is a part of the single universal organism, or that everything conforms to, or is an appearance of, its purpose, design, or idea” (Beiser, 2008, p.352). Lastly, Beiser's interpretation is adamantly anti-sceptical. Beiser rejects any sceptical reading of the absolute idealists on the basis that it is the result of focusing solely on earlier manuscripts. The shift Beiser claims to have found is marked by a later adherence to the Platonic heritage whose roots he claims are obvious in the earlier manuscripts as well. This adherence is based on the absolute idealists' emphasis on intellectual intuition and its non-discursivity which Beiser takes to be directly inspired by the non-discursive intuition of Plato's forms (Beiser, 2003, p.60).

Beiser takes Hölderlin to instantiate this form of idealism insofar as he argues in

favour of four specific theses. First, denying that subject-object identity can be located within consciousness alone. Second, that the absolute is constitutive and not merely regulative. Third, the claim that cognition of such an absolute is possible. And lastly, that nature is an autonomous organism with an independently existing reality (Beiser, 2008, p.375).

We have already seen the first of these theses. Fichte's I cannot contain the identity of subjectivity and objectivity since self-consciousness depends on a division between these terms that disqualify it as a source of this identity, which must now be found in Being (Beiser, 2008, p.389).

The second of these theses follow from the first. Beiser sees in this argument a transcendental deduction of Spinoza's substance. Following Fichte, Hölderlin takes the basic condition of knowledge to be subject-object identity. But insofar as this can only be found in a ground transcendent to consciousness akin to Spinoza's substance then the thought of this ground must be constitutive rather than regulative (Beiser, 2008, p.391).

The third thesis comes as a result of Hölderlin's aesthetics. Although for Beiser it is clear that Hölderlin thought we could gain knowledge of being itself through aesthetic means he takes him to have never completed his strategy for justifying this conclusion. What Beiser takes Hölderlin to have wanted to argue for is the necessity of aesthetic ideas for ensuring the proper functioning of understanding and reason (Beiser, 2008, p.396). Both reason and understanding are analytic, proceeding from the part to the whole, but they both presuppose some synthetic faculty, or sense for the whole through which their results can be ordered, which can only be found in aesthetic sense (Beiser, 2008, p.396). If understanding and Reason can not presuppose this whole they fall into contradiction and would thereby vindicate scepticism which Hölderlin, on Beiser's reading, would want to avoid, at least in its entirety (Beiser, 2008, p.396). In addition,

Beiser takes it that for Hölderlin cognition of the absolute is possible since even though Being is transcendent to consciousness and is the condition of experience and thinking, it is only the condition of *discursive* thinking and *sensible* intuition, and it can still make its appearance in intellectual intuition or aesthetic experience (Beiser, 2008, p.393).

The last thesis, concerning Hölderlin's organicism and the autonomy of nature, arises out of an opposition between different features the absolute must exhibit. First of all, being itself must be absolute unity. However, insofar as the world is to arise out of it it must also be 'self-distinguishing' (Beiser, 2008, p.398). In other words, the forms and activity whereby the absolute differentiates itself must have their source in the absolute itself. Insofar as this is the case the absolute can be identified with an organism in a constant process of “growth, organization, or differentiation,” and in “development from the unified, inchoate, and indeterminate into the manifold, organized, and determinate” (Beiser, 2008, p.399). Within this framework the ideal and real are different degrees of development of a single living force, which at the same time only become what they are through the other (Beiser, 2008, p.400). The aesthetic dimension returns here as Beiser takes it that for Hölderlin beauty is “is nothing less than the harmonic structure of reality itself” (Beiser, 2008, p.379).

We have already seen how Hölderlin's position can be seen to be neither idealistic nor realistic, and Beiser agrees with this at the level of idealism and realism in general (Beiser, 2008, p.389). However, for Beiser, Hölderlin can still be considered an absolute idealist since Beiser takes the question of absolute idealism to be separate from that of idealism and realism. Insofar as absolute idealism is a position which sublates the differences between idealism and realism then it can still be consistent to claim that Hölderlin is both an absolute idealist and that he wishes to overcome idealism and realism.

The problem with Beiser's interpretation therefore can not be that of the characterisation of Hölderlin as an absolute idealist in the face of Hölderlin's own aims but is instead found in the characterisation itself. Specifically, the problem is that Hölderlin simply can not be characterised as an absolute idealist. This is because the *Frühromantiker*, including Hölderlin, set themselves apart from the development of absolute idealism precisely in their scepticism about the possibility of knowledge of the absolute. Granted, the *Frühromantiker* held strong convictions regarding the existence of some identity between the subject and object which can be characterised as Being, a presupposition shared by the absolute idealists.¹¹ However, this conviction, though a strong metaphysical thesis in its own right, also comes with a series of epistemological constraints which do not appear in their absolute idealist counterparts. Schelling, for example, in his identity philosophy, begins with this identity as opposed to deducing it. For the romantics on the other hand, Being's existence, and that it meets the demand from which its existence is derived (that it is an identity between subject and object), are the only things we can know regarding this absolute, which otherwise remains ungraspable in its entirety. This sets them apart from absolute idealism for which the absolute remains graspable and knowable. That the absolute can, for Hölderlin and the other early romantics, be felt or intimated in aesthetic intuition is not enough to warrant their inclusion in this movement precisely because its central tenet regarding the possibility of theoretical knowledge of the absolute is categorically rejected by the romantics. Beiser is therefore, I suggest, wrong to characterise Hölderlin as an absolute idealist.

In conclusion, we can not interpret Hölderlin as a realist, idealist, or even absolute idealist, but should instead interpret him as finding a middle path between

¹¹ See §41 in *Hegel's Logic: Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, and §1 of Schelling's *Darstellung*

idealism and realism as I have done above. We began with a short summary making clear that this was in fact Hölderlin's aim before moving on to the major elements of Hölderlin's philosophy based on the metaphysical and epistemological foundations laid out in his essay "Über Urtheil und Seyn." As we saw, Hölderlin's position is one of scepticism regarding the possibility of theoretical knowledge of the absolute outside of aesthetic representation coupled with a rejection of Fichte's absolute I as a candidate for that absolute. Being is instead identified as that which consciousness itself presupposes and which gives unity to the subject-object opposition. Knowledge of this Being can also only ever be infinitely approximated. We then turned to Frank's interpretation, which argues that insofar as Hölderlin takes reality to be transcendent to consciousness and our knowledge to be inadequate to reality Hölderlin should be seen as a realist. However, we dismissed such an interpretation on the grounds that it not only goes against Hölderlin's own aims but misrepresents his notion of Being and of reality's dependence on and independence from consciousness. We then found that since subjectivity and objectivity only arise out of opposition to each other, are dependent on each other, are equiprimordial, and that the world is a product of this opposition, Hölderlin's philosophy exemplifies exactly the position we would expect from someone who wanted to combine idealism and realism. Having covered the possibility of interpreting Hölderlin in line with his own aims, and rejected one-sided idealist and realist readings of Hölderlin, we turned to a last alternative, namely Beiser's absolute idealist reading. Here we saw that we simply can not include Hölderlin, or any of the *Frühromantiker*, in the absolute idealist movement since their scepticism regarding absolute knowledge, regardless of any aesthetic manifestations of such knowledge, sets them apart from the basic position of absolute idealism. Having rejected any idealist, realist, or absolute idealist readings of Hölderlin, and demonstrated the possibility of

interpreting Hölderlin in accordance with his own aims, I conclude that we both can and should interpret Hölderlin as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

Chapter 2 – Realism and Idealism in Novalis

In this chapter I will be looking at realism and idealism in Novalis. I will show that we both can and should interpret Novalis as falling somewhere between idealism and realism. I will begin by making it clear that this was in fact Novalis' aim by giving some examples from his own texts in which he makes this explicit. I will then move on to his arguments regarding the nature of philosophy and the possibility of absolute knowledge as found in his *Fichte Studies*. As we will see, the *Fichte Studies* is a divided text. The dialectical product of a struggle between Novalis' philosophical ambitions and his self-imposed epistemological constraints. In order to bring this out I will begin with a summary of what Novalis takes to be the aim of philosophy followed by his criticism of Fichte that makes apparent why he takes it that Fichte was unsuccessful in achieving these aims. We will see more of this internal struggle as we look closer at Novalis' aims and sceptical conclusions about the nature of reflection. I will then move on to the later writings of Novalis, his fragments and *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*. There is a tension between these and the earlier work insofar as these works are not sceptical to the degree that the *Fichte Studies* were. However, as I will show, scepticism is as much part of the later work as it is of the earlier work in Novalis, something which recent accounts such as Frederick Beiser and Alison Stone's have not taken sufficiently into account. Having presented Novalis' philosophical position I will then quickly summarise Beiser and Frank's opposing interpretations of Novalis as an absolute idealist and realist respectively, before giving a critique of these one-sided interpretations. In the light of this and what has preceded I will then give an interpretation of Novalis' relation to idealism and realism which takes his self-proclaimed aim of finding a middle path between the two into account. Having done this, I will conclude that we both can and

should interpret Novalis' philosophical position as occupying a space between idealism and realism.

Novalis on Philosophy

Novalis makes it clear in several places that one of his philosophical aims is to find some middle position between idealism and realism. For example, in a selection of notes titled *General Draft* intended for his encyclopedia Novalis writes that the “idealization of realism and realization of idealism leads to truth” (GD:32). Additionally, in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* Novalis makes clear his contention that idealism and realism are not opposed, or at least that this opposition can be removed insofar as “idealism should not be opposed to realism, but to formalism” (AB:565). However, it is not just that this opposition is in some way illusory or surmountable, but it is essential to the very task of philosophy as it is only “the complete concurrence of idealism and realism” that “furnishes the complete proof of the correct methodology for everything” (AB:634).

In order to find out how Novalis' takes himself to accomplish this aim we will begin by looking at his collection of notes and fragments, written in 1795 and 1796, titled *Fichte Studies*. This collection of notes is a divided work. The work contains a sustained critique of Fichte and of the possibility of philosophy in general while also containing several fragments that reveal Novalis' philosophical aims which stand opposed to the conclusions reached in the sections manifesting the former of these two tendencies. Insofar as the possibility of philosophy in general, or rather, the possibility of a sufficient and total system of philosophy is concerned, Novalis presents three arguments against this possibility which are all based on an exposition of the nature of reflection. The first of these is found in Novalis' critique of Fichte and here Novalis argues that reflection is incapable of grasping identity in itself insofar as it must always

present identity as a compound rather than a simple identity. If reflection is only capable of grasping identity as a compound, or as secondary, then it must also be incapable of grasping the absolute as that which is prior to its products. Secondly, Novalis argues that reflection necessarily reverses the order of being in the objects it reflects upon. Finally, Novalis reiterates in his own terms an argument common amongst his contemporaries, that insofar as our knowledge is always conditioned we are incapable of grasping the unconditioned (or the absolute).

Some way into the *Fichte Studies* Novalis writes about the start and aims of philosophy. “What do I do when I philosophize?” Asks Novalis, “I reflect upon a ground. The ground of philosophizing is thus a striving after the thought of a ground” (FS:566). The ground is that which ensures something's connection to the whole. If two things share a ground their connection can be made apparent. The end of philosophy is for Novalis an absolute ground, that which would provide unity to the entire series of conditioneds that compose our world (FS:566). Philosophy therefore starts with a systematic disposition. We search for the unconditioned which would allow us to order and connect every thing into a systematic whole and whose own existence must also be made apparent and explicit. This ground itself is being, the pre-subjective and unitary ground of consciousness and nature. “Being,” is the “ground of all relation” (FS:312). This starting point of philosophy also contains its high-reaching ambitions that combined with Novalis' continual scepticism set the stage of the internal dialectic of the work. With this search for Being Novalis is aiming at transcending Spinoza and Fichte, where “Spinoza ascended as far as nature – Fichte to the I, or the person. I [ascend] to the thesis God” (FS:151).

