

Friedrich Schleiermacher: The Father of Modern Theology & a Prophet of German Nationalism, Part 1

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Part 1 of 2. Part 2 [here](#).

“I feel sure that Germany, the kernel of Europe, will arise once more in a new and beautiful state, but when this will happen, and whether the country will not first have to experience even greater difficulties [...] God alone knows.” — Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1806[1]

“... were you not mine, I should not have felt so conscious of how true is my patriotism and my courage. As it is, however, I know that I may place myself on a level with whomsoever it may be, that I am worthy of having a country I can call my own, and that I am worthy of being a husband and a father. [...] Now, this is just my vocation – to represent more clearly that which dwells in all true human beings, and to bring it home to their consciences.” — Friedrich Schleiermacher, in a letter to his wife to be, Henriette von Willich, 1808[2]

Friedrich Schleiermacher is generally recognized as the father of modern theology,[3] and considered the most influential Protestant theologian since John Calvin. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher redirected the course of Protestant theology by breaking the stalemate of rationalism and orthodoxy.[4] The rise of neo-orthodoxy in the twentieth century, led by Karl Barth, was in many ways a reaction to the influence of Schleiermacher. After World War Two, Schleiermacher was treated with suspicion, since he was a Romantic, a German idealist, and an advocate of nationalism, culturally conditioned Protestantism, and the German *Volksgeist*. [5] To him, the essence of religion was an inward disposition of piety, rather than outward practices or written dogmas.[6]

Early Life

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born in 1768 in the Silesian town of Breslau in Prussia (now Wrocław in Poland). He was the son of a Reformed pastor who served as a chaplain in the Prussian army.^[7] At fourteen, Schleiermacher was placed in a school of the Moravian Brethren, or Herrnhuters, a Pietist congregation. The Moravians emphasized an intense devotion to Jesus and a vivid communion with him, resulting in the immediate presence of God, experienced within the self. This had a profound influence on Schleiermacher. At the Moravian school he also got a humanistic education based on the study of Latin and Greek.^[8] He enrolled in a Moravian seminary at sixteen to become a pastor. At the seminary, the students were forbidden from reading modern writers like Goethe, or the investigations of modern theologians and philosophers into the Christian system and the human mind. Schleiermacher asked his father for permission to enroll at the University of Halle instead, telling him that he no longer believed in Christ's vicarious atonement. His father reluctantly agreed, believing that "pride, egotism, and intolerance" had taken possession of him.^[9] "Go then into the world whose approval you desire," he told his son.^[10]

Schleiermacher matriculated at Halle in 1787. The leading philosopher at Halle then was Johann August Eberhard, who acquainted his students with a thorough knowledge of Kant's philosophical system, and introduced them to the history of philosophy, and philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. For many years, Schleiermacher devoted himself to the study of Kant's philosophy,^[11] and for a while he thought he'd lost all faith except in Kantian ethics.^[12]

In 1796, Schleiermacher moved to Berlin when he was appointed as a Reformed chaplain at Berlin's main hospital, the Charité Hospital. There, he became acquainted with a circle of Romantics, who sought unity in their lives by completely devoting themselves to something they thought worthy of devotion. Their ideas centered around inward feeling, idealism and the growth of individuality. There, Schleiermacher met the poet Friedrich Schlegel who became his friend and had a significant influence on him.^[13] Schleiermacher understood individuality to be the designation of each individual in the order of things by divine providence: "Your obligation is to be what the consciousness of your being bids you to be and become."^[14] His relationship with the Romantics was somewhat ambivalent. He noted that all people with artistic nature had "at least some stirrings of piety." But ultimately, Schleiermacher wrote, "imaginative natures fail in penetrative spirit, in capacity for mastering the essential." Wilhelm Dilthey wrote about Schleiermacher's time with the Romantics: "Like every genius he was lonely in their midst and yet needed them. He lived among them as a sober man among dreamers."^[15] Schleiermacher was repeatedly embarrassed and humiliated by their social impropriety and inability to function in the real world.^[16]

Together, Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel decided to begin the monumental task of producing the first German translation of Plato's works. But Schleiermacher could not count on Schlegel, and soon he had had to work on the translation alone. The work took many years and the volumes were published intermittently between 1804 and 1828, although not all dialogues were translated. Still today, Schleiermacher's translations are the most sold paperback editions of Plato in Germany and are authoritative translations for scholars. Dilthey claimed that through them, "knowledge of Greek philosophy first became possible."^[17] The work on the translation was to have a profound effect on the development of Schleiermacher's philosophy.

