

# Absolute Idealism: General Introduction

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## 1. The *Dramatis Personae*

From 1795 to 1801, a completely new form of idealism evolved in Germany, one unlike the critical idealism of Kant and Fichte, and even more unlike the “skeptical idealism” of Descartes and Hume or the “dogmatic idealism” of Leibniz and Berkeley. This idealism was deeply influenced by Kant and Fichte; but it also grew up in reaction against them. We do best to call this new form of idealism by the name occasionally used by some of its protagonists: ‘absolute idealism.’<sup>1</sup> There were other cognate terms, such as ‘objective idealism,’ ‘syncriticism,’ ‘transcendental idealism,’ or, more often and simply, ‘idealism.’ Since, however, the term ‘absolute idealism’ is more customary, I will use it here.

There were three main groups of thinkers who advocated absolute idealism. One group consisted in leading figures from the “romantic circle” in Jena and Berlin: Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), and Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), who is best known by his pen name Novalis.<sup>2</sup> Another was the so-called *Bund der Geister* in Frankfurt and Homburg, a circle of friends comprising Friedrich Hölderlin (1774–1843), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Isaak von Sinclair (1775–1815), and Jakob Zwilling (1776–1809).<sup>3</sup> Yet a third group was the *Bund der freien Männer* in Jena, a fraternity modeled on Fichtean principles, whose members included August Ludwig Hülsen (1765–1810), Johann Erich von Berger (1772–1833), Johann Smidt (1773–1857), Johann Georg Rist (1775–1847), Johann Casimir Böhlendorff (1776–1825), and Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841).<sup>4</sup> All these groups could be regarded as offshoots of early romanticism or *Frühromantik*,<sup>5</sup> and

for this reason I will sometimes refer to the absolute idealists as romantics, though this is to use the term 'romantic' in a broad sense.

These circles sometimes overlapped with one another. Schelling was a close friend of Hölderlin and Hegel, who were his classmates at the *Tübinger Stift*; Sinclair cavorted with the *freie Männer*, though they did not admit him into their ranks; Böhlendorff and Hölderlin were friends; and Hülsen was an associate of the romantic circle in Berlin. But these circles do not coincide, not only because their meetings, membership, and location differ, but also because their interests, ideals, and beliefs sometimes do. What all these groups have in common, however, is a shared intellectual heritage and *Weltanschauung*. Their origins can be traced back to the University of Jena around the time of Fichte's tenure there (1794–1799).<sup>6</sup> All of them reacted against Fichte's idealism for very similar reasons; and all of them shared a sympathy for Spinozism. Their *Weltanschauung* was a synthesis of Spinozism, Platonism, and vitalism.

With some justice, Schelling and Hegel are the best known among the absolute idealists. They gave absolute idealism its most elaborate and systematic formulation; and they edited a common journal to defend it, the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*. It is important to recognize, however, that they were not the progenitors but only the propagators of the doctrine. The essential ideas behind absolute idealism had already been formulated years earlier by Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Zwilling, and Hülsen. While Hegel has gone down in history as the grand representative of absolute idealism, his main achievement was to systematize ideas already formulated by his contemporaries. To be sure, Hegel broke with the romantic movement around 1804; but that break has little to do with the content of absolute idealism and much to do with how to justify or defend it.

It is extremely difficult to determine who, if anyone in particular, was the founder of absolute idealism. This title has often been claimed for Hölderlin.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to determine with reasonable accuracy that he developed the foundations of his position in the early spring of 1795.<sup>8</sup> But there is also evidence that his criticisms of Fichte's philosophy were a commonplace in Jena, and that Hülsen developed the rudiments of his views by 1794.<sup>9</sup> In any case, Zwilling, Novalis, and Schlegel formulated their positions very shortly after Hölderlin, and independently of him. It is necessary to stress that the essential ideas of absolute idealism were "in the air" in Jena after 1794. They were the subject of discussion among a whole generation of students, many of whose views are now lost to us. The general atmosphere was such that

many could have developed similar views around the same time. Under these circumstances, then, it becomes difficult, indeed impossible, to sustain any claim to originality.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. The Meaning of Absolute Idealism

What did these thinkers mean by 'absolute idealism' or its cognates? We will address this question in detail in the following chapters; but it is important now to have at least some schematic idea, so that we know what is to be explained, and so that we can see the forest as well as the trees. Since there is no generally accepted meaning to the term, which is often associated with the most different, even opposing, doctrines, it is all the more imperative to provide some preliminary account of its meaning.

Unfortunately, none of the advocates of absolute idealism gave a precise definition or explicit explanation of the term, or indeed any of its cognates. This reflects partly their mistrust of definitions, partly their view that the meaning of a term rests on its precise place in a system, and partly their reliance on an historical context of meaning that is now lost to us. In the absence of a formal and final definition, the historian has no recourse but to reconstruct the meaning of the doctrine from various sources.