However, due to the nature of reflection, this search for the absolute ground, for Being, and for God, will never be completed. Novalis' first argument against the

possibility of this appears in his critique of Fichte's I as a principle of philosophy. For Fichte the ground with which Novalis takes our philosophising to be tasked with finding is found in the self-constituting act of consciousness in which there is an identity between the self insofar as it is an object for a subject and the self insofar as it has an object for itself, is a subject. As we saw in the last chapter, Fichte took the identity of self-consciousness to be absolutely valid and the existence of the I to be absolute insofar as he took it to be a necessary condition for the validity of the proposition "a = a." Novalis rejects this strategy on the basis of reflection's inability to represent identity. For Novalis, in the proposition "a = a" we do not successfully represent identity in itself but rather represent it through a positing, a differentiating, and a combining (FS:1). To say that *a* is *a* is to make a judgement. In this judgement of identity both *a* and *a* become posited. However, insofar as both are posited as two terms of a judgement the two are also differentiated. It is only through the copula that both are combined in the judgement in order to present them as identical. The identity presented in the proposition "a = a" is therefore not a simple, or analytic one, but rather an identity constructed out a compound of two terms. In other words, it is a synthetic identity. In this way we misrepresent the unity that would underlie the possibility of the proposition "a = a" where each *a* would be a term which is only made possible by this prior unity, by representing the unity as secondary to, and also composed of, the terms of the judgement. Thus, "we abandon the *identical* in order to present it" and an attempt at a presentation of identity merely produces an "illusory proposition" (FS:1).

We can also apply this logic to Fichte's judgement of self-consciousness, to the "I am I" through which we become aware of the self-constituting act of consciousness. In the judgement "I am I" we don't find an underlying unity between our I in the subject and our I in the object position. Rather, the identity we find between the two has been

constructed through the copula, such that the absolute ego (as found in reflection) does not underlie the self and the not-self but rather appears as a compound of these former two. Insofar as its identity can not be guaranteed by our reflection, and insofar as reflection merely produces illusory propositions, and Fichte's proof of the I as a first principle of philosophy relies on this proposition, the I can not be a proper candidate for a first principle of philosophy. In addition, since the absolute is the ground of all being it must itself be prior to that being. Insofar as we are unable to represent such an identity as prior to its own terms we must also be unable to grasp the absolute itself, and the possibility of a complete system of philosophy is therefore also rejected.

The second argument against the possibility of philosophy comes out of Novalis' discussion of feeling and thought. Although Novalis rejects Fichte's I as a first principle of consciousness Novalis himself starts with consciousness and an attempt to find its ground. However, unlike Fichte, Novalis maintains that we find ourselves incapable of discovering this and instead of being able to find a single source of consciousness and thought we find two, feeling and reflection (FS:15-6). Feeling is described as a sense for the original act, for that which consciousness relies on but which it can not be made responsible for. This places a limit to philosophy's potential reach such that “the borders of feeling are the borders of philosophy” (FS:15). Insofar as feeling stands opposed to reflection, reflection is unable to comprehend it, and should it attempt to do so “the spirit of feeling” would then be “gone” (FS:15). Both feeling and reflection contribute to intuition, and here Novalis introduces another sceptical conclusion (FS:16). Similar to how our attempts at representing identity negate that very identity, so do our attempts at feeling or reflecting invert the order of being of their objects. Novalis writes,

“In consciousness it must appear as if it went from the limited to the unlimited, because consciousness must proceed from itself as limited – and this happens through feeling - without consideration of the fact that feeling, regarded abstractly, is a progression from unlimited to limited –

this inverted appearance is natural”
(FS:17)

Philosophy begins with consciousness and attempts to find its unconditioned ground. Therefore it starts with our limited, empirical consciousness and moves towards the unlimited, its ground. It therefore begins to look for the original act through which consciousness arises, which it must do through feeling. This is because we only have a feeling (or belief) for the original act since, as that which first makes awareness possible it can not be an object of awareness itself. Insofar as the object of feeling is the act that grounds our limited empirical consciousness, feeling moves from the unlimited to the limited. The error of reflection is that it attempts to move from the limited to the unlimited by way of a mode of 'knowing' which requires a movement in the opposite direction. Therefore, in the same way that our attempts at representing identity understand it as a composition of objects rather than a prior unity out of which these objects are derived, our attempts at understanding the absolute ground of consciousness reverse the order of its being, understanding our only access to it as a progression from the limited to the unlimited as opposed to its proper order. Since the absolute is the originally unlimited ground of everything understanding is therefore also incapable of grasping the absolute.

The last argument Novalis gives for the impossibility of knowing the Absolute follows a common strategy at the time. The argument simply states that since all knowledge is conditioned knowledge then knowledge of the absolute, or the unconditioned, is by definition impossible. In Novalis' terms it appears as such:

“All reflection relates to an object. An object as such, however, is determined by the original oppositions. I can thus only think a determinate thing – the undetermined is only thinkable as opposite, but insofar as the opposite is an object, it is already determined by itself”
(FS:278)

Reflection depends on the positing of an object in opposition to consciousness. Even before any categories of thought might make their appearance all objects must stand under the condition of objectivity in general which for Novalis means simply that they can be opposed to a consciousness. Insofar as even this basic pre-supposition of consciousness having any object is a determination so must consciousness be unable to grasp the undetermined, or the absolute.

Philosophy begins with reflection on a ground. It aims at the pre-subjective, pre-objective, singular, unconditioned ground of all thinking and being. It aims at the absolute ground. However, due to the nature of reflection, the discovery of this ground is impossible for us. For us, the concept of an absolute ground contains an impossibility. “The drive to philosophize” is therefore nothing but an “unending activity” (FS:566). Philosophy contains a desire which it may never fulfil. Instead, “unending free activity in us arises through the free renunciation of the absolute – the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we only find through our inability to know an absolute” (FS:566). The only absolute we might find is the negative absolute of the impossibility of our finding an absolute. We can neither find it nor can we begin with it and thus “all searching for *a single principle* would be like the attempt to square the circle” (FS:566).

Having covered the sceptical dimension of the *Fichte Studies* we will now turn to Novalis' later fragments as well as *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*.¹² The aim of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* is to find and present the underlying unity found within all sciences. In this way, the task of the encyclopedia represents the ideal of knowledge, that through which all our other knowledge can be organised in its interdependence and coherence. In one of the earliest entries in the *Brouillon* Novalis laments the fact that

12 The word 'later' is a misnomer. The *Fichte Studies* were written from 1795 to 1796 while the *Brouillon* and fragments were written in the time between 1797 (starting with the *Logological Fragments*) to 1800 (ending with the *Last Fragments*). However, that there is a break between these two periods will become clear below and this break in thought is also documented in (Stone, 2008).

“there is as yet no physics—there are only isolated physical sciences” (AB:8). This is why Novalis sets himself the task of working his “way through all the sciences—and collect material toward encyclopedistics. First the mathematical sciences—then the others—philosophy, morality etc. last of all.” (AB:229). Encyclopedistics is defined by Novalis as the basis of science itself, as that science which “I make it into a universal science and order it *under itself*—and consider all the other sciences as a modification of it” (AB:90, 155). Given Novalis' sceptical disposition in the *Fichte Studies* we might question why Novalis thought such a project would be possible. The reason Novalis thinks this project might be possible is because, as Alison Stone points out, for Novalis, all sciences ultimately deal with relations. This is so because the particular objects with which the sciences are concerned are constructed out of their relations with each other (Stone, 2008, p.155). Novalis confirms this early on in the *Brouillon* when he writes that “our world is what it is as a member of the universal system of the world. Its changes are determined in conjunction with the changes in the larger system” (AB:113). This relation holds not only for our world but also for particular things as “everything distinct, is only *distinct* and *individual*—insofar as it is already defined in a system” (AB:79). The burden for the rest of the text is then to show that such uniform relations are in fact multiply instantiated across different scientific disciplines which will also allow Novalis to show exactly what these relations consist of as well as demonstrate the unity of all the sciences.

However, we will be focusing not on the particular relations Novalis takes to hold between objects and their correspondence across scientific disciplines but rather on the philosophical import this methodology has for Novalis. One of the most interesting consequences Novalis' new focus on the sciences has for his philosophy is the emphasis he now places on empiricism. In numerous fragments Novalis talks about the

importance of understanding nature in order to understand ourselves. True criticism is for Novalis the methodology that in the study of our self brings us out to the external world in observations and experiments (AB:820). Novalis even goes as far as to say, in an entry titled “Philosophy,” that “idealism is nothing but genuine empiricism” (AB:402). Along with the external world being necessary for understanding ourselves, mathematics is that discipline through which the external world should be understood. In the *Freiberg Natural Scientific Studies* Novalis writes that “all sciences should become mathematics. Up to now, mathematics has merely been the first and simplest expression or revelation of true scientific spirit. The numerical system is the model for a genuine system of linguistic signs - The letters of our alphabet shall become numbers, our language, arithmetic,” adding later that “physics is *real* mathematics” (FNSS:9, 11).

None of this stands in opposition to the *Fichte Studies* however. The move towards the empirical is motivated by the sceptical conclusions reached in this earlier work, after all we still “*seek* the absolute everywhere and only ever *find* things” (MO:1). That we attempt to understand ourselves by turning towards nature should come as no surprise either. It is merely the natural consequence of the fact that reflection, due to its own limitations, reverse the order of being. Insofar as reflection reverses what it reflects upon we must re-reverse our attempts at understanding our object, understanding nature through the self and the self through nature. This is also why Novalis, in the same entry, refers to criticism as including “the method of inversion” (AB:820).

Although the 'outward gaze'¹³ we find in empiricism seems to follow on from the conclusions reached in the *Fichte Studies* there are at least two elements of the *Brouillon* and later fragments that seem to stand opposed to the framework laid out in the earlier work, namely Novalis' magical idealism and his organicism. The basic

13 “The first step will be an inward gaze – an isolating contemplation of ourselves. Whoever stops here has only come halfway. The second step must be an outward gaze – autonomous, constant observation of the external world” (MO:26).

principle of magical idealism is that the external world should be just as determinable by our will as our internal 'world' is. In the same way that we can direct our thoughts spontaneously, so should we be able to control nature itself. In the *Brouillon* this 'magic' is linked to what Novalis refers to as a “mystical theory of language” (AB:137). This links with Novalis' contention that the movements and changes of the universe are a form of communication, “Everything we experience is a communication. Thus the world is indeed a communication,” such that “the universe also speaks—everything speaks” (LFII:54, AB:143). This might seem like a mystical doctrine, not in the least because Novalis uses that very word, but it might be more commonsensical than it first appears. The conviction that nature is a communication depends merely upon the perspective or aim one takes up. If one wishes to discover the laws and processes that underlie nature then what is nature doing but communicating the answer to that question through its manifestations of those laws and processes? That there is some sort of language at the bottom of these processes¹⁴ does not mean anything other than that these processes can be expressed in some discursive way, which is nothing other than a basic condition of their intelligibility for us since our intellect is discursive. In fact, we already know the language that Novalis takes to lie at the basis of all things, namely mathematics. Insofar as we can understand nature the workings of nature, which we do through mathematics, we will also be able to manipulate those workings to control nature at our will, which is all magic means for Novalis (AB:322). After all, “the active use of our organs is nothing more than magical, wonder-working thinking, or the arbitrary use of the physical world—for willing is nothing more than the magical, powerful faculty of thought”(AB:1075).