The Speeches on Religion

Bothered by the Romantics' hostility toward religion, Schleiermacher wrote his most famous work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (*Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*), in 1799, which made him instantly famous. In it, Schleiermacher attempted to discern the spirit or idea of pure religion, just as Kant had done for pure reason. In this early work his philosophical and theological ideas were still unformed and would evolve in the following years.

Schleiermacher thought that the Romantics' criticism of religion applied only to external factors such as dogmas, opinions, and practices, which determine the social and historical form of religions. Religion was about the source of the external factors. He noted that, "as the childhood images of God and immortality vanished before my doubting eyes, piety remained."^[18] He distinguished religion from "vain mythology" that conceived God as an outside being who interfered in history or natural events, although he thought Christianity should retain its mythical aspects and language as long as it was recognized as myth. Beliefs or knowledge about the nature of reality were also to be separated from religion.^[19] After Kant, the old-world view with its metaphysical idea of God was no longer possible. Martin Redeker explains: "On the basis of critical transcendental philosophy God cannot be the object of human knowledge, since human knowledge is bound to space and time and the categories of reason, i.e., the finite world."^[20]

True religion, according to Schleiermacher was the "immediate consciousness of the universal being of all finite things in and through the infinite, of all temporal things in and through the eternal."^[21] Feeling was the essence of his idea of religion, feeling of the eternal in all that has life and being. Feeling was only religious though, if it imparted a revelation of the spirit of the whole. That was God, the highest unity, being felt.^[22] Schleiermacher defined feeling as the pre-conceptual organ of subjective receptivity that makes thought and experience possible. Feeling is self-consciousness itself, the unifying property of the self that pre-reflectively apprehends the world as a whole.^[23] It is the primal act of the spirit before reality is divided into subject and object. An existential experience of revelation is the basis of faith and the certainty of salvation, not correct doctrines or theological formulations.^[24]

In contrast to Romantic religious individualism, Schleiermacher claimed that religion was social or nothing at all, since it was "man's nature to be social." The more one is stirred by religious feelings, "the more strongly his drive toward sociality comes into play." A religious person, therefore, must interact with other people and do his part in the Christian church, which is the social form of the idea of true religion. Although, corruption is to be expected when the eternal steps down into the sphere of the temporal and must adapt to historical and political realities.^[25] What characterizes Christianity is the conflict of the infinite and finite in human history, and through Christ's reconciliation this conflict is overcome. Thus, Christianity is by nature a polemical religion, critical of culture, of religion, and above all of itself.^[26]

Many readers, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, found Schleiermacher's account of the essence of religion wonderful, but his attempt to justify church Christianity disappointing. Georg W. F. Hegel admired *On Religion*, but later the admiration would turn to hate. It has been suggested that it was

partly because Hegel envied Schleiermacher's work on Plato, Heraclitus, and the dialectic, although their later rivalry at the University of Berlin seems an adequate cause.^[27]

In this early work, Schleiermacher shows some prejudice toward his neighboring countries, when he asks who could fathom his testimony: "To whom should I turn if not to the sons of Germany? Where else is an audience for my speech? It is not blind predilection [...] that makes me speak thus, but the deep conviction that you alone are capable, as well as worthy, of having awakened in you the sense for holy and divine things."^[28] According to Schleiermacher, the English, "whom many unduly honor," are incapable of attaining true religion, for they are driven by the pursuit of "gain and enjoyment." He continues, "their zeal for knowledge is only a sham fight, their worldly wisdom a false jewel, [...] and their sacred freedom itself too often and too easily serves self-interest. They are never in earnest with anything that goes beyond palpable utility."^[29] The French are worse: "On them, one who honors religion can hardly endure to look, for in every act and almost in every word, they tread its holiest ordinances under foot." The "barbarous indifference" of the French people and the "witty frivolity" of their intellectuals towards the historical events taking place in France at the time (the French Revolutionary Wars) shows how little disposition they have for true religion. "What does religion abhor more than that unbridled arrogance by which the leaders of the French people defy the eternal laws of our world? What does religion more keenly instill than that humble, considerate moderation for which they do not seem to have even the faintest feeling?"^[30]

Professor at Halle and *Christmas Eve*

In 1804, the Prussian government called Schleiermacher to the University of Halle as professor and university preacher.^[31] The following year, he wrote *Christmas Eve (Die Weihnachtsfeier)*, a work in the style of Plato's dialogues. It is a conversation among a group of friends gathered on Christmas eve, discussing the meaning of the Christmas celebration and Christ's birth.^[32]