To recover the meaning of 'absolute idealism,' it is necessary to begin with its qualifying adjective, the term 'absolute.' True to name, absolute idealism was first and foremost a doctrine about the absolute, or, to use some synonyms, the unconditioned, the infinite, or the 'in-itself.' Like the term 'absolute idealism,' however, 'absolute' is rarely explicitly defined or explained. One of the very few definitions appears in a later work of Schelling, his 1804 *System der gesamten Philosophie*.<sup>11</sup> There Schelling says that the absolute is, according to its general idea, something which is "from itself and through itself" (*von sich selbst und durch sich selbst*).<sup>12</sup> In the same vein Schelling and Hegel sometimes refer to the absolute as "the in-itself" (*das An-sich*). These short phrases offer the best key to the meaning of the term. For they are obvious allusions to Spinoza's definition of substance in the *Ethica*: "By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception."<sup>13</sup> Spinoza understood substance to be that which has an *independent* or *self-sufficient* existence and essence, or that whose being and nature does not depend on anything else. It was on the basis of this definition that he argued that substance must be infinite, equivalent to the uni-

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\* { verse as a whole, because anything less than the whole of all things must depend on something else outside itself. While the absolute idealists often disagreed with Spinoza's specific conception of the absolute, they understood the concept of the absolute in the same general sense as Spinoza. Their absolute was like Spinoza's substance because it was that which has a self-sufficient essence or existence. For the same reasons as Spinoza, they insisted that the absolute has to be nothing less than the universe as a whole.

It is this Spinozist context, then, that defines the general meaning of the term 'absolute' among the romantics. Though it has religious and mystical associations, the term usually meant nothing more than the universe as a whole. Hence its cognates were sometimes 'the universe' (*das Universum*), 'the one and all' (*Hen kai pan*) or, more simply, 'being' (*Seyn*).

Of course, the romantics had a much more specific conception of the absolute than simply the universe *simpliciter*. Their conception could be summarised in three theses. The first thesis is straightforward *monism*: that the universe consists in not a plurality of substances but a single substance; in other words, the only independent and self-sufficient thing is the universe itself. The second thesis is a version of *vitalism*: that the single universal substance is an organism, which is in a constant process of growth and development.<sup>14</sup> The third thesis is a form of *rationalism*: that this process of development has a purpose, or conforms to some form, archetype, or idea. Putting these theses together, 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.

Clearly, these are distinct theses. It is possible to be a monist and not a vitalist: one might hold, with Spinoza, that the universe is static and eternal. Conversely, it is also possible to be a vitalist and not a monist: one might maintain, with Leibniz, that there are a plurality of substances that consist in living force. It is even possible to be a vitalist and monist but not a rationalist: one might claim, with Schopenhauer, that the universe consists in a single irrational will struggling for power. What is distinctive of absolute idealism is its *synthesis* of monism, vitalism, and rationalism: it is a monistic vitalism or a vitalistic monism; or it is a monistic rationalism or a rationalistic monism.

According to this interpretation, one distinctive trait of absolute idealism—what makes it a species of idealism in general—is its monism, its thesis that there is one and only one being that has an independent existence and essence. It is important to add that this monism opposes not only *pluralism*, the doctrine that there are many beings having an independent existence

and essence, but also, more specifically, *dualism*, the doctrine that there are *two* kinds of substance, the mental and the physical, the ideal and the real. It is this latter point that Schelling, Novalis, Hegel, and Schlegel emphasize as central to their idealism. They explain that absolute idealism consists in the doctrine that the opposition between the real and the ideal, the mental and the physical, disappears in the absolute, which is a single reality.<sup>15</sup>

What, though, makes absolute idealism *idealism*? What is the genus of which monism and vitalism are only the species? The idealist dimension of absolute idealism comes from its rationalism. It should be obvious that this makes it idealism in a very different sense from the critical idealism of Kant and Fichte, or even the empirical idealism of Descartes and Berkeley. The ideal does not refer to the mental, subjective, or conscious, but to the rational, archetypal, or intelligible. To claim that everything is ideal in this sense does not mean that it is an appearance existing for some consciousness, but that it is a manifestation or embodiment of the rational, archetypal, or intelligible. In this latter sense the ideal can have manifestations in either the subjective or objective, in mind or matter, and it would be a mistake to limit it to either the mental or the physical. In absolute idealism a distinction is finally made between two senses of the ideal that had been constantly confused before Kant and by Kant: the distinction between the noumenal and archetypal on the one hand and the mental and spiritual on the other hand. } 2.

It is important to note two completely distinct reasons why some absolute idealists, especially Schelling and Hegel, call their doctrine "idealism." First, insofar as it holds that everything is a part of the absolute, which is identified with the idea or reason, absolute idealism maintains that everything is a manifestation or appearance of the idea or reason. Idealism in this sense is the doctrine that everything is ideal because it is a part, aspect, or appearance of the absolute idea. Hence Schelling sometimes identifies absolute idealism with "the doctrine of ideas" (*Ideenlehre*), and Hegel with the thesis that finite things do not exist in themselves but only in the "universal divine idea."<sup>16</sup> Second, it is sometimes held that all oppositions between finite things, and especially that between the ideal and the real or the subjective and objective, have not a *real* but only an ideal existence. To say that they have only an ideal existence in this sense does not mean that they are an appearance of the absolute idea, but that their appearance of an independent reality *outside* the absolute exists only for reflection, or only for the intellect as an artificial and arbitrary abstraction.<sup>17</sup> This sense of ideal is virtually opposed to the first because it attributes ideal status to that which is *outside* Pheno-  
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the absolute, whereas the first sense attributes ideal status to that which is *inside* it.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the various uses of the term 'idealism' in this period, two caveats are necessary. First, sometimes the term is used to refer to one aspect or form of the absolute, whereas at other times it refers to the entire or whole standpoint of the absolute, of which this idealism is only a part. Second, sometimes Schlegel, Schelling, and Novalis use the term 'critical idealism' to describe their own doctrine of absolute idealism. This does not imply, however, any endorsement of the critical idealism of Kant and Fichte, though it does express their common goal with that idealism of providing a synthesis of idealism and realism.

