

Friedrich Schlegel

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Friedrich Schlegel

Born: 1772 | **Died:** 1829

Nationality: German

Primary Field(s): Philosophy, Literature, Linguistics, Philology, History, Politics

1. Summary

Friedrich Schlegel was a pivotal figure in German intellectual history, renowned as an author, linguist, and philosopher. His multi-faceted career spanned both academia and political service, leaving an indelible mark on various disciplines. Born in Hanover, he was instrumental in shaping the intellectual landscape of his era, particularly through his involvement with the burgeoning Romantic movement. Schlegel's early intellectual pursuits were marked by a profound engagement with classical philology, which provided the foundation for his later revolutionary ideas concerning language and history. His academic interests later expanded to encompass the philosophy of history, a field in which he made significant contributions, including the coinage of the term "historicism."

Throughout his life, Schlegel underwent significant intellectual and personal transformations, moving from an early, radical phase of Romanticism to a more conservative stance influenced by his conversion to Catholicism. He was a central figure of the so-called Jena Romantics, a group that fundamentally redefined German literature and philosophy. His work, often produced in collaboration with his elder brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel, challenged existing paradigms and introduced concepts that continue to be debated and analyzed. His legacy extends beyond literary theory into the realms of philology, where he was an early proponent of comparative linguistic studies, and the philosophy of history, where his ideas on the historical conditioning of human culture remain influential.

2. Early Life and Intellectual Development

Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel was born on March 10, 1772, in Hanover, into a family deeply embedded in the German intellectual and cultural scene. His father, Johann Adolf Schlegel, was a Protestant pastor and professor of rhetoric, whose influence fostered an early environment of literary and theological inquiry. Unlike his more academically inclined elder brother, August Wilhelm, Friedrich's early education was somewhat tumultuous. He initially pursued a career in commerce but soon abandoned it to dedicate himself to scholarly pursuits, driven by an insatiable curiosity for classical antiquity and philosophy. This formative period saw him immerse himself in the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Immanuel Kant, whose critical philosophy profoundly influenced his developing thought.

His studies at the universities of Göttingen and Leipzig focused primarily on law and classical

philology. It was during this time that Schlegel began to articulate his early critical theories, particularly on Greek poetry, which challenged conventional interpretations. He developed a keen interest in the historical evolution of language and literature, laying the groundwork for his later contributions to philology and the philosophy of history. These early explorations were characterized by a radical spirit, questioning established norms and seeking new ways to understand human artistic and intellectual endeavors.

The late 1790s proved to be a transformative period for Schlegel. His move to Jena, a vibrant intellectual hub, placed him at the heart of what would become the Early German Romantic movement. Here, he interacted with a constellation of brilliant minds including his brother August Wilhelm, Novalis, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. This intellectual ferment in Jena was crucial for the formulation of his most influential ideas, particularly those related to the nature of poetry, art, and the philosophical underpinnings of history.

3. Key Contributions to Romanticism and Philology

Friedrich Schlegel is widely acknowledged as one of the principal founders and theoreticians of the Romantic movement in German literature. His early work, especially the influential fragments published in the journal Athenäum (1798-1800), which he co-edited with his brother, served as a foundational manifesto for Romantic ideals. These fragments championed concepts such as romantic irony, which suggested a perpetual self-transcendence and critical detachment in artistic creation, and the idea of "progressive universal poetry." This concept envisioned poetry as an ever-evolving, comprehensive art form that could unite all genres and forms of knowledge, continually striving for the infinite and incomplete. Schlegel's theoretical contributions moved beyond mere literary criticism, positing a philosophical framework that sought to integrate art, philosophy, and life into a cohesive whole, emphasizing individualism, subjectivity, and the infinite nature of human endeavor.

Beyond his pivotal role in Romanticism, Schlegel also made groundbreaking contributions to the field of philology. He was one of the first European scholars to seriously study Sanskrit and Indian literature, which he believed held the key to understanding the origins of European languages and culture. His seminal work, Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians, 1808), marked a crucial moment in the development of comparative philology. In this work, he not only highlighted the linguistic connections between Sanskrit and European languages but also proposed a method for linguistic comparison that would significantly influence later scholars like Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm, establishing the foundation for the study of Indo-European languages. His philological insights demonstrated his belief in the deep historical interconnectedness of cultures and languages, a theme that resonated with his broader philosophical explorations.

4. The Concept of Historicism

One of Friedrich Schlegel's most enduring and widely recognized contributions is his coinage of the term "historicism" (Historismus). This concept, articulated in his writings on the philosophy of history, proposes that cultural, social, and even philosophical phenomena are not static or universally applicable, but rather are products of their specific historical contexts. Schlegel argued that to truly understand any aspect of human experience--be it art, law, religion, or social institutions--one must approach it historically, recognizing that it is shaped and influenced by the unique historical trajectory of a given society or civilization. This perspective marked a significant departure from Enlightenment universalism, which often sought to identify timeless and immutable principles of human reason and nature.

Schlegel's historicism emphasized the dynamic and developmental nature of history, viewing it not as a mere chronological sequence of events, but as an organic process of unfolding. He believed that each historical epoch possesses its own intrinsic value and coherence, demanding to be understood on its own terms rather than judged by the standards of another. This approach had profound implications for intellectual inquiry, advocating for a deep engagement with the past to illuminate the present. It underscored the relativity of cultural values and the continuous transformation of human society, laying groundwork for future historical methodologies and the interpretive traditions within the humanities.

