

Lecture 1

On Early German Romanticism as an Essentially Skeptical Movement

The Reinhold-Fichte Connection



I call these lectures “The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism.” I owe you some explanation for this title. First let me clarify what I mean by the term ‘foundations.’ I do not mean something like principles or highest fundamental propositions, from which other propositions are deduced. This is worth emphasizing because the post-Kantian mood in Germany was filled with a tendency to view philosophy as an activity which necessarily departed from an absolute principle. Karl Leonhard Reinhold and Johann Gottlieb Fichte fit squarely into this tradition. Fichte was a professor in Jena from 1794–99 and his predecessor had been Reinhold, who had introduced a philosophy of this sort in 1789.¹ Certainly, the group of thinkers who became known as the early German Romantics were influenced by both Reinhold and Fichte, indeed Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) had been Reinhold’s student from 1790 to 1791. During this time and also later, Novalis was in contact with a number of fellow students who had also studied under Reinhold and whose names have now been forgotten; among them Johann Benjamin Eberhard, Friedrich Karl Forberg, Franz Paul von Herbert, and Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer stand out. In disputes concerning Reinhold’s *Philosophy of Elements* (*Elementarphilosophie*), this group of young thinkers came to the conclusion that a philosophy, which seeks to follow a method of deduction from some highest fundamental principle, is either dispensable or downright impossible.

In the course of these lectures, I will show you that Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel shared this conviction, namely, that it is impossible to establish an

absolute foundation for philosophy. Moreover, I shall indicate which arguments this critique of first principles rests upon. Thus, by the title “The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism,” I do not mean to imply that the philosophy of early German Romanticism rested upon a fundamental proposition as did the philosophy of Reinhold (and later that of Fichte). To the contrary, early German Romanticism was oriented against such foundations.

You will now object that I am here parting from the predominant view of early German Romanticism as it is represented in academic research. When early German Romanticism, which included thinkers such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel, has been considered at all as an independent epoch in the development of modern thought, then it has only been in relation to the development of so-called German idealism, that is in relation to thinkers such as J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel. One can say of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, of course, with the appropriate specifications and modifications, that they either assumed a primary and absolute fundamental proposition for all thought, or that they executed a process of thought that led to such a fundamental proposition, to so-called absolute knowledge. The early Romantics also speak often (using the terminology of that time) of the Absolute or the unconditioned, but they were of the opinion that we could not grasp the Absolute or the unconditioned in thought, to say nothing of being able to arrive at it in reality. Consider Novalis’ famous first *Blüthenstaub*-fragment: “Everywhere we seek the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*), but find only things (*Dinge*).” In some formulations (which sound revolutionary if one modernizes the discursive context in which they were expressed), Novalis finally concluded that there was not an Absolute at all: that the Absolute was only a Kantian idea and that any attempt to pursue it led to “the realm of nonsense.” In this statement, the metaphysical conclusions of German idealism were rejected—many years before these metaphysical conclusions were clearly articulated in Hegel’s mature system. Because posterity has passed clear judgment upon the possibility (or, more accurately, the impossibility) of this sort of metaphysical thought, early German Romanticism has more affinities with contemporary thought than with the idealism of Fichte and Hegel. In early German Romanticism, respect for the finitude of our potential for knowledge (a respect which Kant had already shown) begins to be taken seriously. But until just recently we did not know what the philosophical dimensions of early German Romanticism really involved.

That this was the case is astounding when one considers that early German Romanticism is generally considered to be the phenomenon that brought the German language into concert with European culture. The general conception of early German Romanticism, a view shared by many scholars