The next aspect of the *Brouillon* and fragments that stands out in opposition to the scepticism of the *Fichte Studies* is Novalis' organicism. In her article "Being,

14 “A grammatical mysticism lies at the basis of everything” (AB:138)

Knowledge, and Nature in Novalis" Alison Stone gives an account both of the nature of Novalis' organicism and the epistemological consequences of this, and an important question regarding Novalis' scepticism arises out of this article. In the article, Stone attempts to reconcile Frank's sceptical realist reading of Novalis with Beiser's organicist and absolute idealist interpretation by giving an account of the development of Novalis' non-scepticism in the writings following the *Fichte Studies*. Stone sees the development of Novalis' thought to consist in the move from the unknowability of being to holding that being is knowable as self-organising nature which, due to its spontaneity, only gives us access to its forms of organization without knowledge of why those particular forms of organization manifest themselves (Stone, 2008, p.141). She also takes it that this move is motivated by the difficulties inherent in Novalis' attempt to re-enchant a nature which in its finite manifestations, and by the account of experience given in the *Fichte Studies*, necessarily appears as comprehensible, mechanistic, and lifeless (Stone, 2008, p.148, 151). For Stone, in order to address this issue, Novalis moves towards an organicist view of nature in which the meaning of natural objects is guaranteed by their reference to an infinite amount of similarly structured phenomena that arise out of the self-organisation of nature, the reference of which need only be made apparent by science (thereby making the object enchanted) (Stone, 2008, p.154-5). Insofar as nature is organically self-organising and unitary we can throughout nature make apparent the systems of organisation which nature has produced for itself in characteristically organic patterns and therefore also make the character of nature, or the absolute, intelligible (Stone, 2008, p.157). In this way knowledge of the absolute becomes possible through science itself, provided that science(s) do(es) not merely disclose nature as mechanistic and lifeless (Stone, 2008, p.158). However, insofar as nature is free, since there is nothing external to nature through which it could be determined, the forms of its

organisation must be the result of its spontaneous activity and must therefore be unintelligible to us (Stone, 2008, p.158, 160). Nature is therefore only knowable insofar as its organisation is concerned, while the reason for its particular organisation is not something of which we could gain knowledge.

Stone's article raises an important question of the role of scepticism in Novalis' writings following the *Fichte Studies*. Although the tone of the later writings indisputably change, the scepticism for the most part remains. Let us begin with the knowability of the absolute. This is a recurring theme for Novalis, from the 1775-6 *Fichte Studies*, through to his 1798 *Teplitz Fragments* and finally his *Last Fragments* dated to 1800 before his death in 1801. The *Teplitz Fragments* are perhaps most telling since they seem to suggest the sort of anti-scepticism that Stone and Beiser take to be a characteristic of Novalis' later works, while on second glance we find that the scepticism remains. One instance of this non-scepticism is Novalis' remark that "nothing is more attainable for the spirit than the infinite" (TF:14). At this point there are two possible candidates for the infinite Novalis is referring to. There is Being-in-itself, and, going back to the fragment in the *Fichte Studies* on renunciation, there is the infinite activity that arises out of our renunciation of the possibility of knowing the absolute, which Novalis took to be "the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we only know and find through our inability to attain and know an absolute" (FS:566). So is Novalis referring to infinite renunciation or infinite being? The answer is found in another *Teplitz Fragments* in which Novalis writes, on women, "are they not similar to the infinite in that they cannot be squared, but can be found only through approaching them?" (TF:17). By invoking the notion of approaching we find that Novalis is still deeply situated within the framework of infinite approximation which is a cornerstone of *Frühromantik* as a sceptical movement. The language of the fragment

also harks back to the *Fichte Studies* in which Novalis says of the impossibility of finding a first principle that “all searching for a single principle would be like the attempt to square the circle” (FS:566). If, for Novalis, the attempt to understand a woman is like the attempt to square the circle,¹⁵ and it is the same with the infinite, then the infinite that it is so easy for the spirit to attain can not be infinite Being, but only the infinite renunciation of our possibility of knowing the infinite itself. This scepticism in infinite approximation carries through to Novalis' *Last Fragments* wherein Novalis simply writes "philosophy will never be complete" (LF:39).

This scepticism is also central to the *Brouillon*. As we've seen the aim of the *Brouillon* is to find the the underlying unity of all sciences, philosophy included. The aim is to find that single element which we could use to organise our entire body of current and future knowledge. In essence, it is the search for a single principle. In the very same text, illustrating his continued anti-foundationalism, Novalis reiterates the impossibility of finding such a principle when he writes that “every science has its God, that is also its goal ... Philosophy seeks a first and single principle. The mathematician, the squaring of the circle” (AB:314). Again first principles are compared to the impossibility of squaring the circle. This does not mean that Novalis' attempt at discovering this unity is self-contradictory. We can still approximate this unity and as philosophers we should be concerned with approximating it as closely as possible. The impossibility of completion does not necessitate the impossibility of progress.

I have already said why I take Novalis' empiricism to be consistent with the *Fichte Studies*, what is less obvious is how his magical idealism is not entirely anti-sceptical.¹⁶ After all, the call for us to control nature such that we can control our own world seems to be a call both for the complete understanding of nature itself and, and

15 Offensive as the comparison is.

16 The sceptical dimensions of Novalis' organicism will be explored as part of my critique of Beiser's interpretation of Novalis.

when such control has been established, the ability to explain nature entirely by way of the self that controls it. However, Novalis' magical idealism is not anything more mystical than an adaptation and re-phrasing of Fichte's practical imperative that the self should determine the not-self. This is found in the practical part of the *Grundlage*, wherein Fichte considers the proposition "the self posits the not-self as limited by the self" (I, 125). For Fichte, insofar as the self is viewed as an intelligence, that is, as empirical consciousness, the self is determined under the mode of being a presenting being (I, 248). However, this self differs from the self in general, or the self considered in abstraction from its specific determinations (I, 248). Now the self in general, or the absolute self, was supposed to provide the ground for the absolute identity of the self, but insofar as the self is determined by the not-self it stands opposed to the absolute self (I, 249). This creates a demand for the self as the validity of the judgement 'I am I' is contradicted by the dependence of the self on the not-self. In order to reinstate this identity the not-self will have to be shown to be determined by the self (I, 249). However, there is a contradiction implicit in this demand. In order for the self to be a self at all it must oppose something to itself. If the self were to completely determine the not-self it would then become a part of the self such that it would no longer be opposed to it and the self would no longer be a self at all (I, 254). The self must therefore aim to make the world subject to its will knowing that this task could never be completed even if it is the demand of practical reason itself. Both in magical idealism and in Fichte's demand of practical reason we find the same notion of making the world subject to our will. Just as we are able to direct our internal world, our thoughts, at will so should we be able to direct the external world and its objects. In Novalis this is to occur through science and through the control of our own sensory organs. However, in both Novalis and Fichte the aim is one which will never be achieved. In Fichte its accomplishment

would mean the end of the ego, and in Novalis it will never be completed since such a task would require a comprehensive knowledge of nature which by its very infinity is impossible.

Given all of this, what is the role and methodology of philosophy? Philosophy begins with the search for an absolute ground but finds that this goal in itself contains an impossibility. However, as philosophers we are still aiming for the maximum of knowledge and for truth. It is just that this goal in itself will never be completed. Truth is therefore now recast as an “inward, inherent harmony and concordance,” an inner coherence of all thought which can never be verified but which at every stage can become ever more probable (AB:881). In order to achieve this coherence philosophy has to overcome the contradictions that arise from taking merely partial viewpoints of the universe (KS:47). All standpoints on the absolute are relative insofar as they are not the standpoint of the absolute and are therefore false with regards to the whole. This is partially the project undertaken in the *Brouillon*. By showing the underlying unity of disparate disciplines of science their partiality is removed and their oppositions shown to be illusory. The task of philosophy then is to overcome these partialities in order to infinitely approximate the ideal of total knowledge. Specifically, “philosophy disengages everything—relativizes the universe—And like the Copernican system, eliminates the fixed points—creating a revolving system out of one at rest. Philosophy teaches the relativity of all reasons and all features—the infinite diversity and unity in the constructions of one and the same thing etc.” (AB:622)

Novalis and Beiser on Absolute Idealism

Having covered some of the main features of Novalis' philosophy we can now move on to critically evaluating Beiser and Frank's interpretation. As we saw in the last chapter, Beiser interprets Novalis, along with the other *Frühromantiker*, as an absolute

idealist and takes absolute idealism to be characterised by a commitment to the existence of the absolute, a rejection of Fichte coupled with a sympathy for Spinoza and monism, an adherence to the theory of forms, vitalism, the identification of the universe with an organism in a constant process of development according to some determinate idea, an adherence to naturalism, and the positing of the real and ideal as merely “different degrees of organization and development of a single living force” rather than distinct substances (Beiser, 2008, p.367). As we saw, Beiser's interpretation is also thoroughly anti-sceptical. Beiser claims that any sceptical reading of the *Frühromantiker* comes as a result of focusing solely on earlier manuscripts and ignoring the later writings of the *Frühromantiker*. Combining all of these features together, Beiser defines absolute idealism as “the doctrine that everything is a part of the single universal organism, or that everything conforms to, or is an appearance of, its purpose, design, or idea” (Beiser, 2008. p.352)

It is within this framework that Beiser locates Novalis' philosophy. Even though Beiser dismisses sceptical readings of Novalis he does spend time on the *Fichte Studies* uncovering what he takes to be its main argument. However, insofar as Beiser takes Novalis to later reject the consequences of these arguments we will focus on Beiser's reading of the later Novalis. The two elements of Novalis' writings which Beiser takes to be definitive (apart from the *Fichte Studies*) is his magical idealism and his syncretism.

As we have seen the aim of magical idealism is to extend the power of will over nature such that we can live in a world of which we are the authors (Beiser, 2008, p.422-3). This is a form of idealism since it ultimately wishes to make perception dependent on our own creative activity, and it is a form of magic since it is an attempt at exercising control over nature through reason (Beiser, 2008, p.423). It is also merely

regulative ideal which we should strive for but can never attain. For Beiser this presents a fusing of Kant and Fichte insofar as for Kant we know what we create and for Fichte making depends on willing, whereas in magical idealism, the world depends on the will (Beiser, 2008, p.423-4). Beiser also maintains that there is a realist side to magical idealism which consists in learning when to be passive and integrate oneself with nature since the ultimate goal is a harmony of energy and passivity (Beiser, 2008, p.424).

The second part of Beiser's interpretation of Novalis concerns his syncretism. This is aimed at being a form of criticism which fuses idealism and realism, and involves understanding nature as mind and mind as nature. The theoretical underpinning of syncretism is its symbolic physics which takes it that the visible can symbolize the invisible and vice versa. The soul also symbolizes the body and the body symbolizes the soul and the world is a communication, or revelation, of spirit (Beiser, 2008, p.430). syncretism's idealist dimension is that we know things only insofar as we can make them accord with our own laws, while the realist dimension is that we know things only insofar as we make ourselves into the object and alienate ourselves. These meet in the fact that "I create and extend the nature of the object by making it conform to me; and I create and extend myself by making it conform to the object" (Beiser, 2008, p.432). In syncretism objects become determinate through their being known. In this way the distinction between an object's determinacy and the knowledge of it falls apart and they turn out to be almost the same thing (Beiser, 2008, p.432). Conversely, the knowing subject also only becomes what it is through knowing objects (Beiser, 2008, p.432). This fuses idealism and realism since in idealism we see subject as cause of the object, in realism we see the object as cause of the subject, and in syncretism they are both the cause of each other's determinacy (Beiser, 2008, p.432)

As we saw in the last chapter, Beiser's characterisation of the romantics as

absolute idealists fails as a result of the inherent scepticism of the romantics, a scepticism which we've seen repeated in Novalis. However, there are aspects of Beiser's interpretation that must be correct. Most importantly, the features which Beiser takes to be salient to an interpretation of Novalis all take into account his attempt at fusing idealism and realism. In syncretism the world as determinate both through objectivity and subjectivity only arises out of their mutual determination. In magical idealism we should aim to be as much in harmony and passive with nature as we should try to control it. The account of realism as it relates to magical idealism might seem strange but the most important thing is Beiser's attempt to interpret magical idealism in a way consistent with Novalis' aim to find a middle ground between the two.

The question now becomes, having established his reading of magical idealism and syncretism, why does Beiser insist on characterising Novalis as an organicist absolute idealist? It is at this point that Beiser's interpretation falters, as it concerns Novalis' inherent scepticism and our ability to know the absolute itself. If it turns out that Beiser is wrong to take it that Novalis holds the absolute to be an organically self-organising form of being of whose rationality everything is merely an appearance, then regardless of how correct his interpretation of magical idealism or syncretism is, we could still say that he is wrong to classify Novalis as an absolute idealist.