Another word of caution should be added. While all the absolute idealists follow, more or less, the general theses ascribed to them here, this should not be taken to imply that they always agreed with one another, as if they formed a solid phalanx against their opponents. These general theses provide only the *genera*, not the *differentia specifica*. Each of these thinkers developed their own specific form of absolute idealism, so that, not surprisingly, there were sometimes quarrels between them. Schelling and Schlegel, Hölderlin and Schelling, Schelling and Hegel, Schlegel and Hegel—all differed with one another about one point or another. Still, while these differences are not to be overlooked, they should not obscure the fundamental points of agreement.

This very general account of the meaning of absolute idealism should be relatively uncontroversial. Many would agree that absolute idealism is a form of monism, rationalism, and vitalism. However, even if the definition is uncontroversial, its application is not. It is controversial to claim that such a definition applies to the early romantics, more specifically to Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel. It might well be admitted that it fits easily enough the doctrine developed by Schelling and Hegel around 1801; but it will be protested that we should not read all early romantic philosophy in such terms. One reason for distinguishing between absolute idealism and early romanticism, it has been argued, is precisely that the early metaphysical doctrines of Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schlegel are not a form of rationalism.<sup>19</sup> Their epistemology has been characterized as a form of radical skepticism, and their metaphysics has been identified with the view that the absolute is pure being, a ground of consciousness transcending all consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

But such an interpretation of early romantic metaphysics is much too narrow, and it derives from focusing all one's attention on a few early manu-

scripts to the extent of their philosophy as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Most significantly, it completely underrates the Platonic heritage of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel, which becomes more explicit in their later years, though it was always present from the very beginning. This Platonic heritage means that—in one form or another—the absolute is identified with the *logos* or *telos*, the archetype, idea, or form that governs all things. The absolute is not transcendent being, which is somehow presupposed by reflection and consciousness, and so can never be its object. To be sure, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel were critical of the powers of a *discursive* reason; but, true to the Platonic tradition, they clung all the more firmly to the powers of an *intuitive* reason. Hence they all developed—in one form or another—a doctrine of intellectual intuition, which they identified with aesthetic feeling or perception.<sup>22</sup> Their mysticism or faith in an immediate form of knowledge should be placed within the Platonic tradition, which had always claimed that an insight into the forms transcends discursive elaboration.<sup>23</sup> It should not be seen in terms of the religious mysticism characteristic of the Protestant tradition. In the following chapters we will have occasion to consider the Platonic legacy of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel in more detail, which should leave no doubt about its importance for their metaphysical views.

## 5. Intellectual Sources

To have a more concrete idea of absolute idealism it is necessary to consider its main sources, the chief influences on it. There were three such sources: Spinozism, Platonism, and vital materialism. All these doctrines enjoyed a remarkable renaissance in late-eighteenth-century Germany, the gestation period of absolute idealism. What is characteristic of absolute idealism is its synthesis of all these strands of thought.

### Spinozism

One of the strongest influences on absolute idealism—an influence to vie with that of Kant and Fichte—was the remarkable rise of Spinozism in the late 1780s. The revival of Spinoza began in 1786 with the publication of F. H. Jacobi's *Briefe über die Lehre von Spinoza*, which grew out of Jacobi's dispute



with Mendelssohn about Lessing's alleged Spinozism. To a stunned world, Jacobi revealed the content of his private conversations with Lessing in the summer of 1780. According to Jacobi, Lessing had told him that the orthodox concepts of the divinity were no longer of any value, and that he could believe in only the God of Spinoza. "Εν ἅλλαι Παν! [one and all] I know nothing else," Lessing said.<sup>36</sup> In making this revelation, Jacobi's motives were much more than biographical; he was making a very provocative philosophical point. Since he held that Spinozism is the only tenable system of philosophy, and that it is tantamount to atheism and fatalism, he was in effect warning his contemporaries of the dangerous consequences of *all* philosophy or enlightened rationalism. Lessing was the perfect figure to make this point since he had a reputation for being the most daring and radical, the most honest and scrupulous, thinker of the *Aufklärung*. If Lessing were honest enough to admit his Spinozism, Jacobi insinuated, then every other *Aufklärer* should have the integrity to do the same. Jacobi then threw down a gauntlet to the German public: they had to choose between a rational atheism and fatalism or take a leap of faith in freedom and a personal God.