as well, is that it attempted to bring the “German Spirit” to world literature. This contribution is viewed both positively and negatively. The negative aspects attributed to early German Romanticism are its anti-Enlightenment ambitions (for example, attempts to reestablish religion, especially Catholicism) and conservative political convictions. Georg Lukács went so far as to invent a history of direct cause and effect that passed “from Schelling to Hitler” (as is explicit in the subtitle of his famous book *The Destruction of Reason*).² But this is clearly wrong because Schelling was no Romantic, and the Nazis, as can be shown in detail, hated the protagonists of early German Romanticism.³ In the authors of early German Romanticism, the Nazis saw—and rightly so—ground breakers of the literary avant-garde, whose irony was biting and whose sincerity was doubted, enemies of the bourgeoisie, friends and spouses of Jews, welcomed guests and discussion partners at the Jewish Berlin salons, aggressive proponents of “the emancipation of the Jewry,” and finally “subversive intellectuals” (a slogan which the Nazis used indifferently to refer to members of the political left, to Jews as a group, and to intellectuals). Finally, the early Romantics were the closest friends of committed Democrats and Jacobins who constantly came into conflict with the censors, especially because the young Friedrich Schlegel was a Jacobin. Erhard was the most radical of the group and was Hardenberg’s (Novalis’) “real friend.” Moreover, Erhard was indebted to Novalis for a lifesaving position working for Novalis’ uncle, the Prussian minister and later chancellor, Karl August von Hardenberg. And it was Novalis who, when in 1798 he went to a spa in Teplitz for a health cure with von Herbert, a mutual friend of his and of Erhard’s, allowed the correspondence between von Herbert and Erhard to occur under his noble name, protecting his two friends’ correspondence from the censors.

I suggest that we do not occupy ourselves long with the clichés on either side. These clichés are the result of misconceived prejudices. Though prejudices do play a role in philosophy, they are at odds with the definition of philosophy as a love of knowledge. Even more fatal to us than both of the prejudices I have mentioned (which apply more to the literary dimensions of early German Romanticism than to its philosophical dimensions) is the misconception that early German Romanticism was a fantastic variation of absolute idealism as established by Fichte. This misconception rests upon a misinterpretation of the actual influence that Fichte’s work did in fact have upon the central figures of early German Romanticism. Novalis’ first independent writings (of 1795–96) show the strong influence of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. In the case of Hölderlin (whose first independent philosophical reflections were sketched in 1794–95), this influence seems even more evident, especially because he was Fichte’s student. And a good case can be made for the influence of Fichte upon Friedrich Schlegel, who came to Jena in 1796 and had close relations with Fichte.

This is, in fact, the way it seems. But I will show you in the following lectures that although Fichte was highly appreciated by those named above, their thought did not follow his, but rather diverged radically from it. Most importantly, their thought had different presuppositions—this is what I meant just now when I spoke of foundations. In imagining the occasion of Fichte's appearances in Jena, you must remember that his audience—which consisted largely of former students of Reinhold or newcomers who had been informed by them—expected new arguments against the philosophy of first principles from their new teacher.⁴ But Fichte provided the opposite: he sought to show that a philosophy based upon absolute principles was the right way of going about things, but that Reinhold's fundamental proposition could not be the first and highest proposition, and that it had to be replaced by what Fichte called the "absolute I." Among the group of Reinhold's former students, this thesis then reactivated the reservation concerning the feasibility of a philosophy based on first principles. This reservation had already been expressed between 1790 and 1792 (when Novalis had been Reinhold's student and had had access to the most important circle of thinkers critical of a philosophy based on first principles). But now it was not Reinhold's philosophy, but rather Fichte's, which was the object of critique. Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel's skeptical reactions to a "first philosophy" or a philosophy based on an absolute principle can best be understood within the context of the criticism which grew from Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*. Hence, that group of thinkers whose names have been forgotten, becomes more important. Previous research on early German Romanticism has neglected to examine the important relations between the criticism of Reinhold's philosophy and the subsequent criticisms of Fichte's philosophy. In order to fully appreciate the philosophical foundations of early German Romanticism, reactions to both Reinhold and Fichte must be studied and understood.

Why then has the Reinhold-Fichte connection been neglected? The sources that have enabled us to reconstruct this relation were, for many years, unavailable to scholars. These sources did not receive much attention until not more than ten years ago, although the essential ones had already been published two hundred years ago in forgotten collections of letters and in smaller publications. The rediscovery of these sources happened during the course of a substantial research project, to which Dieter Henrich, the initiator and leader of this work, gave the name "constellation-research." By "constellation-research," Henrich meant the scholarly and large-scale philological reconstruction of the discussion that occurred among Reinhold's students between 1792 and 1795 and of the context in which it occurred. This discussion has been gathered from correspondence which had until recently been difficult to access and was sometimes only salvageable from archives. Henrich concentrated his research upon the reconstruction of Hölderlin's