The dialogue begins with the historical criticism of the Enlightenment, claiming that although the Christmas celebration is a powerful and vital present reality, it is hardly based on historical fact. The birth of Christ is only a legend. Schleiermacher rejects the historical empiricism of the Enlightenment since it results only in the discovery of insignificant causes for important events and the outcome of history becomes accidental. This is not good enough, "for history derives from epic and mythology, and these clearly lead to the identity of appearance and idea." Therefore, he says, "it is precisely the task of history to make the particular immortal. Thus, the particular first gets its position and distinct existence in history by means of a higher treatment."^[33]

Speculation and empiricism must be combined for historical understanding: "However weak the historical traces may be if viewed critically, the celebration does not depend on these but the necessary idea of a Redeemer."^[34] Since men lack the unity and harmony of primordial nature and whose nature is the separation of spirit and flesh, they need redemption.^[35] The birth of Christ, "is founded more upon an eternal decree than upon definite, individual fact, and on this account cannot be spoken of in a definite moment but is rather elevated above temporal history and must be maintained mystically." Festivals like Christmas simply create their own historical background.^[36] But the myth of Christmas is far from arbitrary: "Something inward must lie at its basis, otherwise it could never be effective nor endure. This inner something, however, can be nothing else than the ground of all joy itself."^[37]

Schleiermacher understands Christmas as the event when eternal being enters the finite becoming of history, influenced by the Platonic ideas, the archetypes of pure being. The spirit thus reveals himself in history and brings mankind to self-consciousness.[38] The celebration of the eternal is what sets Christmas apart from other festivals.

Some, to be sure have attempted to transfer the widespread joy that belongs to the Christmas season to the New Year, the day on which the changes and contrasts of time are pre-eminent. [...] The New Year is devoted to the renewal of what is only transitory. Therefore, it is especially appropriate that those who, lacking stability of character, live only from year to year should make an especially joyful day of it. All human beings are subject to the shifts of time. That goes without saying. However, some of the rest of us do not desire to have our live in what is only transitory.[39]

The joy of Christmas bespeaks an original undivided human nature where the antitheses between time and eternity, thought and being have been overcome, an eternal life in our temporal existence.[40] The celebration of Christmas also brings to the fore the divine relationship of mother and child. Mary symbolizes every mother, and mother's love for her child is the eternal element in every woman's life, the essence of her being.[41]

Schleiermacher's life changed when Napoleon defeated the Prussian army in 1806. After battles in the streets, Halle was captured and occupied. Schleiermacher's house was plundered and occupied by French soldiers.[42] "Unlike Goethe and Hegel, who admired the French conqueror, Schleiermacher seethed with rage at the crushing of old Prussia." [43] When he was asked by a French official to witness Napoleon's entry into the city, Schleiermacher asked to be excused. The students were expelled and the University dissolved. Yet Schleiermacher remained, convinced that greatness awaited Prussia and Germany. The destruction of Prussia was only a transition, the old and feeble had to fall for something stronger to emerge. He wrote: "The scourge must pass over everything that is German; only under this condition can something thoroughly beautiful later arise out of this. Bless those who will live to see it; but those who die, may they die in faith." [44] He was convinced that God had ordained that Germany, this glorious cultural entity, would also be realized politically.[45]

Prussia's defeat and Napoleon's occupation brought Schleiermacher to consciousness of the spirit of nationalism. He joined the movement for reform in Prussia, based on the emerging Protestant ethics, and the values of *Volk*, state, and fatherland. Schleiermacher's ethics had until then been based on individuality. The individual self now found its freedom by serving the nation and the state. Moreover, Providence was at work in history as peoples and states evolved into social individuals. The old idea of history as a process of continuous perfection, harmony, and peace, gave way to a history as a life of struggle, decisions, and sacrifice, but also catastrophe and destruction. This was the will of God for the realization of justice and truth.[46] In the collapse of the Prussian state, Schleiermacher sensed the will of God leading his people through defeat to victory. Germans had to recognize God's work in the ethos and spirit of the German nation and the historical state, and obey his will. God would protect those who wanted to preserve themselves, and their unique meaning and spirit. For the fatherland and its freedom, one must risk his life. A Christian cannot rely on others or only himself, but should trust in the power of God when standing up for his Fatherland.[47]