So what does Novalis say about the absolute? In the *Fichte Studies* he is adamant that we can know nothing about the absolute or its nature. However, insofar as Beiser dismisses sceptical readings that focus on Novalis' earlier writings, relying on what Novalis says in the *Fichte Studies* would have little force. We must therefore look at what Novalis had to say about the nature of the absolute in his later writings. Perhaps the most important place is the *Brouillon* in which Novalis seems to suggest that the universe is in some sense a self-organising organism. He writes,

*“the life process ... and the structuring process determine individuality—
Its complete study conveys to us the natural ... every individual life process
is codetermined by the universal life process ... ultimately by the natural
system of the universe ... therefore, one can justifiably call the complete
natural system of a perfect individual—a function of every other perfect
individual—and a function of the universe”*
(AB:460)

That there is a universal life process and a natural system of the universe suggests the existence of a process of organisation that takes an organic form which is ascribed to nothing less than the universe itself. However, this remark is immediately revoked when Novalis writes

“therein lies perhaps the character of a complete individual. An incomplete individual would have an incomplete natural system—which is indicated by an incessant striving, a feeling of dissatisfaction, a deficiency—a boundlessness”
(AB:460).

The end of the quote is reminiscent of the fragment from the *Fichte Studies* in which Novalis tells us the only absolute we can ever achieve is that of infinite renunciation, the absolute which realises itself through our inability to find any absolute. That it is the latter position, the one concerned with deficiency rather than the completeness of an organicist absolute, that Novalis thinks we should be concerned with becomes clear in another fragment from the *Brouillon* titled “Pathological Philosophy” in which Novalis derides the philosopher who aims for completeness,

“an absolute drive for perfection and completeness is morbid ... as soon as it shows itself to be destructive and adverse to what is imperfect, and incomplete. If we want to attain and accomplish something definite, then we must also set up provisional and definite limits”
(AB:638).

Those who refuse to do so are named, somewhat confusingly, either 'Magical Idealists'¹⁷ or 'Magical Realists.' They are those who attempt to explain the entire content of

17 This is not necessarily a rejection of Novalis' own doctrine, but rather a critique of any position, including his own, when combined with a totalising tendency unaware of its own limits

metaphysics from their respective beginning in the objective or subjective,¹⁸ and their one-sidedness is both a 'logical affliction' as well as a type of delusion (AB:638). While idealism and realism must be combined, since a comprehensive view must encapsulate and subsume all one-sided interpretations of the same subject matter, they must be combined within a system that recognises its own limits. Therefore, while the organicist and natural system of the universe *would* be the character of a complete individual, such an individual would also be guilty of pathological philosophy for Novalis, and it becomes clear that for Novalis the absolute should remain unknowable in its particular nature.

However, Beiser might counter this criticism with some passages in which Novalis speaks in organicist terms without the reservations I attribute to him,¹⁹ and by pointing out that the only thing which could sustain Novalis' notions regarding magical idealism would be a thoroughly organicist view. However, we have to remember the status of any claims to knowledge within Novalis' scepticism. While Novalis' natural-scientific findings seem to suggest the inner coherence of all of nature within a self-developing totality, such findings can never acquire the certainty that they would if derived from a first principle. Since the possibility of such first principles is rejected by Novalis the task of philosophy is the continued attempt to organise and systematise our empirical findings. Within this task organicism can only arise as a tentative attempt which might be superseded by other forms of organisation that more closely approximate the absolute. Organicism therefore appears as an attempt out of the findings of empirical science, and not as the organising principle of our empirical knowledge in the way Beiser suggests. This would be to treat organicism as a first principle whose claim to truth is absolute, something which Novalis would categorically

18 Analogous to the idealist and dogmatist from Fichte's *Introductions to the Science of Knowledge*

19 See for example (AB:477)

reject. All we can say about the absolute without reservation seems to be what is true by definition of it being the absolute. Specifically, that the absolute is the unity of every opposition and that “the universe is the absolute subject, or the totality of all predicates” (AB:633). Therefore, although Beiser's interpretation of Novalis' syncretism and magical idealism takes into account his attempt to find a middle point between idealism and realism his overarching absolute idealist interpretation ignores the scepticism that remains constant throughout Novalis' writings and which make it impossible to ascribe, in absolute terms, an organicist absolute idealism to him.

Novalis and Frank on Realism

While Beiser stresses the absolute idealist aspect of Novalis, Frank's interpretation stresses the realist and sceptical dimensions found in the writings. Frank focuses primarily his reading on the *Fichte Studies*. For Frank the text has three main elements. First, to raise the question of how there can be any consciousness of that which exceeds and grounds our cognitive capabilities. Secondly, to show how the thought of an absolute unity can be in harmony with the thought of a unity that articulates itself into oppositions. Lastly, to show that Being must be beyond consciousness and that philosophy consists in infinite approximation (Frank, 2004, p.163). It is in the elements that emerge from the considerations of the first of these theses that Frank locates Novalis' realism. The first of these elements to arise is Novalis' account of judgement. For Novalis, consciousness is incapable of grasping Being in its self-identity insofar as it must represent such an identity by the copula in a judgement, thereby making it a synthetic unity (Frank, 2004, p.164). The second element is Frank's interpretation of Novalis' claim that “consciousness is a Being outside of Being within Being” (FS:2). Frank takes this to mean that consciousness' being is dependent on its being directed towards the only real Being such that consciousness depends on Being

for its own being and that Being would exist even without consciousness (Frank, 2004, p.165). Consciousness is in its essence merely a reference to Being, such that without Being consciousness would not exist. However, the reverse does not hold, Being is not essentially a referent for consciousness and it would subsist even if consciousness did not (Frank, 2004, p.167). Here we have Novalis' ontological realism, "Being is prior to our consciousness; we feel it but don't produce it or even constitute it" (Frank, 2004, p.169). The third element is the role feeling plays in Novalis' philosophy. Feeling is a non-discursive apprehension of Being but it also plays another role which comes about in Novalis' rejection of intellectual intuition (Frank, 2004, p.169). In order for us to grasp something as ourselves in a judgement, that is, in order for self-consciousness to be possible, we must in some way already be 'acquainted' with ourselves (Frank, 2004, p.171). This is the role feeling plays, as it is the ground of consciousness' immediate familiarity with itself (Frank, 2004, p.167). Insofar as this pre-supposition can not be resolved into knowledge, since it is not a form of knowledge itself, consciousness is unable to "make the presuppositions of its existence comprehensible by its own means" and we therefore have, according to Frank, a form of epistemological realism since we "do not possess adequate knowledge of reality" (Frank, 2004, p.28, 178).

There seem to be no faults with the particularities of Frank's reading of Novalis. The whole reading is backed up with substantial textual proof and Frank continually supports his interpretation of particularities found in Novalis by showing their similarity to authors from whom Novalis would have been inspired. Frank's reading also stresses the thoroughly sceptical element of Novalis' writing. Frank's choice to omit the content from Novalis' later fragments and the *Brouillon* might seem odd, but if the case for the intellectual break from the earlier and later works can be sufficiently made then such a move is by no means illegitimate.²⁰

20 Although as I have laid it out I take the main features of Frank's Novalis to be present throughout the

The only place at which it seems that Frank transgresses his own exegetical duties is not in his interpretation of Novalis *per se*, but rather in his characterisation of Novalis as a realist. Frank's main motive for classifying the *Frühromantiker* as realists is to make apparent their break from the canon of absolute idealism into which they are often dissolved. However, this could be accomplished merely through making apparent their scepticism, their anti-foundationalism, and their notion of infinite approximation, whereas labelling them as realists *tout court* might accomplish too much. After all, it brings Frank into the arena of giving a single definition of the historically diverse disciplines of both idealism and realism. Questioning whether the *Frühromantiker* should be seen as realists or idealists or something in between might at this point seem like frivolous semantics. After all, if Frank is right about everything else in his interpretation and merely puts a label on it that we are not happy with, then what is the big deal? The content remains the same in either case. However, this simply can not be true for the romantics considering that they took it to be central to their philosophical enterprise to overcome the opposition between these two metaphysical standpoints. We should therefore be attempting to understand how, in this case Novalis, took himself to be accomplishing this goal in his rejection of Fichte and his rejection of the possibility of absolute knowledge, something which Frank fails to do.

Novalis on Idealism and Realism

So how *can* we say that Novalis accomplishes his goal of finding a middle ground between idealism and realism? Novalis is perhaps the most difficult of the three main *Frühromantiker* when it comes to elaborating the ways in which he should be interpreted as finding some way of combining idealism and realism. This difficulty comes from the thoroughgoing scepticism we find in Novalis' works. While Hölderlin is

works.

happy to stress the equiprimordial status of both the subjective and the objective and their unity within the absolute it is only a confirmation of the latter that we find in Novalis. In addition, the epistemological constraints which Novalis elaborates on seem to preclude the possibility of knowledge that would show the combined nature of two systems of philosophy that in themselves attempt to give an account of the entirety of Being.

I take it that the question of Novalis' idealism and realism must boil down to what he takes to be the essence of philosophy. As we saw earlier, Novalis takes the task of philosophy to be to show everything's relativity to the standpoint of the absolute, to show how partial viewpoints are false of the whole. In relation to idealism and realism, Novalis accomplishes this by showing how one can only be fully understood through, or with, the other. Idealism is relativised insofar as the self is shown to be incapable of accounting for its own existence. In order for the self to recognize itself in self-consciousness it must have some immediate relationship with itself. This occurs through feeling. In Fichte intellectual intuition was that through which we became aware of the original act in which the self constitutes itself and therefore has an immediate relationship with itself. In other words, through intellectual intuition the I is capable of accounting for its own existence by reference only to itself. In Novalis however, insofar as feeling and reflection are both necessary for intellectual intuition, we find that the self, in order to account for that act through which consciousness is possible, depends on a mode of 'knowing' which in turns depends on something being given to it (FS:22). This mode of 'knowing' is feeling, and insofar as it requires something being given to it, so must the self require some given (of which it can not be found to be the cause) in order to account for its own consciousness. The self therefore can not account for its own consciousness with reference merely to itself, and idealism is shown to require a

counterpart, namely realism.

This dependence is symmetrical, and realism is relativised insofar as the unity of the objects of the external world are found to depend upon the ego for the representation of their unity. Since every existent receives its meaning from its reference to the rest of the system of which it is a part and the place it occupies within this system, and the thing in itself is unknowable simply because “it is *absolutely isolated* – it is simple matter,” nature is in need of something which can synthesize it and its products (FNSS:20). While the absolute provides nature's ultimate and analytic unity, the ego is the only thing through which a synthesis and unity can be brought to bear on the manifold of predicates and relations we find within nature. In other words, the ego is the “simple – synthesizing principle” (FNSS:20). Insofar as our attempt at understanding nature depends on science, and science depends on the underlying unity of relations that compose the objects of the various sciences, and this unity relies on the synthesizing power of the ego, then our understanding of nature must itself depend on our understanding our ego. Realism, the necessary counterpart to idealism, is therefore shown to require its own counterpart, namely idealism. In this way, both idealism and realism have been relativised as partial viewpoints, and shown to be completed only in and through the other.

In relativising the supposed total world systems of idealism and realism, and establishing the ways in which they pre-suppose and are completed by each other, Novalis' philosophy becomes one which not only combines the two, but establishes a triadic philosophy whose elements are idealism, realism, and scepticism. As we saw with Hölderlin, even if scepticism provides the overarching structure to the philosophical process, some positive knowledge or intimation of the absolute is required, since otherwise the notion of approximation becomes incomprehensible. In

Novalis this is provided in feeling, the non-cognitive relation we stand in with Being itself. While the absolute of free renunciation is “the only possible absolute that can be given to us,” or the only representable absolute, we have a non-theoretical intimation of Being itself in the feeling that grounds the possibility of the negative knowledge we can acquire of the absolute in approximation. The triadic structure of philosophy therefore has idealism and realism as its primary elements, while scepticism appears as an essential expression of our inability to complete the philosophical project laid out in idealism, realism, and/or their union. Metaphysics thereby takes precedence over epistemology, albeit only for a short time until epistemology reappears to make apparent our inability to discursively express the metaphysical truths we started out with.