early thought (from the period around 1795). Henrich's ongoing research is directed toward the investigation of the thought of a relatively unknown scholar, Carl Immanuel Diez, and of his influence upon the Jena Circle (1792). Diez was at one time *Repetent* (a *Repetent* is more or less equivalent to an assistant professor of today) at the *Tübinger Stift*, the still existing theological seminary which has known world famous students such as; Johannes Kepler, Georg W. Hegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich W. J. Schelling, David Strauß, and Eduard Friedrich Mörike. Now, Diez, *Repetent* at the *Stift*, had a decisive influence upon the formation of the thought of Niethammer, Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel, and later, in Jena, upon that of Reinhold. My own thesis is that what was specific to early German Romantic philosophy can also be explained through appeal to this constellation, particularly the work of Novalis, who—in contrast to Hölderlin—had actually been Reinhold's student and a friend of the first strong critics of Reinhold's proposed "first philosophy." As a result of the systemic investigation of the discussion amongst Reinhold's former students in Jena between 1792 and 1795, entirely new sources have surfaced, and with them fresh, new insights have emerged. These new sources are so groundbreaking that it is no exaggeration to say that they not only place early German Romanticism scholarship upon an entirely new foundation, but that they also provide it with an entirely new mission. In the following lectures, we shall explore a portion of these new and pathbreaking sources.

The second point of clarification has to do with my use of the term 'Early German Romanticism.' I intentionally take the expression 'early Romanticism' (*Frühromantik*) to have a broader sense than that in which it is commonly used. One commonly understands early Romanticism as meaning the philosophical and literary production of a circle which consisted of friends who found themselves together in Berlin and/or Jena between 1796 and 1800 and which came to be centered around the house of the Schlegel brothers in Jena: that is to say, authors such as Wilhelm Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, and Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel (not to forget Caroline and Dorothea Schlegel, as well as Sophie Tieck). Hölderlin and his circle are usually not included as members of the early German Romantic movement because—despite the meeting between Novalis and Hölderlin in the home of Niethammer at the end of May 1795, and despite the great attention which Tieck, Schlegel, and Franz Brentano paid to Hölderlin's lyrical work—there was no direct relationship between the two circles. When Hölderlin himself was considering plans to found a journal, he alluded only indirectly to *Das Athenäum*, the famous journal of the Jena Circle that was published between 1798 and 1800. We have, in particular, little knowledge of how much Hölderlin knew of Friedrich Schlegel, who was the most productive, theoretical author and

especially the best-known classicist of the group. On the other hand, we do know that Hölderlin was familiar with Schleiermacher's lectures of 1799, *On Religion: Speeches Addressed to Its Cultured Despisers*. Emil Petzold has already demonstrated that the influences of this work are to be found in Hölderlin's *Brot und Wein*.⁵ But such relations between the two circles are incidental. It is in no way necessary to refer to them in order to demonstrate the unity in structure of thought between the Jena Circle and the Homburg Circle. This unity can, according to the newest research, be largely explained by the fact that the thought of the two circles was built upon the same foundation. Namely, they both develop the results of the constellation of conversations that played out among Reinhold's students starting in 1792.

Much nonsense has been promulgated with the goal of contrasting the basic inspirations of Hölderlin and of the early Romantics, especially in the field of literature. Among this nonsense is the prejudice that, due to his lifelong orientation toward the Greeks, Hölderlin should be more appropriately considered a classicist, while the Romantics were more oriented toward the Middle Ages. First of all, Hölderlin completed the same "turn toward the national" as Novalis and Schlegel, at the latest in his letters to Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff. And second of all, it was Friedrich Schlegel himself whose thought is especially rooted in the foundational works of the classical epoch generally and in the classical period of art in particular; it was with reference to Schlegel that the satirical term 'Graecomania' was invented by Karl Philipp Moritz, I think. So, when viewed clearly, no essential difference arises here, but rather a strong parallel.