Up until the defeat, Schleiermacher had seen Prussia as his Fatherland, but he now started to question its existence. He wondered whether God was using the defeat to awaken the Prussian people to their destiny in Germany. This humiliation could only have been prevented by a unified Germany.[48] He felt that the struggle of nationalism had been made almost impossible by the Enlightenment, its ideas masked decay with a false sense of progress. “Every last moment is supposed to have been full of progress. Oh, how much I despise this generation, which adorns itself more shamelessly than any other ever did.”[49]

Professor at the University of Berlin

The University of Berlin was founded in 1809 by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Schleiermacher played an important role in the founding of the university, working as one of Humboldt’s closest collaborators. Schleiermacher, like Fichte, opposed the idea of the university as a technical school of higher learning and special studies, based on those that had been established in France after the Revolution. Science was supposed to be universal and coherent, a unified and universal system of man’s total knowledge. [50]

Schleiermacher and Fichte based their idea of university on the transcendental idealist philosophy and its new conception of science. A mere technical academy could not represent the totality of knowledge. According to Schleiermacher, “the totality of knowledge should be shown by perceiving the principles as well as the outline of all learning in such a way that one develops the ability to pursue each sphere of knowledge on his own.” All genuine and creative scholarly work must be rooted in the scientific spirit as expressed in philosophy.[51] The philosophical faculty was to predominate over the other faculties in the university because, “there is no productive scientific capacity in the absence of the speculative spirit.”[52] The students were to be captivated by the idea of knowledge, and all specialized learning was to be understood in accordance with the entire framework of knowledge. From this, the students would derive the impulse for their own research.[53]

In 1810, Schleiermacher joined the Prussian Academy of Sciences and became permanent secretary of the philosophical division in 1814. There he worked to establish a new field, cultural-historical studies, in which he emphasized a new study of antiquity that combined philosophy with the history of philosophy, law, and art. A critical edition of Aristotle’s works was also prepared at his recommendation. Because of the importance of the new studies, Schleiermacher urged the appointment of Hegel to Berlin, but Hegel became isolated, and they had no personal relationship.[54] Hegel soon took issue with Schleiermacher’s theology of feeling and blasted Schleiermacher in every lecture cycle. [55] Schleiermacher, in turn, made sure that Hegel was kept out of the Academy of Sciences, ostensibly on the grounds that Hegel’s speculative philosophy was no science.[56]

Schleiermacher served as a pastor alongside his academic appointments his whole career. During the French occupation he used his pulpit in the Berlin Charité to raise the spirits of his congregation and instill in them the spirit of nationalism. The philosopher Henrik Steffens, a friend of Schleiermacher’s, described his sermons thus: “How he elevated and settled the mind of [Berlin’s] citizens [...]; through him Berlin was as if transformed [...]. His commanding, refreshing, always joyful spirit was like a courageous army in that most troubled time.”[57] In 1808 he joined a secret group of agitators, who sought to prepare a popular uprising and a war against Napoleon. There he befriended prominent

patriots like General Gerhard von Scharnhorst and Field Marshal August von Gneisenau, whose names were later given to famous German battleships. Political maneuvers of Russia and Austria ruined the work of the secret group and the possibility of war against Napoleon would have to wait a few years. [58]

Then in 1813, Prussia prepared to fight Napoleon again. That year, Schleiermacher preached a sermon before young soldiers in Berlin who were going to fight the coming war. He told them that they should think only of the nation when fighting. That should be their inspiration for bravery. They were fighting for the Fatherland and not for personal liberties. If a soldier died fighting to preserve his personal liberties, his death was a total waste since one had to be alive to enjoy the liberty. To die fighting for the Fatherland, on the other hand, was only an “utterly insignificant casualty.” Schleiermacher, valued death from a mystical point of view, as it united the soul with God. He knew what tragedy the death of a soldier was, but he wanted them to know that the only meaningful death for a soldier would be for the sake of the Fatherland. He himself served in the *Landsturm* reserve unit for the defense of Berlin. The *Landsturm* was supposed to be a second line of defense behind the newly established *Landwehr*. [59]

The struggle against France and the ineffective political organization in Prussia caused Schleiermacher to begin to question the rule by divine right, on which the monarchy was based. Germany was ruled by many monarchs who all claimed to rule by the will of God, but to Schleiermacher, God would only approve a unified Germany. A rule by a monarch was only justified by the will of the nation as expressed in its traditions. He also blamed the conceited aristocracy for Germany’s troubles, for they were more concerned with their own status than with the welfare of the Fatherland. [60]