The concept of historicism, as envisioned by Schlegel, also had a teleological dimension, suggesting that history, despite its apparent chaos, moved towards a higher spiritual or universal consciousness. His later work, particularly after his conversion to Catholicism, infused this historical perspective with a theological framework, seeing history as a divine plan unfolding towards salvation. This synthesis of historical understanding with spiritual purpose distinguished his brand of historicism and influenced subsequent thinkers who grappled with the meaning and direction of human history.

5. Later Life, Political Engagement, and Religious Conversion

Friedrich Schlegel's intellectual and personal journey took a decisive turn with his conversion to Catholicism in 1808, a decision that profoundly influenced his later philosophical, political, and literary endeavors. This conversion marked a shift from the radical individualism of his early Romantic phase towards a more conservative and communitarian outlook. Following his conversion, Schlegel moved to Vienna, which became the center of his activities for the remainder of his life. There, he entered the service of the Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich, engaging in diplomatic and political work. His political writings and activities during this period reflected a strong commitment to conservative principles, advocating for the restoration of traditional monarchical and religious structures in post-Napoleonic Europe.

In Vienna, Schlegel also continued his academic pursuits, delivering influential lecture series that synthesized his historical, philosophical, and literary insights. His lectures on the History of Ancient and Modern Literature (1815) and the Philosophy of History (1829) were particularly significant, showcasing his broad erudition and his evolving perspectives. These lectures provided comprehensive surveys of intellectual and cultural development, always framed through his historicist lens and increasingly imbued with his Catholic worldview. He saw the history of literature and thought as a complex, interconnected tapestry, revealing a divine order and progression.

His later works often reflected a synthesis of his diverse interests, attempting to reconcile the Romantic impulse for spiritual depth with a conservative appreciation for tradition and order. This period of his life solidified his reputation not only as a profound thinker but also as a cultural statesman, deeply involved in the intellectual and political currents of early 19th-century Europe. His contributions to the Congress of Vienna as a secretary further underscored his practical engagement with the political restructuring of the continent.

6. Major Works

Lucinde (1799): A controversial epistolary novel that scandalized contemporary society with its unconventional portrayal of love, marriage, and gender roles. It is considered a seminal work of early German Romanticism, embodying its ideals of subjective freedom and the dissolution of conventional boundaries.

Athenäum Fragments (1798-1800): Co-published with his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel in their influential journal, these aphoristic statements are a cornerstone of Romantic theory. They introduced concepts like romantic irony and progressive universal poetry, articulating the core tenets of the Jena Romantic circle.

Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians, 1808): A pioneering work in comparative philology, this treatise argued for the genetic relationship between Sanskrit and European languages, laying crucial groundwork for the development of Indo-European studies.

Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur (History of Ancient and Modern Literature, 1815): A series of lectures delivered in Vienna, offering a comprehensive and historically contextualized survey of literary development from antiquity to his own time, reflecting his historicist approach.

Philosophie des Lebens (Philosophy of Life, 1828): Another collection of lectures, this work delved into philosophical anthropology and ethics, exploring the nature of human existence and its spiritual dimensions, often through a lens informed by his Catholic faith.

Philosophie der Geschichte (Philosophy of History, 1829): Schlegel's magnum opus on the

philosophy of history, where he fully developed his concept of historicism, presenting history as a divinely guided process leading towards spiritual fulfillment and the eventual restoration of humanity.

7. Intellectual Context, Impact, and Legacy

Friedrich Schlegel's intellectual journey was deeply intertwined with the dynamic philosophical and literary landscape of late 18th and early 19th-century Germany. He was profoundly influenced by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, particularly Kant's ideas on subjectivity and the limits of human reason, which Schlegel sought to transcend through artistic and spiritual means. The works of Johann Gottfried Herder, with their emphasis on language, national character, and the organic development of cultures, also provided a crucial intellectual precursor to Schlegel's historicist thought. Furthermore, his close association with the German Idealists, particularly Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, shaped his understanding of the dialectical nature of reality and the role of the human spirit in shaping the world.

Schlegel's impact reverberated across multiple disciplines. In literature, he, along with his brother, laid the theoretical foundations for German Romanticism, inspiring generations of poets, novelists, and critics. His concepts of romantic irony and progressive universal poetry became essential tools for understanding the self-reflexive and unbounded nature of Romantic art. In philosophy, his articulation of historicism provided a powerful framework for understanding cultural phenomena within their specific temporal contexts, influencing later thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey and the broader hermeneutic tradition. His pioneering work in comparative philology, particularly his study of Sanskrit, fundamentally altered the course of linguistic studies, paving the way for the development of modern Indo-European linguistics.

Despite his significant contributions, Schlegel's legacy is also complex and has been subject to various interpretations and criticisms. His shift from the radical, often provocative stance of early Romanticism to a more conservative, Catholic-infused worldview led some to view his later work as a betrayal of his earlier ideals. Critics have pointed to perceived inconsistencies in his philosophical system and the sometimes fragmented nature of his theoretical formulations. Nevertheless, his enduring influence lies in his ability to articulate profound insights into the nature of art, history, and language, challenging conventional thought and opening new avenues for intellectual inquiry. His thought remains a critical touchstone for understanding the intellectual ferment of early 19th-century Europe and the origins of several key movements in the humanities.

Further Reading

[Friedrich Schlegel - Wikipedia](#)

[Friedrich Schlegel - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

Friedrich von Schlegel - Britannica

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