With this I have, of course, not yet said anything about the meaning of early German Romanticism itself. I propose the following ad hoc definition, which I will have to justify in the following lectures, piece by piece. The thought of Hölderlin and that of Hardenberg (Novalis) and Schlegel *cannot* be assimilated to the mainstream of so-called German idealism, although these philosophers developed their thought in close cooperation with the principle figures of German idealism, Fichte and Schelling (Hegel, a late-comer to free speculation, played at that time only a passive role). The thought of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel implies a tenet of basic realism, which I will provisionally express by the formula, that that which has being—or, we might say, the essence of our reality—cannot be traced back to determinations of our consciousness. If *ontological* realism can be expressed by the thesis that reality exists independently of our consciousness (even if we suppose thought to play a role in structuring reality) and if *epistemological* realism consists in the thesis that we do not possess adequate knowledge of reality, then early German Romanticism can be called a version of ontological and epistemological realism. Early German Romanticism never subscribed to the projects of liquidating the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*), which are

characteristic of the beginnings of idealism from Salomon Maimon to Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. One can object that the early German Romantics adopt, to borrow a term from Michael Devitt, the “fig leaf realism” of Kant and Reinhold, both of whom distinguished a reality independent of our knowledge of it from the a priori conditions of our knowledge, and both of whom described the quest for knowledge of reality as an infinite task, which will therefore never be exhausted. Kant assigned the name ‘idea’ to the object of this inexhaustible inquiry into reality. An idea is a concept for which no (concrete) intuition can be appropriate—for example, totality. And this means that we finite beings, for obvious reasons, strive toward a completeness of knowledge, but can never arrive at it, since we have a finite number of intuitions available upon which to base our judgments. The early German Romantics, in reference to this infinite project, spoke of the “longing for the infinite” (*Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen*). In “longing for the infinite,” the early German Romantics believed themselves to have provided an unconventional, but by no means unsuitable translation of the Greek *filosofiva*.

Today, I will not elaborate extensively upon the issues relating to Kant’s use of the terms ‘thing-in-itself’ and ‘idea.’ They relate to central points in Kant’s theory, which were heatedly discussed and forcefully attacked by his contemporaries—particularly by the old-Leibnizians of the Wolff School, but also by Jacobi, Maimon, and Aenesidemus-Schulze.⁶ I will mention *one* point of attack, which concerns a contradiction in Kant’s explanation of the origin of our sensations. Like many present-day proponents of a causal theory of reference, Kant held that the passivity of our sensations was due to the effect of a thing in itself. He asks: What would an appearance be without something that appears—without an aboutness? If I think of this affecting conceived of as an application of the principle of sufficient reason, then the following contradiction arises: According to Kant, causality is a category (a pure concept of the understanding). The concept of causality cannot be employed to lead beyond the realm of appearances and of the subjective. In particular, it cannot be used to make the world of sensible appearances understandable as the product of a reality existing in itself, as Kant does, thus leading to inconsistency. Here, of course, we have the origin of Kant’s dualism: there is a reality existing in itself, of which we know nothing; opposed to this reality there is a consciousness, which must be characterized as “completely without content” or “empty.” Kant takes into consideration that there could be a root that is common both to the reality existing in itself and to consciousness, but which is itself unknown. The Kantian system breaks into two parts; this common root would bind these two parts together into a unity. This systematic unity can only be thought of as an idea. Here we have, by the way, a crude, imprecise, and ad hoc definition of the second of Kant’s

core theses: the unity in which reality and consciousness exist together cannot itself be the object of our knowledge. This unity can only be spoken of in terms of hypothetical concepts. They serve our reason, playing a necessarily regulative role in unifying our knowledge. But the “real pursuit” of them would, as Novalis says, “lead into the realm of nonsense.”

My point now (turning back to early German Romanticism) is that Hölderlin and Novalis are in complete agreement concerning the thesis of the priority of Being over the subjective view of Being. From this point of agreement, they progress into other thoughts, according to which the path toward knowledge must be described in terms of a process of infinite approximation or as a necessarily incomplete progression. These thoughts of a priority of existence over the subjective view of it and of the path toward knowledge as infinite approximation are, when taken together, incompatible with the kind of philosophy which Reinhold presents in his *Attempt at a New Theory of the Human Faculty of Representation* and to the sort of method referred to by Fichte in the first paragraphs of the *Foundation of the Wissenschaftslehre*. These are philosophies that start from the certainty of a highest and immediately evident fundamental proposition from which our valid beliefs can be derived as logical implications. For a long time, I thought that Hölderlin’s and Novalis’ talk of Being stood for a higher fundamental proposition like the ones that they attributed to Reinhold and Fichte. Since then I have realized that this interpretation was wrong. Being does not stand for a principle superior to the so-called absolute I, but rather for the thought that we cannot exhaust our access to reality by mere thought, or that, as Hans Georg Gadamer says, “in all understanding there is more Being than we are aware of.” This thought, which moves the finitude of our means of attaining knowledge into the foreground, is entirely compatible with the belief that our knowledge cannot ultimately be grounded in a highest principle. It is also entirely compatible with a basically skeptical disposition toward philosophy, which I would again like to characterize as typically romantic.