It was during a crisis period over the defense of Berlin that Schleiermacher also noted that one particular group was very unwilling to participate in the *Landsturm* reserve units. He had no sympathy for those who left Berlin only to avoid their obligations, and conspicuous among them were the Jews. In 1799, Schleiermacher had advocated full civil rights for the Jews. Now he saw no place for them in Prussia, nor could he foresee one in a unified Germany. Before 1813 he had also never criticized Jewish theology, traditions, or culture. That was to change too. [61]

In the summer of 1813, Schleiermacher was appointed as a journalist and editor of a newspaper called *The Prussian Correspondent*, where he began to criticize the Prussian government for its handling of the war. He regarded a peace treaty with France as a betrayal since it would doom the chance to unify Germany. King Friedrich Wilhelm was furious with Schleiermacher and had him dismissed from the newspaper and expelled from Berlin. The order was later eased, and Schleiermacher got to stay and keep his position in the University and as pastor. [62]

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, a period of reaction began in Prussia, and Schleiermacher found himself almost an enemy of the state. Despite official opposition and knowing that he would never live to see the unification of Germany, Schleiermacher still preached and taught the ideals of German nationalism in the church and in his lectures. He decided to be patient and prepare the groundwork for a unified German state, or as much as the Prussian government would tolerate. [63] For fifteen years he had to live with the fear of persecution, and many friends and colleagues were forced to choose between him and the government. [64] Yet he remained publicly committed to German nationalism,

certain that those who frustrated the nationalist effort would ultimately have to answer to God for their crime.[65] We now turn to Schleiermacher's ideas as they appear in his mature writings.

Schleiermacher's Philosophy of Mind

According to Schleiermacher, the task of philosophy is the "immersion of the Spirit into the innermost depths of itself and of things in order to fathom the relations of their [spirit and nature] being-together." [1] Schleiermacher's philosophy, like German idealism in general, was very influenced by, and a reaction to, the critical transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant. His philosophy was also influenced by Plato, of whom Schleiermacher was the chief scholar in Germany in his time. [2] In his major work, *The Christian Faith (Der christliche Glaube)*, published in 1821–22, Schleiermacher put forth his philosophy of consciousness.

The experience of consciousness discloses that it has both an unchanging identity and is also changing and various in its different moments. The two constitutive elements of self-consciousness are, according to Schleiermacher, the self-caused element and the non-self-caused element, the ego and other. The self is constituted only in relation to an other, it cannot be thought of without an object. [3] He says:

Now these two elements, as they exist together in the temporal self-consciousness, correspond in the subject [to] its receptivity and its activity. [...] The common element in all those determinations of self-consciousness which predominantly express a receptivity affected from some outside quarter is the feeling of dependence. On the other hand, the common element in all those determinations which predominantly express spontaneous movement and activity is the feeling of freedom. [4]

Self-consciousness, "which accompanies our whole existence, [...] is itself precisely a consciousness of absolute dependence; for it is the consciousness that the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us in just the same sense in which anything towards which we should have a feeling of absolute freedom must have proceeded entirely from ourselves." [5] But a feeling of absolute freedom is impossible since it would require consciousness without an object. [6] Schleiermacher adds that, "the whence of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word 'God', and that is for us the really original signification of that word. [...] To feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing." [7]

It is therefore not an object which is the determinative element in the feeling of absolute dependence, but a transcendental eternal and absolute now, which can only be God. God is the absolute infinite unity, the decisive power which unifies the inherent contradictions in the world, e.g., thought and being, reason and sensibility, ego and other. God thus vitally permeates the world and creates and preserves life. Schleiermacher describes the feeling of absolute dependence as an "immediate existential relation." [8] According to him, self-consciousness has two levels, the sensible, dealing with objects, perceptions and ideas, and the immediate self-consciousness which grounds and unifies thinking and willing. Feeling is related to immediate self-consciousness, the pre-conceptual and undivided essence of the self, before there is an ego and other. [9]

Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Schleiermacher defined theology as self-reflection of the church, or believers, on their own beliefs and practice. Church teaching, worship and polity is to be analyzed phenomenologically and pneumatically. Church life is to be unified with the scientific spirit. Faith and a critical spirit of inquiry are not contradictory, although church-mindedness is a precondition of theology.[\[10\]](#)

Schleiermacher does away with the reliance on scriptural proof or the creeds as the basic structure of his theology. Faith is not awakened by obedience to doctrinal norms, but through a community of believers and their relation to the Redeemer. Scripture and creeds take on a special meaning only after one has been brought to faith.[\[11\]](#) Availing himself of the new concept of science from German transcendental philosophy, Schleiermacher's theology is determined by the differentiation between idea and appearance, and by the idea of an organic whole. Attempting to overcome the opposition between a historical-empirical approach on the one hand, and metaphysical speculation about God on the other, the idea, or the nature and truth of Christianity, becomes manifest in the present and historical life of Christianity.[\[12\]](#)