To summarise, then, philosophy begins with the search for an absolute ground. This will be the ground through which everything is connected and wherein the subjective and objective, the starting points of idealism and realism respectively, are joined, since “with polarity, there arises a separation in what is necessarily joined” (AB:479). However, philosophy can never reach this goal. Such an indifference point is imponderable, and the only absolute we can achieve theoretically is the absolute of infinite renunciation (FNSS:27). What philosophy can do is approach or approximate this ideal. This is done through the reconciliation of all contradictions and opposites, and the relativisation of all supposed total standpoints. In doing this we make apparent the incompleteness of our own knowledge and move closer to the whole that underlies these oppositions. The opposition of idealism and realism is only possible on the basis of a prior unity through which the terms can be opposed, which we have an intimation of in feeling. While both are partially right about the nature they attempt to understand, they are also wrong insofar as they reject their opposite, and both are wrong of the whole (AB:633). By making their partiality and completion in each other apparent their

underlying unity is brought to the fore and seen as something which can only be understood through the unification of both (regardless of whether such unification can ever be completed). That this is Novalis' own view is confirmed in a fragment from the *Brouillon* in which he talks of a “new view of idealism and realism” in which he also speaks of “opposite operations” wherein “the one will exist and be perfected along with the other” (AB:331).

In conclusion, I take it that we both can and should interpret Novalis' philosophical position as occupying a space between idealism and realism. That we should aim to do this became clear at the start of this chapter when I highlighted some of the places where Novalis makes it clear that his aim is to find a middle ground between idealism and realism. In order to find out just how Novalis' exemplifies such a position I started with a presentation of the aims and some of the sceptical arguments found in the *Fichte Studies*. Although philosophy aims at the absolute ground we find ourselves incapable of reaching this through reflection since it is incapable of representing identity, it reverses the order of being in what it attempts to represent, and it only gives us conditioned knowledge. We then moved on to some of Novalis' later works and highlighted some of their differences from the earlier text, such as his empiricism, his magical idealism, and his organicism. This brought up a question of scepticism. As I showed, even the elements of Novalis' later writings that seem to reverse his earlier sceptical convictions still contain a sceptical element. Having shown that scepticism is as much a part of the later as it is the earlier work, I moved on to Frank and Beiser's interpretations and critiqued these. We found that Beiser's organicist characterisation of Novalis did not adequately take into account the tentative status of claims to absolute knowledge that bar us from ascribing organicism to Novalis *in toto*. Frank's interpretation was then critiqued for not attempting to take into account Novalis'

self-proclaimed aim of fusing idealism and realism. Instead, an interpretation which takes this into account can be established on the basis of Novalis' relativising of idealism and realism as partial standpoints on reality which both presuppose and are only completed through the other, and, insofar as he takes this to be one of his philosophical aims, this is also the interpretation we should take to be true of Novalis himself.

Chapter 3 – Realism and Idealism in Schlegel

In this chapter I will give an account of Schlegel's idealism and realism while motivating the view, as with the previous chapters, that, at least on his own terms, Schlegel can and should be seen as occupying a place between idealism and realism. Due to Schlegel's conversion to Catholicism and turn to conservatism later in his life we will focus mostly on his early romantic period writings, dating from around 1794 to 1808. Most of Schlegel's writings are metaphilosophical and concern the nature and aims of philosophy and I will begin by summarising what Schlegel takes to be the main features of philosophy, giving particular focus to the ways in which he separates himself from and critiques Fichte and what role these criticisms had for Schlegel's own conclusions about the nature of philosophy. I will then move on to notes taken from some of Schlegel's lectures on philosophy in which Schlegel applies his metaphilosophical principles and attempts to establish a philosophy based on these. After summarising these lecture notes I will begin by rejecting both Frank's and Beiser's one-sided interpretations of Schlegel before I argue that we should take Schlegel to be consistent with his own aim to combine idealism and realism.

Schlegel on Philosophy

Like the other *Frühromantiker*, Schlegel also wanted to find some way of combining idealism and realism. There are many mentions of this in his writings. For example, when discussing the need for a new mythology to unify romantic poetry, Schlegel, through the character Ludoviko, elaborates on the need to establish this new mythology through an idealism out of which an “equally unbounded realism must and will emerge” (DoP:184). Another example is found in Schlegel's fragments where he claims not only that “all philosophy is idealism, and there exists no true realism except

that of poetry” but also that “whatever has been done while poetry and philosophy are separated has been done and accomplished. So the time has come to unite the two” (Id:96, 108).

Before we move on to outlining the features Schlegel takes to be essential to philosophy we must make explicit Schlegel's relation to the absolute. It is only in relation to the absolute and the impossibility of knowing the absolute that these features become cohesive and gain their true meaning. In distinction to Hölderlin and Novalis, the absolute in Schlegel functions as a regulative ideal. Only through the idea of an absolute that transcends all finite thought does finite thought gain the unity that Schlegel thinks we should aspire to but can never reach. In Schlegel's words, “only in relation to the infinite is there meaning and purpose” (Id:3). As a merely regulative ideal the absolute has no constitutive role as such, but in relation to whether the absolute is a mere fiction or not Schlegel writes that “yes, it is a *fiction*. But an absolutely necessary one. Our I has the tendency to approach the infinite, and it is only because of the fact that the I, so to speak, flows toward the infinite, in order to approach it, that we are able to think the infinite” (TP:247). The absolute, although merely regulative, is still that around which Schlegel's entire philosophy is organised and in his lectures Schlegel even goes so far as constructing the absolute by abstracting away from everything finite.²¹

As with the other *Frühromantiker* the feature of Schlegel's philosophy which lays the foundation for most of his other convictions is his anti-foundationalism, which comes out as a result of a critique of Fichte. Schlegel's argument for anti-foundationalism has two steps, a critique of Fichte's conception of the I as the first principle of philosophy followed by a further critique of the possibility of a foundationalist programme in general. Schlegel takes it that Fichte's principle can be

21 For a more in-depth discussion of Schlegel's Absolute see (Nassar, 2013). This text also includes discussions on Schlegel's critique of first principles among other relevant topics.

summed up in the proposition “The I posits itself absolutely” (Frank, 2004, p.182). However, this principle is not as self-sufficient as Fichte would have it be. The I as consciousness can never be self-sufficient in the way that Fichte requires it to be since consciousness is always intentional. Consciousness must always be conscious of some thing such that it always requires some external interference that it can direct itself towards and as such is made dependent on that thing. In Fichte this appears as the check on consciousness that the absolute Ego creates in order for the I to be an I. Interestingly, Fichte himself seems to agree with Schlegel's point about the self-sufficiency (or lack thereof) of the I (although not its consequences) as we can see in the practical part of the *Grundlage* where Fichte turns the tables on the I's absoluteness insofar as he takes it that the I can never entirely determine the not-I since the I would then have no object (I, 254). In the practical part of the *Grundlage* the I is no longer absolute insofar as it must posit a not-I in order to be an I proper and it must now continually strive to become absolute (I, 270). It is this point which Schlegel uses against Fichte. Not only is the I an unsuitable candidate for the principle of a system of a philosophy since it is now merely a regulative idea, but for Schlegel, Fichte's “the I posits itself absolutely” is in fact not a first principle at all but instead a proposition compounded out of two more primitive propositions, one being the unconditioned proposition that “the I posits itself,” and the postulate that “the I should posit itself” (Frank, 2004, p.181). Not only do these propositions precede Fichte's principle but these propositions themselves depend on each other for their comprehensibility. Neither of these are therefore candidates for a first principle either.²²

22 Fichte could counter this claim in a number of ways, which I will only touch on briefly here as it is outside the scope of this paper. The first is to question why a regulative ideal could not serve as a first principle. Secondly, Fichte could claim that Schlegel's two principles are merely extracted from the compounded first principle rather than primitive to it. Fichte could also accuse Schlegel of merely establishing a new form of foundationalism, since Fichte's system, like Schlegel's, as we will see, it itself based on two opposing principles which are in need of synthesis, namely that “the self posits the not-self as limited by the self” and “the self posits itself as determined by the not-self” (I, 125-6).

This is not only because they rely on each other, but because first principles themselves are impossible. Schlegel offers a few simple proofs to motivate this conclusion. The most convincing is found in his lectures. "The absolute thesis of all philosophy," writes Schlegel, "cannot be proven ... it contains its proof in itself" (TP:260). However, as critical philosophers we should not be willing to accept any proposition or thesis without the possibility of proving it. If a first principle can never be proven then we should not be willing to accept it. However, it is just this absolute and undoubtable nature that first principles should have. Beiser outlines some of Schlegel's other proofs for the impossibility of a first principle. First of all, as critical philosophers, we should be willing to place any proposition under doubt, and any such doubt must be answered with another proposition or a proof, which in turn can be doubted *ad infinitum*. If the series of proofs can go back into infinity then no step of that proof can count as a first principle (Beiser, 2003, p.123-4). The complexity of this series is increased when we also consider that proofs can be accomplished in several different ways such that a complete account of any proposition is seemingly endless meaning that no stage of its regressive justification can be taken to be a first principle (Beiser, 2003, p.124).

Many of Schlegel's other views on the nature of philosophy are grounded in his anti-foundationalism, such as his views regarding where philosophy starts and how it should progress. As we've seen Schlegel rejects the view that philosophy can start with an absolute and undeniable first principle and then deduce everything else from this principle. Without a first principle philosophy lacks a natural starting point. The alternative is for Schlegel that "viewed subjectively, philosophy, like epic poetry, always begins *in media res*" (AF:84). Without a first principle there is no demand that we either start somewhere in order to regress to it or start from it and deduce our system. Rather

we can start from anywhere and indeed we *must* start somewhere, regardless of where it might be, in order to start at all. However, since the starting point we choose does not have the sort of certainty that Descartes ascribed to the *cogito* or that of Fichte's absolute I philosophy takes on a different form. Philosophy is now an experiment (TP:241). That is, a venture whose result has no guarantee whatsoever. This is unlike the foundationalist approach to philosophy whose results are guaranteed merely by the validity of the first principle and the correct application of philosophical methods. So how does philosophy as an experiment validate itself? After all, it might be that every step of the process is undertaken correctly but the experiment's starting point was not a valid starting point at all, at which point its result are negated. Schlegel's answer is that a system of philosophy vindicates itself not by some isomorphic correspondence to the way things are in reality but instead by the coherence of each of its parts to each other (TP:241). If from the arbitrarily chosen starting point we progress to explain everything else that our system must explain and end up explaining this first starting point on the basis of this process then our system becomes coherent and cyclical, which is exactly what a system of philosophy should be for Schlegel since “philosophy is still moving too much in a straight line; it's not yet cyclical enough” (AF:43)

However, this starting point of philosophy is not entirely arbitrary. Although on the assumption of the possibility of systematic unity each part should be related to all the other parts in the system such that each part is a possible starting point the proper starting point of a system of philosophy is found in Schlegel's notion of a *Wechselerweis*, or reciprocal proof. This comes out as a result of Schlegel's critique of Fichte's I as a first principle. As we saw, Schlegel takes it that Fichte's “the I posits itself absolutely” is actually composed of two more primitive propositions, namely “the I posits itself” and “the I should posit itself.” These two propositions are not valid by

themselves but are made comprehensible only in and through the other. That is, they stand in a relation to each other in which both reciprocally ground the validity of the other, and they therefore stand in a *Wechselerweis*. Schlegel therefore replaces the foundationalist starting point of philosophy with this notion of a *Wechselerweis*, of principles that reciprocally determine and ground each other and that thereby also set the scene for the structure of philosophy as one in which every part must be related to every other part and which must be represented as whole.