Now, in order to make your way easier, I should say a few words about the previously mentioned group which was brought into view by Henrich: the Jena Constellation. Only against the background of this Jena Constellation is it possible to entirely understand the claims I have introduced. The most important point about the intellectual constellation of 1789 to 1792 is that Hölderlin and later Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel were exposed to the Kantian philosophy. In the following lectures, we shall consider this Kantian legacy through two texts, which for the last two hundred years went unnoticed. The first is the second edition (from 1789) of Jacobi’s *Spinoza Buechlein*.⁷ The second is Reinhold’s *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Missverständnisse der Philosophen* (Contributions to the Rectification of Hitherto Held Misconceptions of Philosophers), which represented his turn in the summer of 1792.⁸

Reinhold's text was only discovered due to a curious event. We shall consider it first.

In response to the so-called Vienna Jacobin Conspiracy of July 1794, the Austrian reactionaries conducted a raid of suspected Jacobins who had been influenced by studying Kant. In this raid, part of the correspondence of Baron Franz Paul von Herbert, owner of the white lead factory in Klagenfurt, was confiscated.⁹ The police are usually more thorough than are the philologists. Thus, a letter to the Baron from the Jena professor of philosophy, Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, was kept in the archive of the Imperial and Royal Ministry of the interior. Baron von Herbert was patron to Niethammer (and also, by the way, to Reinhold, who was of humble means). Niethammer had been Hölderlin's "friend" and "mentor" since their time at the Stift. Their relationship solidified during their time together in Jena.¹⁰ Niethammer's letter to von Herbert is dated June 2. In it he speaks of "the dispensability of a single highest principle of all knowledge," and thus of the failure of Reinhold's and Fichte's attempts to establish our knowledge on a highest proposition, the truth of which could be secured by immediate evidence.¹¹ During his formative phase, Niethammer was a student of Karl Leonhard Reinhold. Reinhold is known in the history of philosophy as the founder of a philosophy that determines the acceptability of propositions by their derivability from a highest principle that is in itself evident. But, in the summer of 1792, Reinhold himself was troubled by doubts as to whether such a philosophical program could be carried out.

It seems that two personalities played a role in the origin of this philosophical crisis: Novalis' former tutor, Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, and the Tübingen *Repetent* Carl Immanuel Diez. In a letter to Johann Benjamin Erhard (dated July 18, 1792), which Henrich has recently published,¹² Reinhold admits—and this is an admission which is repeated in none of the writings he published at the time—that his philosophy rests upon premises which cannot all be grounded right from the beginning, but which can be grounded only in succession (or by later justification).¹³ In the case of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, the presupposition which is implicitly assumed is that of the self-activity of the subject, which is the only active element in all the relations addressed by the 'principle of consciousness.' So the foundation is not a principle that is laid down right from the beginning, but is rather accomplished through a final idea. This must be an idea in Kant's original sense (namely, a relational category which is expanded for the purpose of systematizing our knowledge into the unconditioned). Now ideas are only hypothetically valid. They regulate our reflections upon the world, but do not constitute objects. If final foundations only follow from ideas, then, paradoxically, they can never be ultimately justified (since they never follow ultimately). And so the program of a deduction from a highest principle

is transformed into an infinite approximation towards a principle that can never be reached. In other words, the first principle becomes a regulative idea. Reinhold's former student, Novalis, recapitulates this twist (the result of which should have remained binding for Novalis himself) when he says that "the absolute I" must be transformed into a "principle of approximation."¹⁴

And now we take a jump forward. In the fall of 1796, another young Jena student of philosophy recorded the following conviction:

[. . .] Philosophy [must], like the epic poem, begin in the middle, and it is impossible to present philosophy and to add to it piece by piece, so that the first piece would be in itself completely grounded and explained (KA XVIII: 518, Nr. 16).