For Schleiermacher, the omnipotence of God does not mean that God can do whatever he wills, but rather that he is the cause of everything. A scientific worldview based on critical transcendental philosophy should not necessarily end in pantheism or atheism, but be open to the reality of God as the Lord of nature and history. Schleiermacher wanted to make clear that religion is a necessary element of human life in history, that it alone provides the foundation for the unity of the human spirit with the ground of being, thus protecting human life from degeneration.[\[13\]](#) God as the world's unity and totality is the power that brings together the antithesis of matter and spirit, and is the source of all finite life.[\[14\]](#)

Man is, however, unaware of God as the vital power and is unable to have a relationship with him. This, Schleiermacher calls unredeemed God-consciousness, or sin. Only through redemption in Christ, can the God-consciousness be restored, and God's omnipotence and final purpose be comprehended. It is the experience of a living communion with Christ and the unity with God as the ground of being that is the new assurance of faith.[\[15\]](#) In Christ was first formed the perfect and archetypal God-consciousness, and through the Christian community, preaching, and the Gospel stories, this God-consciousness is awakened in the believer and a relationship established.[\[16\]](#)

Schleiermacher does not consider Christianity to be a continuation of Judaism. The essential element in the both religions is eternally constituted, meaning that if they did not exist or have a historical beginning, they would have to be created by necessity. But rather than being a religion, Judaism represents for Schleiermacher the absence of religion:

Judaism has long been a dead religion, and those who still wear its livery only sit lamenting at the imperishable mummy, bewailing its departure and the mournful state of being left behind. But I do not talk about it as were it in some way a predecessor of Christianity: I hate such historical connections in religion; its necessity is one that is far higher and eternal, and every beginning in it is original [...] the whole thing [is] such a strange example of the corruption and total disappearance of religion.[\[17\]](#)

He also held that among the early Christians, heathens had less to overcome than the Jews, which is why more heathens became Christians. Jews found it very difficult forsake their law and Abrahamic promises.[\[18\]](#) Schleiermacher identified the New Testament exclusively as the Christian canon.[\[19\]](#) His

hermeneutical rule for Old Testament exegesis was: “Whatever is most definitely Jewish has least value.”[\[20\]](#) He even found it hard to believe that Jesus had much in common with the people among whom he was born:

And where indeed was that narrowing and isolating race-prejudice keener than just where our Lord was born? The nation that regarded all other nations as unclean, and avoided intercourse with them; [...] such a people could not of themselves have produced, nurtured and instructed Him who is the Fountain of universal love.[\[21\]](#)

Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher has had a great influence on the field of hermeneutics. Richard E. Palmer, in his book *Hermeneutics*, states: “Schleiermacher [...] is properly regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics as a general study.”[\[22\]](#) According to Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is to be both creative and scientific, it is the imaginative reconstruction of the writer’s selfhood. It therefore ventures beyond the principles of philological science and becomes an art.[\[23\]](#) Johann Gottfried Herder was a primary influence on the hermeneutical thinking of Schleiermacher.[\[24\]](#)

Thinking has, according to Schleiermacher, a moral and historical character that involves an awareness of the relatedness of the individual consciousness to a community of other minds. Thinking also necessarily involves an awareness of conflict between the judgements of one’s own self and those of others. The self is then situated in a dialogical relation where it struggles to overcome conflict. Thought is a constant reproduction of the social matrix in which the self finds itself and from which the impulse to critical reflection stems. Thinking also involves the mediation of one’s thoughts and to deposit them in the public language and to respond to the thoughts of others. And since all men learn to speak within some given, historical language, their historical mold also impresses their thinking.[\[25\]](#)

The interpreter, Schleiermacher claims, must master the grammar of the language of the author he is studying, as well as the history and physical conditions of the language. The author is to be considered as an expression of the language or an event in its life. The language is moreover an inheritance that qualifies the author’s spirit and demarcates the direction and progress of his thought. A thorough knowledge of the author’s language is therefore required to know the limits of his mind and to avoid anachronism in textual exegesis. Schleiermacher stated that the goal of hermeneutics is “to understand the text just as well and then better than the author himself understood it.” That is, the interpreter must be conscious of the history of the language and culture of the author, things that the author may have been unconscious of.[\[26\]](#) In addition, the text of an author also arises from his own being and inner history, which is separate from the history of the language. Therefore, acquaintance with the author’s own personal history is required, helping the interpreter to fathom the author’s sense of identity and purpose.[\[27\]](#)