Jacobi's *Briefe* was a sensation. It shocked the orthodox, and it provoked the *Aufklärer*. But, worst of all, it backfired. It was avidly read by the young, who were inspired by it. Rather than heeding Jacobi's warnings about Lessing's secret religion, the new generation was drawn to it. Here was a tempting *credo*, all the more alluring just because it was forbidden and unorthodox. The young romantics lined up in solidarity with Lessing, whose *En kai pan* soon became their slogan.<sup>37</sup> Although they were not doctrinaire Spinozists themselves, they were very sympathetic to some of the main strands of Spinoza's thought.

Why were the young so sympathetic to Spinoza? There were several reasons, all of them complex, which we can only roughly summarize here.

First, Spinoza's vision of the universe was both religious *and* scientific, combining an account of the infinite with a complete naturalism. This seemed to provide a solution to that persistent and notorious conflict between science and religion, reason and faith, that Jacobi had so dramatized in his *Briefe*. There was no need to make Jacobi's *salto mortale*—his leap of faith in a personal God—to save oneself from Spinoza, for he was a man who saw God in all things. He was indeed "ein Gott betrunkenener Mensch," as Novalis called him. His creed was pantheism rather than atheism. To brand him an atheist was simply to confuse the *natura naturans*, the immanent and infinite creative force of nature, with the *natura naturata*, the sum total of all

finite things. For a generation who held that the old orthodox concepts of the divine were nothing but mythology, but who also shuddered at a purely mechanical materialism, Spinoza seemed to provide the answers. Spinozism seemed to be nothing less than the religion of science, the science of religion. Einstein

Second, Spinoza's critique of the Bible, his defense of democracy, and his separation of church and state seemed to provide the realization of such classical Protestant ideals as the priesthood of all believers and the liberty of the Christian. Spinoza seemed to liberate the Protestant spirit from its two self-imposed shackles: adherence to the letter of the Bible and allegiance to the state. This was the reason for Spinoza's appeal to those sympathetic to the Radical Reformation, thinkers such as Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), Johann Christian Edelmann (1698–1767), Johann Gottfried Herder (1774–1801), and, of course, Lessing himself. But Spinoza continued to have the same attraction to the younger generation, who wanted to throw off the yoke of Protestant orthodoxy without abandoning its classical ideals.

Third, Spinoza's monism seemed to provide a solution to the dualisms that had plagued philosophy since Descartes, and continued to do so after Kant, who, it seemed, had overcome Descartes' mental-physical dualism only to reestablish some dualisms all his own. The sharp distinctions between noumena and phenomena, understanding and sensibility, were just as bad as that between Descartes' mind and body. Spinoza's doctrine that the mental and the physical are simply two different attributes of one and the same thing seemed to provide a path out of the dualistic impasse. It applies *mutatis mutandi* to the Kantian dualisms, so that the noumenal and phenomenal, or the intellectual and the empirical, can also be attributes of a single thing. Hence Spinoza's doctrine was the chief source of the monism of absolute idealism.

For all their sympathy with Spinozism, his young admirers were anything but strict followers of his doctrine. Without fully admitting or recognizing it, they departed from Spinoza in two basic respects. First, they did not accept Spinoza's rationalism, his strict geometrical method that begins with axioms and definitions and derives every proposition as a theorem.<sup>38</sup> This method smacked too much of the old scholasticism of Wolff, which had been discredited by Kant. What they did find in Spinoza, however, was just the opposite of rationalism: his mystical love of God, the *amor intellectus dei*, with which he ends the *Ethica*. Second, they were not advocates of Spinoza's strictly mechanistic conception of the laws of nature, which they saw as sim-

ply the product of his allegiance to the sciences of his day. Contrary to Spinoza's banishment of final causes, they would attempt to introduce a form of telology into the natural order.

### Platonism

A second source of the worldview of absolute idealism was Platonism. Such was the growth of Platonism in the late 1790s and early 1800s in Germany that it is fair to speak of a Platonic renaissance. It is in any case difficult to exaggerate the influence of Plato's writings on the generation of the 1790s. Hölderlin, Hegel, Novalis, Sinclair, Schelling, and Schlegel all began their philosophical education by reading Plato, especially the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, in the original Greek. Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Novalis were inspired in particular by the writings of the Dutch Platonist Franz Hemsterhuis, whose writings first appeared in Germany in the 1780s.<sup>39</sup> Many Platonic themes in Hemsterhuis—desire as longing to return to the eternal, the unity of truth and beauty, the role of poetry as a medium of knowledge, the fundamental role of love as a power of the soul—reappear in the writings of the young romantics in the late 1790s.<sup>40</sup>

Platonism plays a central role in the worldview of absolute idealism.<sup>41</sup> Its rationalism derives as much from Plato as its monism from Spinoza. The *En kai pan* was often described in Platonic terms, whether as an "hypostasis," "archetype," or "the form of all forms." The unity of universal and particular in the Platonic form provided the perfect model for the unity of the one and many in the absolute itself. The doctrine of intellectual intuition, which became so important for Schelling, Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin, also has Platonic sources, whether they lie in the ecstasy of the poet in *Phaedo* or the intellectual perception of the guardian in the *Republic*. The point is important if only because the mysticism of the early romantic idealists has so often been described as "antirationalist."<sup>42</sup> This is to assume, however, that their mysticism arises from the Protestant tradition, which limited the realm of reason to the earthly sphere; but the mysticism of the idealists does not go *beyond* the realm of reason but *into* it, aspiring toward insight into the archetypical world.<sup>43</sup>