The student was Friedrich Schlegel. Eight years later, in the private Cologne lectures for the Boisserée brothers, he is able to articulate his claim even more clearly:

Our philosophy does not begin like others with a first principle—where the first proposition is like the center or first ring of a comet—with the rest a long tail of mist—we depart from a small but living seed—our center lies in the middle. From an unlikely and modest beginning—doubt regarding the "thing" which, to some degree shows itself in all thoughtful people and the always present, prevalent probability of the I—our philosophy will develop in a steady progression and become strengthened until it reaches the highest point of human knowledge and shows the breadth and limits of all knowledge (KA XII: 328, 3).

And in July, another former student of Reinhold, namely Novalis, notes:

What do I do by philosophizing? I am searching for a foundation. At the basis of philosophizing there lies a striving toward thought of a foundation. But foundation is not cause in the actual sense—but rather inner nature—connection with the whole [coherence]. All philosophizing must terminate in an absolute foundation. If this were not given, if this concept contained an impossibility—then the urge to philosophize would be an infinite activity. It would be without end, because an eternal need for an absolute foundation would be at hand—and thus it would never stop. Through the voluntary renunciation of the Absolute, infinite free activity arises in us—the only possible Absolute which can be given to us, and which we find only through our incapacity to arrive at and recognize an absolute. This Absolute which is given to us may only be recognized negatively, in that we act and find that through no action do we arrive at that which we seek. This may be called an absolute postulate. All searching for *one principle*

would be an attempt to square the circle. *Perpetuum mobile*. The philosopher's stone (NS II: 269 f., Nr. 566).¹⁵

Other things that Novalis says are just as decidedly Reinholdian. For example, he claims that the subject, thought of as "cause" (this would be Reinhold's "absolute subject") is "only a regulatory concept, an idea of reason—it would thus be foolish to attribute real efficacy to it" (l.c., 255, Nr. 476; cf. l.c., Nr. 477). Or: "All search for the first principle is nonsense—it is a *regulatory idea*" (l.c., 254, Nr. 472; cf. 252, lines 5 ff. and 177, Nr. 234, lines 15 ff.). "A pure law of association [coherence] seems to me to be the highest axiom—a hypothetical proposition" (l.c., lines 12 ff.).

Between Reinhold's doubts concerning a first philosophy and Schlegel's and Novalis' decided departure from it, a history is played out which stands quite at odds with what the historians have to say to us about the origin of the so-called absolute idealism. This history has to do with skepticism regarding the possibility that beliefs can be ultimately grounded through a deduction from a highest principle. When this principle breaks apart under the blows of such doubt, then the belief in the "relativity of all truth" can spread, as is assumed in the citation from Schlegel. In Schlegel's *Review of the First Four Volumes of F. I. Niethammer's Philosophisches Journal* (KA VIII: 12–32), which he himself characterizes as his "debut on the philosophical stage":

How can there be scientific judgments, where there is not yet a science? Indeed, all other sciences must oscillate as long as we lack a positive philosophy. However, in other sciences there is at least something relatively firm and universally valid. Nothing is yet established in philosophy, this is shown to us by the present state. All foundation and ground is still missing (KA VIII: 30 f.).

At the time this conviction was written, Fichte had already been teaching at Jena for three years, and had already claimed, in principle, that his *Wissenschaftslehre* had laid a firm and universally valid foundation. When we keep this clearly in mind, the boldness of Schlegel's skeptical objection stands in sharp relief. Inquiry into the history which played out between Reinhold's philosophy of first principles and Schlegel's and Novalis' reactions to it will be *one* topic of these lectures. But before developing this theme, I shall first address another important piece of background information.

The basic skeptical conclusion for which I have presented evidence and whose effect turned back upon Fichte could be cultivated within the context of the Jena discussion through a reflection upon the semantics of the term 'knowledge.' Jacobi discussed the semantics of knowledge in the seventh