What Schleiermacher called the psychological method deals with an author’s decision, or his freedom. Its goal is “the thorough understanding of the style.” He explains this further:

We are accustomed to understand by ‘style’ only the way in which the language is handled. But thoughts and language always inform each other, and the distinctive way in which the object is grasped

informs the arrangement [of the elements of the composition] and thereby also the handling of the language.[28]

The task of the psychological method is twofold. One part, which he calls the “technical” method, is to analyze the form in which the author organizes and presents his thoughts. The other part, the “pure psychological” part, is the attempt to fully grasp the significance of the author’s decision to make this particular writing and to communicate these ideas. They mean little if the interpreter can’t understand why and how a rational will chose them as his instruments.[29]

Schleiermacher defined interpretation as an art, and therefore the interpreter must possess certain talents that only a few have in the requisite measure. He must not only have an extensive knowledge of the language, but also be able to grasp the language as a vital reality and to penetrate “into the core of the language in its relation to thought.” He must have the ability to gain a direct understanding of men and to grasp the “genuine meaning of a man and his distinctive characteristics in relation to the [essential] idea [*Begriff*] of the man.”[30]

Schleiermacher extended the concept of the so called “*hermeneutic circle*,” the idea that the understanding of the whole text is gathered from the individual parts, and then each part is interpreted in light of the whole. It is not enough for Schleiermacher, to interpret the part in light of the whole text, but the whole text must also be interpreted in light of the author’s whole mind and being and his historical linguistic and cultural setting. The hermeneutic circle is in fact much more than a tool for interpretation. It is an essential part of the mind. “Every child comes to understand the meanings of words only through hermeneutics,” Schleiermacher wrote.[31] Hermeneutics is how any understanding is possible at all through a dialogical process, it is the art of understanding. In conversation, we construct the meaning of a sentence by hearing a series of words that otherwise would have little meaning individually.[32] Sometimes, we can know what our interlocutor wants to say and even construct the development of his thought before we have heard the whole speech.[33] According to Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Schleiermacher’s grounding of understanding on dialogue and on interhuman understanding establishes a foundation for hermeneutics at a deeper level than before, and in a way that allows one to erect a system that is scientific and scholarly on a hermeneutical basis. Hermeneutics becomes the foundation not just for theology but for all historically based humanistic disciplines.[34]

Philosophical Ethics, or Reason in History

Schleiermacher defined ethics thus: “Ethics, as the depiction of the way in which reason and nature coexist, is the science [of the principles of] history.”[35] He does not conceive of ethics as a normative science that only deals with the “ought to be,” rather, it is to deal with the “is,” like the natural sciences. He has therefore little sympathy with Kant’s categorical imperative. Morality is not to obey any specific commands, it is a principle that permeates all of life.[36] Ethics is the science of the organizing activity of the ideal principle in nature.[37]

Schleiermacher divides science into two main branches, ethics and physics:

Ethics is, accordingly, the representation of being under the power of reason, that is from that side in which, in the co-inherence of the polarity, reason is the active term, and the real that which is acted

upon; and physics is the representation of finite being under the power of nature, that is, as the real is the active term and the ideal that which is acted upon.[38]

Schleiermacher constructs his theory of ethics on the fundamental antithesis of ideal and real. All finite being never represents the pure unity of the ideal and real. Its actual existence cannot be inferred from its form and its form cannot be inferred from its existence. Both ideal and real fall outside of human experience, which is limited to that which is involved in becoming. The intellect can never grasp it and reduce it to a single term. Therefore, we cannot ascribe primacy to either form without matter or matter without form, since both transcend our experience. This is so because of our own existence in body and soul. Experience cannot be reduced to either pure reason or pure matter.[39] Therefore, all real knowledge is only possible within the world and is delimited by human history.[40]

Schleiermacher says: “The work which is the activity of the spiritual [ideal] within nature is always shape; the work of the material [real] in reason is always consciousness.”[41] He continues:

Body and soul in man is the highest tension of the antithesis, a twofold interpenetration of the objective [real] and the spiritual [ideal]. We see it diminish in the animal and the vegetable world, but we never see it quite disappear. Where there is form, there is also consciousness corresponding to it, and vice versa. This antithesis, which was first found in our own being [...] extends through the whole of reality. [42]