The Platonic renaissance of the 1790s was the climax of decades of interest in the classical texts; but it was in sharp contrast to the earlier eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup> At the dawn of the century Plato was almost as good as forgotten, having been eclipsed by the Aristotelian scholasticism in German univer-

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sities. Because of theological controversies, Germany had turned further away from the Platonic currents of the Renaissance than either France or England. In France Descartes and Malebranche kept the spirit of Plato alive, while in England there were the Platonists of the Cambridge school. Germany had no equivalent. It had its great Platonist in Leibniz; but his Platonism was one of the more esoteric aspects of his teaching, and so it remained largely without influence. The neglect of Plato in the early eighteenth century is evident from the fact that the last major edition of Plato's writings had appeared in 1602.

Interest in Plato began to appear only in midcentury, largely due to the growth of classical philology, a formidable weapon in theological controversy. In the 1750s the classicists J. A. Ernesti and David Ruhnken did much to revive classical philology by insisting on reading Greek sources in the original. Admirers of Plato, both Ernesti and Ruhnken delivered influential academic orations on his philosophy. It was also in 1757 that Winckelmann read Plato, who became one of the central influences on his aesthetics. By the 1760s interest in Plato had grown enormously. The writings of Rousseau and Shaftesbury, which were filled with Platonic themes, began to have their impact. It was also in the 1760s that Hamann, Herder, Winckelmann, Wieland, and Mendelssohn all wrote about Plato or Platonic themes. By the 1770s Plato had become a popular author. New editions and translations of his writings frequently appeared. By the 1780s the Plato renaissance had truly begun. In Halle, F. A. Wolf began a more rigorous philological study of Plato, publishing several editions of some of his writings. From 1781-1787 the Zweibrücker edition of Plato's writings appeared, making Plato more accessible than ever before.

### Vital Materialism

Another crucial source of the worldview of absolute idealism was the rise of vital materialism around the close of the eighteenth century. Among the chief exponents of this doctrine in France were the *philosophes* Diderot, La Mettrie, and Maupertuis; and among its main spokesmen in England were the freethinkers John Toland, Matthew Tindal, and Anthony Collins. According to vital materialism, the essence of matter does not consist in extension, as in Cartesian physics, but in motion. The modern grandfather of this doctrine was no less than Leibniz, who had developed a dynamic view of matter against the mechanism of Cartesian physics. According to Leibniz,

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the essence of matter consists in living force (*vis viva*), which is not only a tendency toward motion but also the development or realization of the essence of a thing. Self-consciously going back to the Aristotelian tradition, Leibniz designated this concept with the old scholastic term *entelechy*, which refers to the form inherent in matter, or what has its purpose within itself.<sup>45</sup>

This concept of matter never disappeared, despite the increasing mechanization of science in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was not only defended by members of the Leibnizian–Wolffian school in Germany, but it was also adopted by radical republican and masonic circles, who were eager to undermine the alliance of throne and altar.<sup>46</sup> They were attracted by this view because if matter has the power to move and organize itself, there is no need for a supernatural creator and designer of the physical cosmos, so that revealed religion, the main pillar of that alliance, crumbles. The spread of masonic ideas in Germany in the late eighteenth century would only have made this view more popular. Its radical political implications made it attractive to some of the younger generation, who were no less intent on undermining the alliance of throne and altar.

The vitalist conception of matter only gained in prestige with the new developments in natural science in the late eighteenth century. The new experiments with electricity, magnetism, and chemistry seemed to give evidence for a more dynamic view of matter, according to which matter consists in attractive and repulsive forces. Because they seem to involve action at a distance, these forces had always been difficult to explain according to mechanism, which accounts for motion by the impact of one body on another. Mechanism could explain attraction and repulsion only by postulating ethers or subtle matters through which the forces worked; but ether theory had been subject to constant experimental criticism in the late eighteenth century.<sup>47</sup> While the physical sciences were becoming less mechanistic, the life sciences were becoming more materialistic. Lavoisier's chemistry suggested that the very stuff of life was oxygen, while Galvani's experiments with "animal electricity" seemed to show that vital forces operated according to the same laws as matter. These complementary developments appeared to demonstrate that there was no clear dividing line between the mental and physical because the same kinds of forces were active in both the organic and inorganic worlds.