Schlegel, along with Novalis and Hölderlin, is also committed to the idea of infinite approximation. Schlegel writes that "the essence of philosophy is to seek the *totality of knowledge*" (PhF:101). This knowledge must not only be totally comprehensive but it must also be absolute (TP:241). However, for Schlegel this knowledge, insofar as it is to be total, must also include not only knowledge of what is unconditioned but the innumerable number of conditioned entities that are grounded in the absolute. However, here we meet a contradiction. Knowledge, insofar as it is discursive, is necessarily conditioned knowledge. Any knowledge of the unconditioned would represent it as conditioned and would therefore no longer be knowledge of the unconditioned since it would not represent it as it is in itself. In Schlegel's words, "knowledge already denotes conditioned knowledge. The unknowability of the Absolute is, therefore, an identical triviality" (KA XVIII: 511, Nr., 64).²³ Philosophy is therefore defined by a lack. It can never accomplish that which in its very essence it sets out to accomplish. What we are left with is not a nihilism about knowledge or an absolute scepticism however. Clearly some systems of knowledge are more adequate than others²⁴ or we might say that they more effectively approximate the end goal of philosophy. Philosophy therefore turns out to be an infinite approximation. The spirit

23 Translation taken from (Frank, 2004, p.56)

24 Remembering that the mark of adequacy is coherence and comprehensiveness rather than correspondence

sets itself the infinite task of infinite knowledge, a task which it can only strive to complete but will never accomplish. At each stage some unity and coherence will be found in its system until either some contradiction arises within it or from some element which it had not previously contained, at which point a new system is demanded which, if it overcomes this contradiction, more closely approximates total knowledge. "The idea of philosophy can only be attained through an infinite progression of systems" (TP:248). At this point the importance of the absolute becomes clear. Only the idea of an absolute can give unity to the whole series of systems. It is only through the continuous approximation of the infinite that the series gains continuity, and through the continuity of the series the absolute becomes ever more probable.²⁵

If philosophy is characterised by infinite approximation then insofar as no position can ever be adequate to reality philosophy must also be thoroughly sceptical. Although scepticism is central to critical philosophy for Schlegel it must occupy a particular place the elaboration of which we find in another one of Schlegel's criticisms of Fichte. This criticism concerns Fichte's mysticism and the self-destructive nature of the three major dogmatic systems of philosophy of which scepticism is a part. These dogmatic systems of philosophy are scepticism, mysticism, and eclecticism. All these systems stand opposed to criticism based on one common feature: they all start with a wilful, and therefore unphilosophical and dogmatic, positing (PhF:10). Mysticism starts with the wilful positing of some absolute (PhF:7). Eclecticism starts with a wilful destruction of all absolutes (PhF:7). Finally, scepticism begins with the wilful positing of an infinity of contradictions (PhF:9). As mentioned, all of these systems of philosophy not only mutually destroy each other but they also 'annihilate' themselves. First of all, the problem with eclecticism is that it begins with an absolute limit to knowledge and a rejection of the absolute. However, for Schlegel, such an absolute limit

²⁵ In this way even the process of philosophising and the absolute themselves stand in a *Wechselwirkung*

could only itself come from something unconditioned, that is, from that which eclecticism rejects (PhF:6). Secondly, the problem with scepticism is that a consistent scepticism will in the end refute itself. Otherwise scepticism would have to accept that it can refute only what is refutable in which case there must be some possibility for knowledge (PhF:6). Finally, the problem with mysticism is, as Schlegel writes, that "if one is allowed to posit arbitrarily something unconditional, nothing is easier than to *explain everything*" (PhF:2). Although we aim to explain everything such an aim should be based in a good faith attempt to *discover* the explanation for everything as opposed to merely positing that which would allow us to explain that which we wish to explain. In addition, in the end, due the impossibility of complete communication and the nature of the content of mysticism (the absolute), the mystic is reduced to "a stupefying, internalized brooding" (PhF:6).

So why is Fichte a mystic? Because he begins with the wilful positing of an absolute identity between consciousness and what it is conscious of. As we've seen, Fichte begins the *Grundlage* with the search for a principle expressing the act that "lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible," the proof of which relies on the universal truth of the proposition 'A = A' (I, 91, 93). In this proposition the necessary connection between each A is posited such that if A is posited it must necessarily be true that it is A (I, 93). However, since this connection, this X, is found in the self that judges the proposition to be true according to laws, and this X bears a relation to each A as that which makes one follow of necessity from the other, A must also be found within the self. (I, 94). This means that any positing of A by the self, since both it and the laws concerning its necessary consequence are contained within the I, is absolute for the self, and it is just this that happens in self-consciousness. In self-consciousness the I makes itself a reality precisely because it posits itself as an I (I, 94).

This self-positing relies on the validity of the X, that which gives positing the status of a necessary proposition, since the existence of the self should follow from its mere positing (as with the A in 'A = A'). Since this X establishes the necessary connection between the absolutely valid judgement 'A = A' it must itself be as valid as that judgement. Therefore, the judgement 'I am I' whereby the I posits itself must also be absolutely valid (I, 95). For Fichte this judgement expresses the act that lies at the ground of all consciousness and since this positing also absolutely posits the necessity of the basic proposition of logic (X) as well as its relation to all possible positing (A), Fichte concludes that the I must be absolute, and therefore also that "everything that exists does so only insofar as it is posited in the self, and apart from the self there is nothing" (I, 99). However, this entire proof rests on the assumption that the self can enter into the same relation to itself that each A can in the proposition 'A = A.' If it is not true that the I can enter into such a relation in which the self that is conscious and the self that enters consciousness are absolutely identical then their validity can not be guaranteed by the principle of identity (X) and the absolute validity of I has not been guaranteed. Insofar as Fichte assumes this to be possible he can be said to be a mystic in the way Schlegel takes him to be.

Despite his criticisms of Fichte's mysticism and of scepticism in general, Schlegel believes both are necessary. Schlegel takes it that in the end critical philosophy will combine all three dogmatic philosophical positions. First of all, although mysticism stands opposed to critical philosophy since it begins with a wilful (and not knowledgeable) positing of an absolute it is clear that Schlegel takes it to be important to philosophy. After all "the belief that Mysticism and all metaphysics are only a *game with empty abstractions* and formulas rests alone on the eclectic, empiricist point of view" (PhF:50). If mysticism is not merely a game with empty abstractions it must have

some important role to play. Mysticism is partially pardoned by Schlegel on the basis that it is the most economical of the three dogmatic systems (on the basis that it only posits one contradiction) and that the mystic is the source of their own contradictions (PhF:9, 13). However its true value comes as an essential component of the philosophical attitude. Mysticism has an important place in critical philosophy insofar as all philosophy begins with a tendency and a striving towards the absolute (TP:242). However, as opposed to Fichte, true critical philosophy can never begin with an absolute as such wilful positing stands opposed to knowledge. Instead philosophy must combine scepticism and the striving for the absolute. Whereas enthusiasm, or striving for the infinite, is the positive factor of philosophy, scepticism is the negative factor of philosophy (TP:242). This will not be the self-annihilating scepticism which begins and ends with an infinite number of contradictions but a scepticism used as a tool to make sure no part of philosophy is left untouched by critique (AF:400). If philosophy begins with a mystical striving for the absolute whose existence and nature is not merely posited and a tempered scepticism which submits everything to the tribunal of reason, then philosophy becomes a constant progression towards the absolute in which each further step is demanded by the failure of the previous step as made clear by the penetrating force of scepticism, and the infinite approximation which must be a part of philosophy has been achieved.

Scepticism also has a place in philosophy as that which has never been fully utilised by previous philosophers. The sheer volume of Schlegel's writings which concern the nature of philosophy itself as opposed to metaphysics and epistemology *simpliciter* stem from Schlegel's dissatisfaction with earlier philosophers. This dissatisfaction comes out clearly when Schlegel writes for example that, "nothing is more rarely the subject of philosophy than philosophy itself," and "since nowadays

philosophy criticizes everything that comes in front of its nose, a criticism of philosophy would be nothing more than justifiable retaliation,” and finally his claim that his “experience with the greatest philosophers is like Plato's with the Spartans. He loved and admired them enormously, but continually complained that they stopped halfway” (AF:1, 56, 48).

The interplay between enthusiasm and scepticism and the infinite progression it introduces is captured in Schlegel's notion of irony. The role of irony is central to Schlegel's work. Schlegel writes “irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great” (CF:48). The structure of irony is elaborated in Schlegel with reference to two other literal/aesthetic devices, namely allegory and wit.²⁶ Both allegory and wit are introduced as solutions to the problem of knowing the unconditioned. Since the unconditioned can not be represented in conditioned knowledge our only access to it is through a representation of its unrepresentability. This is art's role for Schlegel and it must allude to the infinite in an indirect manner that does not destroy its unconditioned-ness (Frank, 2004, p.207). Art does this in allegory, which in the original Greek ἀλληγορεῖν means 'to say more/other than what one is saying'. In allegory art alludes to that which it is incapable of making explicit and frees itself from its finitude insofar as it points towards the infinite (Frank, 2004, p.209). Art also alludes to the absolute in wit. Schlegel describes wit as the principle of universal philosophy and as the result of the unifying force of thought (AF:220). It is the presentation of the unifying power of the infinite within the finite (Frank, 2004, p.209). However, wit can only do this on a minute scale. In the fragment, the unifying power of wit is focused in on a single point, the only way we could comprehensibly represent the unifying power of the unconditioned is in its partiality. As Schlegel puts it, “only by

26 For a fuller treatment of Schlegel's and the romantics' aesthetics in relation to the concept of literature and poetry see (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1988), (Behler, 1993), and (Bowie, 1997)

means of the sharpest focus on a single point can the individual idea gain a kind of wholeness” (CF:109). As a partial but intense representation of unity each representation of wit found in the fragment gains meaning through its relation to the absolute. But since wit produces only elements isolated from all other elements of the system it can never produce a complete and coherent system, instead producing merely a “chaos of systems” (Frank, 2004, p.210). Fragments are perfectly unified in isolation but will never be unifiable with other fragments. In this way fragments express the disjointed nature of the self and nature by continually contradicting themselves. In addition, it is not just that our epistemic position is so unfortunate that we are bound to contradict ourselves, but this contradiction itself has epistemic value. After all, “since nature and man contradict each other so often and so sharply, philosophy perhaps can't avoid doing the same” (AF:397). In the fragment, the constant self-dissolution of fragments between each other represents and proves the existence of the absolute as the ability of two fragments to contradict each other is grounded in them being related as contradictory representations of one and the same thing: the absolute (Frank, 2004, p.205, 218). The tension between the unifying power of wit and the revelatory power of allegory leads to the ironical moment in philosophy. In wit the unifying power of the absolute is focused into a single point, the infinite is limited to be made comprehensible. However, in allegory, insofar as it alludes to the infinite's true infinity by representing its unrepresentability, the fragmentary and partial nature of the products of wit is made explicit. The illusion of unity must then be restored again by wit and is again exposed by allegory, *ad infinitum*. The continual and infinite oscillation of this is irony itself.

So far we have only been exposed to what Schlegel takes critical philosophy to consist in.²⁷ However, in order to understand his relation to idealism and a realism we

27 Here we have elaborated Schlegel's notion of critical philosophy and critique as a philosophical approach, to understand Schlegel's notion of critique in relation to the criticism of art see (Benjamin, 1996)

also need to know the precise content of such a critical philosophy, which is exactly what we get in his *Introduction to the Transcendental Philosophy* where Schlegel gives us a basic exposition of his system of transcendental philosophy based on the features of his notion of critical philosophy highlighted above.

Schlegel's System

"*We philosophize* – this is a fact," Schlegel begins (TP:240). Philosophy is for Schlegel a striving for knowledge, and as a complete knowledge, also a striving for knowledge of knowledge (TP:240-1). This is not his definition of philosophy however, as this would be to assume the existence of a knowledge of which our knowledge could be of. Instead, as highlighted earlier, philosophy is an experiment, it has no rigorous definition as such, and it must merely begin (TP:241). Schlegel does maintain that we can say what philosophy *should* be however. Philosophy should be an absolute knowledge and as such we should aim to make every step of its construction a necessary one (TP:241). The methods Schlegel employs are the experimental methods of physics and the method of construction of mathematics (TP:241). Schlegel also lets us know that his philosophy will not merely rest on logic since this merely provides the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason and since logic relies on a correspondence model of truth²⁸ (TP:241).

After these methodological remarks Schlegel then goes over what he takes to be the character of philosophy. First, scepticism, the negative factor of philosophy, concerns itself with the person and his/her limits to knowledge. Second, enthusiasm, the positive factor of philosophy, is a tendency towards the absolute. The absolute itself also has a positive and a negative factor, the positive being its unconditionedness in itself, and the negative being the infinite chain of conditioneds in which the absolute appears

28 Hinting towards his coherence model of truth

(TP:242). Third, philosophy will deal with principles and ideas. Principles concern knowledge of what is primitive and is opposed to the totality, while ideas concern knowledge of the totality (TP:242). Lastly, the form of philosophy should be absolute unity, or as elsewhere described "a thoroughly articulated totality of scientific matter, connected in a *Wechselwirkung* and organic connection" (PhF:84, TP:243).