Beilage of the second edition of his book on Spinoza (known as the *Spinoza Büchlein*). There Jacobi shows that the definition of knowledge as justified belief leads to an infinite regress. His argument is as follows: Facts become known, and they are formulated in propositions (that is, Kantian judgments). If a state of affairs is a fact (and thus something known), the statement corresponding to the fact must, by definition, be conditioned by something else that serves to justify it. So this statement must be conditioned by another statement, which must itself be conditioned by another statement, which must in turn be conditioned by yet another statement, and so on ad infinitum. If all of our beliefs are conditioned by other beliefs, then we can never attain knowledge of the unconditioned. So, if we stand by this strong definition of knowledge, all propositions are valid only conditionally. Yet if we assert the existence of an Absolute, there must be at least *one* proposition that is not valid conditionally, but unconditionally. An unconditionally valid proposition is one which has validity that is not derived from a condition of being grounded upon another proposition. Jacobi called the knowledge that is expressed in an unconditional proposition, “feeling” (or belief [*Glaube*]). To believe means: to take a fact to be certain without anything further, where no additional light would be shed upon the fact through an additional grounding of it—where a grounding is neither possible nor necessary. Novalis recapitulates this position succinctly with the words: “What I don’t know, but I feel [. . .], I believe” (*NS II*: 105, lines 11–13; lines 1–3).

The skepticism of the early German Romantics is targeted precisely against a program of absolute foundations. They question whether there is immediate knowledge and find Jacobi’s appeal to faith an untenable solution to the problem of the unknowability of the Absolute. According to the romantic position, our knowledge is situated in an infinite progression and has no firm, absolute foundation. (Because of this, and only because of this, is Schlegel’s statement that “*Truth is relative*” valid. [*KA XII*: 92]). And evidence, even in the form of common sense intuition, cannot replace the grounding which is missing (and which is, in an ultimate form, impossible).

We know that Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel not only knew Niethammer well, and were even friends with him, but that they also regularly read the *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* (Philosophical Journal of a Society of German Scholars), the publication which Niethammer had announced at the beginning of January 1795 and had edited since May of that year (cf, for example, *NS IV*: 200). Schlegel not only reviewed the first three years’ issues of the *Journal*, but he also collaborated on several texts that appeared in the *Journal* (cf, *KA VIII*: CLV ff.). Novalis’ earliest philosophical notes are not in the literary form of fragments, but rather of a *Brouillon*, and these writings may have been intended for the *Philosophisches Journal*. Support for the hypothesis that Novalis’ notes were

written for the *Philosophisches Journal* is the fact that there were letters from Novalis to Niethammer in which Novalis speaks of his intentions to contribute to Niethammer's *Journal*. The editor of the critical edition of Novalis' works had access to these letters, but they have since been lost (*NS II*: 32). Clearly, there is strong evidence in favor of the thesis that the early German Romantic philosophers were involved in critiquing a philosophy based on first principles. Niethammer's *Journal* was a literary vehicle that served these purposes and hence became a forum for this discussion.¹⁶ The general tone of criticism is well-illustrated in an article for the journal that Niethammer wrote. The article was entitled, "Concerning the Demands of Common Sense on Philosophy,"¹⁷ and was written as an introduction to the goals of the journal in general and the skeptical response to a philosophy based on first principles in particular. In this article, Niethammer, as the title of the essay suggests, announces his methodological turn away from Reinhold and attempts to substantiate his doubt concerning the possibility of a philosophy based on first principles. In his skeptical response to the *Aenesidemus* issue, Niethammer had already expressed doubt concerning the possibility of a transcendental proof of the so-called fact of experience (which even skeptics did not dispute). In the classical version of the transcendental deduction, such a proof follows *modo tollenti* from a retroactive inference (*Rückschluß*) to a priori laws of our mind, from which the beliefs we take to be true follow as necessary consequences. Niethammer attempted to expose the following circle in this process of derivation: first, experience is established in consciousness; second, going back from experience, principles are arrived at as antecedents; third, these principles are then supposed to confirm the foundation of experience. But it is not only the case that from the consequent, there is no certain inference to one and only one "determined" antecedent, because the same consequent can follow from many different antecedents (Kant himself knew this [*CPR A368*]). Moreover, according to Niethammer, it is the case that there can be no necessary relation between a contingent empirical proposition and an a priori apodictically valid proposition. In the remainder of the essay, Niethammer denies that the grounds of derivation could consist at all in a priori synthetic propositions.