The vitalist conception of matter had some powerful spokesman in late-eighteenth-century Germany. One of its earliest protagonists was C. F. Kielmeyer (1765–1844), who, in a celebrated speech given in 1793,<sup>48</sup> put for-

ward a view of nature as a single organic whole, a hierarchical continuum from the inorganic to the organic. Another important figure behind the new dynamic view of matter was Kant himself, whose *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften* analyzed matter in terms of its constitutive forces. Although Kant stoutly resisted the move toward vitalism, drawing a sharp line between merely active and living forces, his work helped to bury mechanism and inspired many vital materialists. The most powerful and influential voice behind the new vitalism in Germany was Herder. His 1778 *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* argued that the mental and physical are simply different degrees of organization and development of organic force; and his *Gott, Einige Gespräche* (1786) took his vitalism one giant leap forward by applying it to Spinoza's substance, which was no longer a static thing but a living power, "the force of all forces."

Herder's synthesis of vitalism and monism in *Gott* set an important precedent for the romantic generation. Such a synthesis is a defining characteristic of absolute idealism, which is indeed a vitalistic monism or monistic vitalism. Whether self-consciously or not, the younger generation followed Herder in *vitalizing Spinoza's concept of substance*, which now becomes nothing less than the single cosmic living force. To be sure, Spinoza himself said that the essence of substance consists in power; but his conception of power was by no means organic, for his substance underwent no development and it excluded all final causes.<sup>49</sup> With the young romantics, however, Spinoza's *natura naturans* ceases to be dead and static but becomes alive and dynamic. Like all organic things, it undergoes a distinctive pattern of development: it begins from a stage of inchoate unity; it then differentiates itself; and it then reintegrates itself, so that its development consists in the stages of unity, difference, and unity-in-difference. Although Hegel is the thinker best known for this idea of "dialectical development," the idea was formulated by Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, and Schelling long before him.

This vitalist concept of nature had profound epistemological implications, which the absolute idealists did not hesitate to explore and exploit. One important implication is that it provided a completely new paradigm for understanding the relationship between the mental and the physical. They are no longer distinct kinds of substances, which stand in some mysterious causal connection with one another; rather, they are only different degrees of organization and development of a single living force. The mental is only the highest degree of organization and development of the living forces of the body, whereas the body is simply the lower degree of organization and de-

velopment of the living forces of the mind. As Schelling metaphorically summarized this view in his first work on *Naturphilosophie*: "Nature should be visible spirit, spirit should be invisible nature."<sup>50</sup> The young idealists then reinterpreted Spinoza's dual-attribute doctrine in such vitalist terms. Unlike Spinoza, the mental and the physical are no longer simply different perspectives, or different forms of explanation, of a single substance, which themselves cannot interact with one another. Rather, the mental and the physical refer to only different appearances, manifestations, or embodiments of a single living force. Another important implication of vitalism is that the mental and the physical are no longer in a purely *causal* relation with one another, where the cause retains its identity after acting; instead, they are in an *expressive* relation where one becomes what it is, or develops its determinate character only through the other. The mental is not simply the effect of the physical, then, but its realization or development; conversely, the physical is not merely the effect of the mental, but its embodiment or organization.

## 7. The Aesthetics of Absolute Idealism

Granted that the metaphysics of absolute idealism resolves the problem of the transcendental deduction, this still does not give us the right to assume its truth. For we are still left with the skeptical *quid juris?*: How do we *know* that there is an absolute? How do we know that anything exists beyond our own representations? Until we have an answer to this question, we cannot claim to solve the problem of nihilism, still less to remove the suspicion of dogmatism.

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 The young romantics were, of course, perfectly aware of the challenge of skepticism. They had themselves developed a form of radical skepticism that questions all first principles and all acts of faith. They also accept much of Jacobi's and Kant's critique of reason, especially its central thesis that the unconditioned or absolute cannot be known by discursive or conceptual means. Following Kant and Jacobi, they make two arguments against such knowledge. First, all conceptualization is determination, involving some form of negation where one predicate is contrasted against another; but the absolute is the indivisible whole of all that exists, and so it cannot be determine or contrasted against anything else. Second, all explanation is condi-



tional in form, assuming that something happens only *if* some other condition is fulfilled; but the absolute is the unconditioned, acting from the necessity of its own nature alone. All discursivity therefore transforms the absolute into something it is not, whether that is a finite determination or something conditional. As Novalis summed up the predicament: "We seek the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*) and always find only things."<sup>55</sup>

Yet the romantics' skepticism and critique of reason was only the negative side of a much more positive and imaginative program: their attempt to establish the sovereignty of the aesthetic, the primacy of art over the realms of reason and action. One of the characteristic tenets of absolute idealism around the late 1790s and early 1800s is its faith in the powers of art, its attempt to displace the primacy of practical reason in critical idealism with the supremacy of the aesthetic. The romantics' belief in the powers of art fully emerges when they make aesthetic experience the organon or *ratio cognoscendi* of absolute knowledge. While they insist that we cannot know the existence of the absolute through reason, they also stress that we can know it, if only vaguely and obscurely, through immediate aesthetic intuition. We know that there is an infinite universe outside us, that there is something much greater than us on which we depend, through aesthetic experience. The feeling of the sublime, the longing to reunite ourselves with all things, and the experience of love, in which I see myself in others as others see themselves in me, show us that we know an other that transcends our own circle of consciousness.