Schlegel then begins his construction of the absolute. The aim of philosophy is "to seek the commonly shared midpoint of all principles and ideas"²⁹ (TP:243). In order to find this he abstracts away from everything which is not absolute. In doing this Schlegel constructs the absolute by opposing it to what is abstracted, the finite, and posits it as infinite. However, we now find that we can never abstract away that which does the positing. In constructing the absolute by abstraction there always remains a consciousness of the infinite. We therefore have the two principles of philosophy, the absolute and consciousness. These two stand in a *Wechselerweis* insofar as "the sole object of consciousness is the infinite, and the sole predicate of the infinite is consciousness" (TP:244). With these principles in mind Schlegel begins his fusing of Fichte and Spinoza. Fichte's philosophy is the philosophy of consciousness, represented by the equation

$$I = non-I$$

while Spinoza's philosophy is the philosophy of the infinite, represented by the equation

29 We might wonder whether this aim and our supposed tendency towards the absolute are themselves a wilful positing on Schlegel's part. To this Schlegel might defend himself on the basis of his historicism, a feature we have not covered but a discussion of which can be found in (Millan-Zaibert, 2007). While Schlegel opposes himself to philosophical commitments that are not themselves discovered during the process of philosophy but instead ground and shape that process without justification, any such commitments that we do find in Schlegel, like the search for the unconditioned, might be defended on the basis that philosophy is always historically situated and therefore must be expressed by the terms of its context, in this case post-Kantianism.

what is representable = what is not representable (TP:243).

In order to combine these two systems, Schlegel produces two new formulas

non-I = what is not representable

what is representable = I

It is this latter which Schlegel takes to be the formula for his philosophy, which he also expresses as "*the minimum of the I equals the maximum of nature; and the minimum of nature equals the maximum of the I*" (TP:244). The I and nature stand in a reciprocally determining relationship such that a greater determining power ascribed to nature means a reciprocally lesser power ascribed to the I, and vice versa. With these elements Schlegel gives a definition of reality: the elements of all reality are consciousness and the infinite, and reality is the indifference point between the two (TP:244).

With the groundwork laid out, Schlegel continues his exposition with a common romantic tenet: "All is one, and one is all" (TP:244). For Schlegel this is the middle point between all principles and all ideas, it "is the principle of all ideas, and the idea of all principles" (TP:244). From this follow four axioms. First, "principles are the transition from error to truth" (TP:246). Schlegel does not elaborate on this, but we might suppose that insofar as principles are derived from phenomena and in some way deal with more general or primitive features of phenomena then principles are the first step in ascending towards the infinite. The second axiom states that "reality is only in ideas" (TP:246). Third, "all knowledge is symbolic" (TP:246). Finally, "all truth is relative" since reality, as lying in the middle between the infinite and consciousness is itself relative (TP:246). Here Schlegel breaks away to counter a possible objection. If all

truth is relative and the result of a struggle of errors, is not the infinite itself an illusion? Schlegel answers in the affirmative. Although the infinite is a fiction it is an absolutely necessary one. It is necessary because the I naturally strives for the infinite and we therefore have a ground for thinking of the infinite³⁰ (TP:247). Schlegel ends this section with the claim that philosophy is infinite and that "the idea of philosophy can only be attained through an infinite progression of systems," thereby instantiating the feature of philosophy as an infinite approximation which we covered earlier (TP:248).

Schlegel now moves on to constructing physics and natural science itself. This forms the cyclical part of his philosophy. Schlegel will start with an analysis of idealism and out of this analysis will construct physics by arriving at its method to show how physics can be derived from idealism. Schlegel will then continue the constructions out of the terms already constructed in order to show that eventually we can construct the methods of mathematics, history, and lastly physics, at which point a cycle of construction has been completed and some sort of coherence in Schlegel's system has been achieved. I will not be critiquing this section for two reasons. First of all, I merely wish to demonstrate Schlegel's implementation of his conviction that the form of philosophy is cyclical. Secondly, since these are student notes the notes are incomplete and contain no justification or elaboration on each construction.

Schlegel begins by giving a short analysis of idealism. Idealism consists, for Schlegel, in dualism and realism. Dualism is the negative factor of idealism that takes it that there are two activities and no substance, while realism is the positive factor which takes it that there is one single substance (TP:251). Dualism is concerned with the empirical realm while realism is concerned with theory and identity (TP:251-2). Joining dualism and theory gives us mathematics since it proceeds from elements and produces

³⁰ Schlegel thereby reverses the relation between our intimation of Being and the approximation to it as we have seen in Hölderlin and Novalis

everything else out of these (TP:252). Joining realism and the empirical gets us history since this is farthest removed from mathematics and constructed out of its opposing elements (TP:252). If we now join the concern of mathematics and theory, that is, elements and identity "so that the two activities must be contained in one, the result is what one calls a sphere" (TP:253). If we join substance and duplicity (the character of dualism) we get the individual (TP:253). If we join sphere to constancy (the concern of realism) the result is what is understood by the schema (TP:253). Joining the individual to flux (the concern of dualism) the result is *Bildung*, which is "the content of all history" (TP:253). For Schlegel, the indifference point of mathematics and history is physics as physics can demonstrate the same things as mathematics and history (TP:253). If we join the schema and the individual we get a phenomenon. *Bildung* combined with sphere becomes epoch. Joining the ideal with constructing gives us an approximating constructing, or in other words, experimenting. Adding symbol to characterising (the method of history) gives us interpretation. What does this get us? "all of these concepts now accord with *physics*" (TP:253). We have arrived at the method of physics, experimentation, and as we also saw, physics is the indifference point of mathematics and history. Going back a step further, mathematics and history were derived from dualism and realism. Going a further step back idealism was found to be the indifference point between dualism and realism (TP:254). In this way science is derived from idealism, and "physics is the first among the sciences, *because all science is natural science*" (TP:254). The only difference between the two is that "the philosopher (in idealism) is concerned with the minimum and the maximum, and physics with the finite parts that lie between reality and the elements in an infinite progression of proportions" (TP:254).

Schlegel now moves on to the method of philosophy, and constructs this in a

similar way to physics. He begins with four elements of philosophy which we already have established. These are scepticism, enthusiasm, the absolute, and reality (TP:255). If we add scepticism to reality we get experimenting. Enthusiasm added to the absolute gives us circularity as the direction of the method of philosophy. (TP:256). Schlegel adds, the elements of the method of philosophy are analysis, synthesis, and abstraction. Abstraction added to analysis gives us the concept of the discursive, while analysis added to abstraction gives us the concept of the intuitive (TP:256). The discursive added to synthesis gives us reflection, while the intuitive added to synthesis gives us speculation (TP:256). If we then add these two, reflection and speculation, we get the *allegory* (TP:256). Schlegel adds that reflection and speculation are the forms of all thought and allegory is therefore the result of all thought (TP:256). If we add the discursive to the intuitive we get terminology, the expression of contradictory concepts such as intellectual intuition. The middle point between producing and deducing is construction, the method of mathematics. The middle point of demonstrating and defining is characterising, the method of history. Finally, the middle point of scepticism and reality is experimenting, the method of physics. At this point we have returned to where we started, by following the elements produced by Schlegel's construction of physics we have come back to our starting point, physics. As Schlegel writes, "so we are again at the same place where we began, that is, at our goal" (TP:257).

Schlegel continues with some more constructions. The infinite brought together with consciousness becomes infinite consciousness or the concept of thinking. Consciousness brought together with the infinite becomes a conscious infinity or the concept of a deity (TP:262). The first middle concept we found was reality. If thinking is brought together with reality under the condition of the ur-element consciousness we get a real thinking with consciousness, or knowledge. If the deity is brought together

with reality under the condition of infinity we get a real deity with infinity, that is nature. Schlegel therefore declares, "*the infinite task of nature is to realize the deity*" (TP:262). In addition, it is also impossible to think anything other than the deity, so thinking is necessarily also divination (TP:262). Consciousness brought together with nature conditioned with knowledge is reflection, while knowledge brought together with the infinite conditioned with nature is speculation (TP:262). Divination must therefore be the midpoint of reflection and speculation, the two possible forms of thought, where reflection is the standpoint of Fichte and speculation is the standpoint of Spinoza (TP:263). Schlegel ends with the claim that the aim of philosophy is both to join together the infinite and consciousness such that any separation would be an illusion as well joining together the philosophies of reflection and speculation in divination (TP:264-6).

Schlegel and Frank on Realism

As with the other *Frühromantiker* Frank ascribes to Schlegel a basic position of realism in opposition to idealism, characterised by the thesis that "self-being owes its existence to a transcendent foundation, which does not leave itself to be dissolved into the immanence of consciousness" (Frank, 2004, p.178). As we've seen Frank also defines realism as the conviction that "that which has being ... cannot be traced back to determinations of our consciousness" while "ontological realism can be expressed by the thesis that reality exists independently of our consciousness" and "epistemological realism consists in the thesis that we do not possess adequate knowledge of reality" (Frank, 2004, p.28). If Frank's characterisation of Schlegel is correct then it would tick all of these boxes. However, it is at the general definition of realism that Frank's reading falters, and this precisely because of the primacy of both the infinite and consciousness in Schlegel. Undoubtedly for Schlegel the ground of consciousness is the infinite, he

writes in his lectures that because we can never abstract away that which posits the infinite, that “consciousness is, as it were, a phenomenon of the infinite” (TP:243). In addition, the infinite is transcendent to consciousness insofar as consciousness and the infinite are the ur-elements of philosophy which can never be abstracted away from each other. However, it is just this point which goes against Frank's interpretation. Neither the infinite nor consciousness can be abstracted from each other because the infinite is as much dependent on consciousness as consciousness is on the infinite. This is because consciousness is the sole predicate of the infinite while the infinite is the sole object of consciousness (TP:244). Both are equally primary and both gain their validity through the other, standing in a *Wechselerweis*, an alternating proof wherein these two ur-elements of philosophy reciprocally prove, depend upon, and determine each other. That Schlegel demands that philosophy begin with a *Wechselwirkung* and that the lectures begin with infinity and consciousness as its ur-elements is no accident. Frank cannot be right in his classification of Schlegel therefore. First of all, it is not simply that 'Being cannot be traced back to determinations of our consciousness' since Being's existence is in no way primary to, and in fact is in some sense dependent on, consciousness. Second of all, and on the basis of the same point, it is not the case that reality exists independent of consciousness since reality lies in the middle of the infinite and consciousness. With these two points covered Frank's attribution of epistemological realism to Schlegel based the conviction that we do not possess 'adequate knowledge of reality,' also falls away as it is a result of Schlegel's scepticism rather than a feature of his realism.

A small problem for Schlegel does arise out of this however. As we've seen the elements of all reality are consciousness and infinite with reality occupying the indifference point between the two (TP:244). The question now arises, in what way is

Schlegel consistent with the aim of the *Frühromantiker* to be monists? If the infinite and consciousness are irreducible elements of philosophy then have we not just achieved a dualism? For Schlegel this is a result of our epistemological position. That we are unable to comprehend the absolute within which all oppositions would disappear is 'trivially true' from the fact that our knowledge is always conditioned. However, that Schlegel takes there to be such a primal something is clear from his fragment "there is no dualism without primacy" (Id:73). That the dualism we do find is merely a result of the epistemological context we find ourselves in becomes from his statement that natural science will "never find a higher point to attach itself to than *dualism*," and that this is the "highest form of *illusion*" (own emphasis) (TP:246). That we find dualism to be so basic is therefore merely another feature of our epistemological lack.