A critique of the procedure of transcendental deduction that is even harsher than the one developed by Niethammer, was the one that was put forth by another of Reinhold's rebellious students, namely, the philosopher (and later famous jurist) Paul Johann Anselm Feuerbach.¹⁸ His argument rests upon the insight that the evidence for the first principle must be immediately evident, hence this first principle must be understood as a mere factual (empirical, a posteriori) truth.¹⁹ If a truth is only factual (as Reinhold consistently tells us of the facts of consciousness), then it lacks the necessity which is demanded of a priori truth. The necessity of a factual truth would

result only if the fact were justified by a universal rule of inference (the major premise of the syllogism) and the fact and rule of inference together implied the conclusion—and the first principle of philosophy lacks just this relationship of necessity. Because the adherents of an absolute “first philosophy” make reference to a “first principle” as a piece of evidence (that is, a conscious experience or a belief of healthy human reason), the supposed principle can be formulated *modo ponente* in a classical syllogism only as a minor proposition (that is, as a singular proposition). The validity of a singular proposition can only be empirical (if for the sake of the argument we abstract from mathematical propositions like “two is an even number”—but note we are dealing with facts of consciousness). Feuerbach is positive that grounding can only follow from regulative ideas—thus, it can never follow ultimately.

Feuerbach’s conclusion converges with the conclusions reached by Friedrich Karl Forberg, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, and many others, namely: Claims to truth can only be understood as an infinite approximation toward knowledge which is never complete (Feuerbach, l. c., 317 ff.). Thus, as Schlegel says, “an absolute understanding” is denied “in the philosophy, which denies an absolute truth.” (KA XII: 102; cf. 102). And: “Every system is only an approximation toward its ideal. Skepticism is [thus] eternal [insurmountable, incircumventable]” (KA XVIII: 417, Nr. 1149). I have already mentioned similar formulations by Novalis (the most important example is the note taken over by Forberg; NS II: 269 ff., Nr. 566).

Friedrich Schlegel developed an alternative to approaches like those of Reinhold and Fichte, that is, to approaches which sought to develop a philosophy based upon a single, absolute first principle. His alternative was that of an alternating or reciprocal principle (*Wechselgrundsatz*) or an alternating proof or reciprocal proof structure (*Wechselerweis*) operating in thought.²⁰ Novalis, on the other hand, took a slightly different path, one which is strikingly close to that of Hölderlin (in May 1795). Novalis shows that the reflexive nature of our self-consciousness (Fichte’s “highest point”) is incompatible with the thought of an Absolute (that which Novalis, along with Jacobi, calls “original being” [*Urseyn*]). Thus, reflexive self-consciousness, as an I, cannot be taken as the first principle of philosophy. Rather, the foundation for this I is transformed from a piece of evidence immanent in consciousness (which is felt in an intellectual intuition) into a “principle of approximation,” that is, into a Kantian idea, which we are supposed to approach in an infinite progression. The thought of conferring reality to this idea leads, says Novalis, “into the realm of nonsense” (NS II: 252, line 6). Or also: “Everywhere we seek the unconditioned, but find only things” (l.c., 412, Nr. 1).

I have given you, in rather broad brushstrokes, the main lines of the debate that shaped early German Romantic philosophy. Now, I would like to

provide you with some details of an important but little known source of inspiration for the development of Novalis' thought: the person and work of Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, author of *Empirische Psychologie* (Empirical Psychology).²¹

Schmid lived from 1761 to 1812. He was the most important orthodox Kantian of his time, and was in correspondence with Kant himself. He became the victim of one of the most evil acts of terrorism in the history of modern philosophy: the *Act of Annihilation*, which Fichte directed against him in the *Philosophisches Journal* in 1795. But the very fact that Fichte got himself into such an uproar about Schmid was naturally motivated by something which should be of great interest to us: the significance of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte claimed that the *Wissenschaftslehre* went beyond what Kant had shown in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, Schmid denied this. Schmid later garnered Kant's agreement on this point. Schmid did not belong to the circle around Reinhold and Niethammer (to whom he was nevertheless close; so for a time he planned to edit the *Philosophisches Journal* together with Niethammer); rather, he had been the tutor of the young Friedrich von Hardenberg (later known as Novalis) from 1781 to 1782. Schmid maintained contact with Novalis until Novalis' untimely death in 1801. So, the former tutor became a meaningful and central figure for Novalis—as Niethammer was for Hölderlin: teacher, philosophical mentor, and friend. In 1790, Novalis was studying at Jena, and attending Schmid's lectures (he attended, among other things, his lectures on *Empirische Psychologie*). During this decisive phase of Novalis' life, Schmid acted as his philosophical mentor and also as a friend and confidante. Teacher and student were quite close. Conclusions concerning intellectual dependencies between the two may also be drawn. These I will elucidate in the next lecture.