The absolute idealists recognize that the skeptic doubts the veracity of such experiences, and they admit that they cannot *demonstrate* anything from them. Nevertheless, they also insist with equal justice that the skeptic also cannot *refute* such experiences. The province of the skeptic is the realm of discursivity because he can criticize only a proposition, something we can put in words; but these experiences are not expressible in words. Whether we accept the veracity of such experience simply depends on whether we have sufficient sensitivity. This is not an escape from criticism, the idealists believe, because the same is the case with our normal sense perception. We cannot verbalize, conceptualize, or prove our experience of colors, sounds, and tastes. Either we have the experience or we do not. All that we can do is provide some figurative or allegorical expression of them, which is, of course, the province of poetry, painting, and music.

This faith in the sovereignty of art went hand-in-hand with the absolute idealists' organic concept of the universe: to regard nature as an organism

and as a work of art are one and the same. The universe is nothing less than a *natural* work of art, and a work of art is nothing less an *artificial* organism. Hence the realms of truth and beauty, the natural and the aesthetic, coincide. As Schlegel explained the general standpoint of idealism: "Idealism considers nature as a work of art, as a poem."<sup>56</sup>

Here we seem to be very far from Kant, who had famously criticized the claims of genius and mysticism. But the irony is that, more than anyone else, Kant had prepared the ground for the aesthetics of absolute idealism. In the *Kritik der Urteilkraft* he made the idea of organic unity the keystone of the critical philosophy. This idea not only unified the realms of freedom and nature, of noumena and phenomena, but it also systematized the multiplicity of empirical laws, thus closing the remaining gap between the categories of the understanding and the manifold of sensibility. In giving such a fundamental role to the idea of organic unity, Kant in effect gave priority to the aesthetic itself. For, more or less explicitly, he had stressed the fundamental analogy between the concepts of the organic and the aesthetic. Both concepts came together in the idea of purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*): both the living organism and the work of art were created according to a rational plan where the idea of the whole precedes the possibility of its parts.

These facets of the *Kritik der Urteilkraft* were to prove very suggestive to the absolute idealists, who argued in true Kantian fashion that all the sciences presuppose the idea of organic unity, which they conceive as an aesthetic whole.<sup>57</sup> Yet the romantic view of Kant's aesthetics remained ambivalent. While they smiled on the speculative potential of the third *Kritik*, they frowned on its regulative constraints. Although the implicit structure of the third *Kritik* supported the sovereignty of the aesthetic, Kant also denied aesthetic experience any metaphysical stature. In his view, aesthetic judgments are not cognitive, but only express a universalizable pleasure, which is not an objective property of appearances. Aesthetic experience is thus demoted to a status worse than in Plato's cave: it tells us only about our *feelings* about appearances, and so nothing even about appearances, let alone things-in-themselves. Hence Kant's aesthetics would prove to be as much a challenge as an inspiration to the romantic generation. We shall soon see how Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel rose to the occasion.

## Problems, Methods, and Concepts of *Naturphilosophie*

### 1. Absolute Idealism and *Naturphilosophie*

Above the portals of the academy of absolute idealism there is written the inscription 'Let no one enter who has not studied *Naturphilosophie*.' Without an understanding of at least the central doctrines, basic arguments, and fundamental problems of *Naturphilosophie* the absolute idealism of Schelling and Hegel is all but incomprehensible. This should be clear enough simply by a cursory look at almost any of Schelling's and Hegel's texts, where so much *Naturphilosophie* appears. But no one should be tempted to dismiss this material for the sake of some deeper philosophical substance that exists underneath it. For the philosophical substance of Schelling and Hegel is absolute idealism, which is inseparable from *Naturphilosophie*.

The close connection between absolute idealism and *Naturphilosophie* is clear in two respects. First, as we have already seen (4.2.4; 4.3.6), Schelling's absolute idealism arose from his *Naturphilosophie*, and more specifically from its struggle for independence from, and then hegemony over, the *Wissenschaftslehre*. We should recall that, by late 1799, Schelling maintained that the principle of subject-object identity, the fundamental principle of absolute idealism, is the prerogative of *Naturphilosophie* alone. The *Wissenschaftslehre* and *Naturphilosophie* are not just equal to one another, he argued, but the former is based on the latter, since the self-consciousness of the transcendental ego is derived from the laws of nature in "the physical proof of idealism." It is only in a *popular* sense that the principle of subject-object identity means that ego and nature are equal to one another; in the proper *philosophical* sense it signifies that the ego is derived and nature is fundamental. In other words, subject-identity is originally found not in the self-consciousness of the ego but in the single universal substance. That there is a single universal substance, of which the subjective and objective are only

manifestations, is the fundamental proposition of *Naturphilosophie*; but it is also the sum and substance of Schelling's absolute idealism around 1800.

Second, the intimate bond between absolute idealism and *Naturphilosophie* is also apparent from Schelling's own use of the term 'absolute idealism' (*absoluter Idealismus*).<sup>1</sup> In the early 1800s, Schelling used the term specifically to refer to the standpoint of *Naturphilosophie*. Absolute idealism is not a synthesis of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with the realism of *Naturphilosophie*, a combination of both standpoints where each has equal legitimacy. Rather, it is nothing less than the inversion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the derivation of transcendental idealism from the realism and naturalism of *Naturphilosophie*. In other words, it is Fichte standing on his head.