There is one instance in Schlegel's lectures which initially seems to be telling for Schlegel's relation to idealism and realism. This is when Schlegel constructs natural science out of idealism. As I mentioned above the two elements of idealism are in the lectures dualism and realism (TP:251). These in turn refer to Fichte and Spinoza. Does this mean that Schlegel thinks philosophy can be subsumed under idealism? Or does it mean that idealism in this instance means something different or new than what we would classically consider idealism? I suggest he means the latter. The idealism which subsumes and consists in dualism and realism is, I take it, the type of philosophy linked to criticism and critical philosophy which Schlegel is trying to reshape. Several factors indicate this. First of all, why the opposition between dualism and realism? This seems odd at best since classically it has been realism and idealism which are opposed and not dualism and realism. Second of all, there are several places in which Schlegel describes idealism and realism as separate moments in our longing for the infinite and for absolute knowledge, moments in which realism is not subsumed under idealism but stands

alongside it. In his *Dialogue on Poesy*, Schlegel's character Ludoviko calls for a new mythology based on the failure of poetry to form a cohesive unity and call for a new mythology in order to enable poetry to achieve this (DoP:183). This mythology, claims Ludoviko, must be created out of the “innermost depths of the spirit as if out of itself,” in other words, this mythology must be based in idealism (DoP:183). However, this merely forms the beginning of this mythology for now “idealism must go outside of itself in one way or another in order to be able to return to itself and to remain what it is. Therefore, a new and equally unbounded realism must and will emerge out of the womb of idealism” (DoP:184).³¹ Another factor is found in Schlegel's fragments, in which he writes that “all philosophy is idealism,” adding that “where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin,” and “there exists no true realism except that of poetry” (Id:48, 96). In fact, “realism will never again be able to appear in the shape of either philosophy or even a system” (DoP:185). Lastly, Schlegel's rejection of idealism as it was practised before him is made clear when he asks what philosophical system would be useful for the poet and discounts idealism on the basis that a philosophy useful for the poet can not transform the real into illusion (AF:168). With this in mind, we should be wary of characterising Schlegel as an idealist based on one instance of his terminology. The fact that idealism and realism are two separate moments in the quest for absolute knowledge speaks more towards their equal importance than towards a favouring of one over the other.

Schlegel and Beiser on Absolute Idealism

This question of idealism in Schlegel brings us into the territory of Beiser's interpretation of Schlegel and the *Frühromantiker*. Although we have already rejected Beiser's characterisation of the *Frühromantiker* on the basis of their rejection of the

31 For a more in-depth discussion of Romanticisms' new mythology see (Bowie, 1990)

possibility of absolute knowledge, which is repeated in Schlegel, it is interesting to note that the organicist idealist ascription of Schlegel might not be correct in itself either. From this characterisation we are mostly interested in two features. Firstly, that Schlegel has an organicist conception of the universe, meaning he takes the ideal and real, and indeed the objective and the subjective, to only differ quantitatively insofar “both are differing degrees of organization and development of a single rational activity, which acts through constantly dividing what is one and uniting what is divided” (Beiser, 2003, p.70). Secondly, that the universe is dependent upon an absolute intelligence which is the “rational principle or archetype active in all things, the idea of all ideas” (Beiser, 2008, p.459).

It is uncertain whether Schlegel would identify himself as an absolute idealist in this manner. It has not been suggested by any of the material covered so far and Beiser's referencing leaves much to be desired. There is however an instance in which Schlegel suggests that he does *not* hold this view. This appears in Schlegel's essay *Fichte's Basic Characteristics of the Present Age* in which Schlegel responds to Fichte's criticism of the fanaticism of his contemporaries, and discusses the nature of natural philosophy and two possible and distinct views of the absolute. Towards the end of the essay Schlegel makes a clarification in the midst of an example. He clarifies that “the term 'reason,' in the parlance of the new philosophy, is admittedly used there as something like 'dwelling in the realm of the idea” (FBC:117). This phrase seems to bring us right into the Platonic heritage which Beiser takes Schlegel to be a part of. Schlegel then makes the remark that “the author, indeed to a greater extent that one would expect, is in agreement with the thinking of this so-called age” (FBC:117). If Schlegel is referring to himself as the author of this essay, then this gives some force to Beiser's characterisation, as this would be an admission by Schlegel in the belief in some

rational principle guided by Platonic ideas. Two things tell against Schlegel being the author referred to. First of all, Schlegel writes that “he [the author] generally arrives at such views only after long, artificial detours,” which would be an odd self-description (FBC:118). Secondly, he later writes that “this should be proof enough that Fichte is very much caught in the age that he sets out to characterize” (FBC:118). We therefore learn that the author who is to an unexpected degree in agreement of the thinking of the age is the very same Fichte who is caught in the age that he sets out to characterise. Insofar as Schlegel rejects that he takes reason to mean what Fichte does, it can not simply be that Schlegel is the Platonic vitalist which Beiser takes him to be.

Schlegel on Idealism and Realism

So what can we say about Schlegel's relation to idealism and realism? First of all we've become more familiar with what Schlegel takes idealism to be. It is not the absolute and archetypal idealism which Beiser ascribes to Schlegel. Rather, a philosophy based in idealism seems, like Ludoviko's new mythology, simply to be an attempt at explaining phenomena from the perspective and under the laws of spirit. On the other end of the spectrum, realism is merely the attempt to explain and understand everything (particularly the infinite itself) from the perspective of the infinite. Of course, this is impossible for finite human beings. This is why allegory and wit must step in to represent the unity and unrepresentability of the infinite as moments of irony, and it is also why “there exists no true realism except that of poetry” (Id:96).

Interestingly enough, it seems that what at first glance appeared to have the least to do with Schlegel's relation to idealism and realism now lays the foundation for our understanding of this relation. These are the sceptical conclusions Schlegel draws from the finitude of our perspective. Philosophy can not guarantee the success of its attempt based on some absolutely certain first principle and a sure-fire method. What it can do is

produce a series of attempts at representing whatever phenomenon it is currently directed at such that relative to itself unity is achieved while relative to rest of the world it stands as a contradiction. Every perspective is partial and every philosopheme represents an attempt at unifying that which will never be comprehensibly unified. Two such perspectives are idealism and realism, concerned with consciousness and the infinite respectively. Philosophy, as idealism, explains things from the perspective of spirit and its laws, while realism, as poetry, explains things from the unity and infinitude of the absolute. Being is that which underlies each contradiction and each partial perspective. Between idealism and realism, between consciousness and the infinite, lies all of reality, such that the ur-elements of reality, consciousness and the infinite, the perspectives of idealism and realism, stand together, are only comprehensible through the other, and reciprocally determine and prove the other, standing in a *Wechselwirkung*. In this way, neither can subsume or replace the other but both are necessary and our standpoint should be one that encompasses both since reality is, after all, a product of both of their respective starting points.

Conclusion

We have now gone through the three major philosophical writers of the early German romantic movement, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel, in order to show that, in spite of Manfred Frank and Frederick C. Beiser's realist and idealist interpretations, we should interpret these philosophers as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

We began by looking at realism and idealism in Hölderlin. After making apparent that it was indeed Hölderlin's aim to find a way to combine idealism and realism we looked at the major features of Hölderlin's philosophy and how these developed out of the foundations laid in his short essay "Über Urtheil und Seyn" in which Hölderlin argues that absolute Being cannot be attributed to either objectivity or subjectivity alone, since both stand in a reciprocal relation to each other, and Being must therefore be conceived as a foundation transcendent to both. From this Hölderlin developed arguments against our ability to know this absolute, the necessity of an infinite approximation, the expression of this process of approximation in the eccentric path of Hyperion, and its completion in tragic poetry. Before rejecting Beiser's characterisation of the *Frühromantiker* as absolute idealists on the basis of their rejection of the possibility of absolute knowledge which is an essential element of the movement of absolute idealism, we looked at Frank's realist interpretation and found it to be lacking in several respects. Not only do his definitions prejudge the issue against Hölderlin's attempt, but his identification ignores the possibility of Hölderlin attempting to fuse idealism and realism in accordance with Kant's antinomies, as well as resting on asymmetrical relation between idealism and realism, and consciousness and Being, that precludes the identification of Hölderlin as a realist based only on his rejection of

idealism. Most importantly however, Frank's characterisation rests on a misidentification of what reality consists in for Hölderlin. As we saw, it is only with the opposition of the equiprimordial subject and object that the reality truly arises for Hölderlin, such that reality can neither be said to be entirely transcendent to, or independent from, consciousness, which is the basis on which Frank identifies Hölderlin as a realist. Instead, Hölderlin provides a standpoint which combines idealism and realism, and since this was his self-proclaimed aim, we should therefore read him as such.

We then looked at Novalis' idealism and realism. We began with excerpts from the texts in which Novalis makes clear his aim of combining idealism and realism. We began by looking at the nature of philosophy in face of and along with the strong sceptical conclusions presented in the *Fichte Studies*. Like Hölderlin, Novalis also presents arguments against the possibility of knowledge of Being itself. In Novalis' case these are based on reflection's inability to represent identity, the reversal that occurs in reflection, and the conditioned knowledge it offers that stands opposed to the unconditioned nature of the absolute. We then moved on to the later writings of Novalis, namely his assorted fragments and *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*. We then drew out the apparent tension between this work and the *Fichte Studies*, most notably in his notion of magical idealism. However, scepticism was shown to be as much of a part of Novalis' position during these later years, primarily because of the continued attachment to the notion of infinite approximation. We then moved on to Beiser and Frank's interpretations. First we found that Beiser's absolute idealist interpretation, still unacceptable on the basis of Novalis' rejection of the possibility of absolute knowledge, also did not adequately take into account the tentative status of claims to absolute knowledge that bar us from entirely ascribing an organicism to Novalis. On the other

hand, Frank's account was again found lacking insofar as it did not take into account Novalis' aim of fusing idealism and realism. We then established a reading of Novalis that did take this into account, stressing his relativisation of idealism and realism as primary elements of a philosophy which need completion through each other, and found that their necessary combination established Novalis as a philosopher who both can and should be interpreted as finding a middle ground between idealism and realism.

Lastly, we turned to idealism and realism in Schlegel. We again began with some excerpts that made it clear that Schlegel's philosophical project was, at least in part, to find a way to combine idealism and realism. We then went through the major meta-philosophical aspects of Schlegel's philosophy, including his anti-foundationalism, the notion of philosophy as beginning the middle, the cyclical form of philosophy, the coherence model of truth, the *Wechselwirkung* as the starting point of philosophy, philosophy as infinite approximation, the place of scepticism and mysticism, and the epistemological role of irony, allegory, and wit. Then we moved on to some notes from Schlegel's *Introduction to the Transcendental Philosophy* lectures to see how Schlegel attempted to base a philosophy on these meta-philosophical principles, paying particular attention to the establishment of the infinite and consciousness as the ur-elements of philosophy. With this in mind we turned to Frank's interpretation and found that, insofar as the infinite and consciousness, or realism and idealism in Schlegel's eyes, are equiprimordial, he can not be characterised as a realist. We also rejected Beiser's interpretation both on the now familiar terms of Schlegel's rejection of the possibility of absolute knowledge and on the basis of his comments on Fichte remaining within 'realm of the idea.' We then found that, instead of being able to classify Schlegel either as a realist or idealist, insofar as Schlegel takes the infinite and consciousness to be the principles of philosophy which it is our task to combine and out of whose conjunction

reality arises, Schlegel exemplifies exactly the kind of idealist-realist philosophy we would expect from someone whose aim it is to combine the two.

Having gone through Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel in turn, summarised the major elements of their philosophy, shown how none of the three can, due to the equiprimordiality of the subjective and the objective, be interpreted as either an idealist or realist, and rejected any absolute idealist readings, as well as given a reading of these philosophers consistent with their attempt to combine idealism and realism, I conclude that we both can and should interpret Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel as finding a middle path between idealism and realism.

Bibliography

Key to Hölderlin Chapter:

Hyp – Hyperion and Selected
Poems
EL – Essays and Letters
US – Über Urtheyl und Sein

Key to Novalis Chapter:

FS – Fichte Studies
AB – Das Allgemeine Brouillon
LF – Last Fragments
MO – Miscellaneous
Observations
TF – Teplitz Fragments

Key to Schlegel Chapter:

AF – Athenaeum Fragments
CF – Critical Fragments
DoP – Dialogue on Poesy
FBC – Fichte's Basic Characteristics of the
Present Age
Id – Ideas
PhF – Philosophical Fragments
TP – Introduction to the Transcendental
Philosophy

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