Despite its importance for absolute idealism, *Naturphilosophie* has been ignored or spurned for decades, by historians of philosophy and science alike. Its reputation suffered greatly under the shadow of neo-Kantianism and positivism, which had dismissed it as a form of pseudoscience. *Naturphilosophie* had its heyday in Germany from 1800 to 1830. After the rapid growth of the empirical sciences in the 1840s, however, it came under increasing criticism. It was attacked for its a priori methodology, unverifiable speculations, and disregard for experiment. Allegedly, rather than carefully limiting their conclusions to definite experimental results, Schelling and the *Naturphilosophen* sketched grand theories, resorted to farfetched analogies, and forced preconceptions on a few scanty facts. For many philosophers and scientists, *Naturphilosophie* became the very model of how not to do science. It indeed became "the pestilence and black death of the century."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, there is no longer much need to justify the study of *Naturphilosophie*. After the blossoming of the history of science in the 1970s, there has been a virtual renaissance in the subject.<sup>3</sup> There have been books, conferences, and journals devoted to *Naturphilosophie*,<sup>4</sup> and there are now special editions of Schelling's and Hegel's writings in the field.<sup>5</sup> While there are few who would defend *Naturphilosophie* as a method for doing science today,<sup>6</sup> it has been recognized by many as a phenomenon of fundamental historical importance for the growth of modern science and philosophy.

Unfortunately, however, the legacy of positivism remains, and the old image of *Naturphilosophie* persists to this day. Some scholars would like to distinguish between the development of modern biological science and *Naturphilosophie* on the grounds that the early biologists and physiologists eschewed the metaphysical principles and transcendental methodology of *Naturphilosophie*.<sup>7</sup> According to this distinction, the pioneers of modern biol-

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ogy, such as Albrecht von Haller, J. F. Blumenbach and K. F. Kielmeyer, Alexander von Humboldt, and C. F. Wolff, observed Kant's regulative constraints and strictly followed an empirical methodology, while the *Naturphilosophen* flew in the face of these constraints and recklessly indulged in an a priori procedure. Yet this distinction is more a positivistic construction than an historical reality. It suffers from several difficulties. First, Kant's regulative doctrine was *not* the foundation of empirical science in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century; rather it was completely at odds with it. It is striking that virtually all the notable German physiologists and biologists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries conceived of their vital powers as causal agents rather than regulative principles.<sup>8</sup> Second, the fundamental program of *Naturphilosophie*—to explain life and the mind on a naturalistic yet nonmechanistic foundation—was shared by all the physiologists and biologists. Third, it is wrong to equate *Naturphilosophie* with a priori reasoning, system building, and speculation, as if it had no concern with experiment and observation.<sup>9</sup> Not only does this rest on a misunderstanding of the method of *Naturphilosophie*, which stressed the role of observation and experiment (see 4.4.6), but it also ignores how many *Naturphilosophen* were critical of excessive speculation and a priori theorizing.<sup>10</sup> The history of science needs to cast off the legacy of positivism—especially that lurking under Kantian guise—and to realize that *Naturphilosophie* was nothing less than the normal science of its day, not some freakish philosophical or metaphysical alternative to it.

Nowhere is the legacy of positivism more persistent, however, than in scholarship on German idealism. This seems paradoxical, given the conceptual distance between positivism and German idealism. But, since the Hegel renaissance of the 1970s, this scholarship has been under pressure to make its subject appear more respectable to contemporary analytic philosophy, where positivism still casts a dark shadow. Much recent Hegel scholarship, where positivism still casts a dark shadow. Much recent Hegel scholarship, for example, has attempted to separate Hegel's "rational core" from his "mystical shell."<sup>11</sup> While the rational core consists in his system of categories, his adherence to the Kantian transcendental project, and whatever "arguments" can be reconstructed from his texts, the mystical shell comprises his Spinozistic metaphysics, his dialectical logic, and, worst of all, his lingering involvement with *Naturphilosophie*. Because so much contemporary Hegel scholarship still consists in the anachronistic attempt to reinterpret Hegel according to current intellectual orthodoxies, it has had more interest to conceal rather than reveal his considerable debt to Schelling's *Naturphi-*

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*osophie*. As a result, it has failed to understand the origins and meaning of Hegel's own absolute idealism.

The purpose of the next two chapters is to examine the purpose, problem, and method of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. I shall argue that *Naturphilosophie* belongs to the rational core rather than the mystical shell of Schelling's and Hegel's absolute idealism. We shall find that we cannot so easily separate the epistemological concerns of absolute idealism from its metaphysics, for *Naturphilosophie* arose from the attempt to solve the problem of knowledge, and more specifically the outstanding problem of the transcendental deduction. To dismiss the metaphysics of absolute idealism and *Naturphilosophie* is simply to beg the question against Schelling and Hegel, who believed that they had no choice but to go beyond the Kantian limits to resolve its fundamental problems. Rather than attempting to interpret away Schelling's and Hegel's violation of the Kantian critical limits, it is much more important to reconstruct their reasons for doing so. †

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