In this world of human experience, the world of becoming, it is the real which predominates in everything over the ideal, except in human beings. Man alone express the proper nature of the ideal principle, he is the turning point. Man manifests the ideal principle through the knowledge process, as thought organizes experience into science. Thought, the work of reason in man, is what prevents total chaos in human conduct, a conflict of purposes. Reason thus manifests itself in advanced social life, the organization of the state, commerce and the exploitation of natural resources for its ends.[43]

Schleiermacher divides ethics into branches such as industry, agriculture, commerce, science, art, religion, and friendship, according to the impact of the ideal principle on nature.[44]

Schleiermacher was influenced by the idea, or form, of the good in Plato’s *Republic*, a book he considered “the most glorious composition of antiquity.” Man, as a reflection of the divine world, with the ability to regulate himself, inwardly and outwardly, according to the pattern of eternal ideas, was the most important, yet undeveloped implication of the idea of the good in the history of ethics, Schleiermacher thought.[45] But for him, it meant not conformity to a universal maxim of reason, but the concrete realization of the rational principle through man. Man is thus an organism of reason, and through him reason finds concrete expression in institutions, such as family, nation, university and state. He defines the good simply as the progressive organization of nature by reason. Everything which is produced in this process is good, and everyone who works toward its end partakes in the good itself.[46]

According to Schleiermacher, reason is given to us only through our embodiment and natural constitution, which cannot be dismissed as mere accidents, but are essential to the life of the soul. The soul is then, always rooted in a particular man, his family, nation and race, and shares in his destiny. Man is therefore never an absolute agent but is defined by his historical, social and biological setting. [47] Our existence is also ethically, always an expression and extension of the organizing wills of

others. Primarily, of our parents through procreation, but of other members of the community and nation from which we come and exist. The individual begins his life already as an organized being, he is determined both by the soul-body existence, and by the character and destiny his community.[48] Schleiermacher rejects the basis of the social contract theory, that the freedom of the natural man is inimical to social order. Society is rather an expression of freedom, not a limitation of it.[49]

Man and State

For Schleiermacher, mankind is not an abstract universal idea about the human race or the essence of man. Mankind has a concrete being whose essence is expressed in three forms of community: in friendship, marriage, and Fatherland. Against the spirit of the Enlightenment, he did not think that the sole purpose of man was the progressive domination of nature, increased well-being and the advance of civilization. Martin Redeker explains:

The national state, for instance, is not a necessary evil, not an external community of the material world for the increase of property and protection against misfortune and calamity. The state is the finest work of human art by which man raises his being to the highest level. The state is for Schleiermacher the concretion of mankind as moral community and higher life.[50]

According to Schleiermacher, a state is necessary if a society is to progress beyond a certain point. His idea of society and the state is very influenced by his reading of *The Republic*. When a state is established, the customs of the social organism are sanctioned and expressed in its laws. The state thus furthers the ends of the organism and expresses its individuality, it represents the completion of the good life.[51] He wrote: “When such an institution is founded, it is one of the greatest steps forward possible for our race. [...] It follows that patriotism is good, and those who think it is not for them are like guests or aliens.”[52] The idea of a multi-ethnic state did not impress Schleiermacher:

Variation in political dignity is always a sign that several hordes have been fused together. [...] Particularity in common is the basis of the state, partly to the extent that it is also a family bond and partly because only to that extent will every individual posit the totality of the external sphere of the state as his own moral, particular sphere (that is, as absolutely holy and inviolable), for on this alone does the defence of the state rest.[53]

The state must be active in the life of the nation, otherwise the nation will degenerate: “To transform the state into a mere legal institution, [...] would be to reverse the direction of the ethical process.”[54] Schleiermacher also claims that: “Essentially people and soil belong together. [...] State is the identity of people and soil. [...] The determining power of the soil is an essential element in the character of the people...”[55] War for living space is justified:

Every state needs a sufficiency of soil because it ought not to be dependent [on others] for its essential needs. These essential needs increase, however, if the community of peoples gains in size. The state strives to push back its frontiers, in order to acquire what is lacking; these are wars of need. Thus we can distinguish three different sorts of natural warfare: wars of unification which form the state, frontier wars, or wars which maintain a state of equilibrium, and wars of need which defend the state; the usual distinction, on the other hand, between offensive wars and defensive ones, is an entirely empty one.[56]

Folk traditions (*Volkstümlichkeit*) and race mark the boundaries for the possibility of a moral community according to Schleiermacher: “. . . people from different folk traditions, or who speak different languages, and to an even greater extent people of different races, find themselves separated in a way that is specifically different to any other. It is within these natural boundaries that moral relationships are determined . . .”[57] It is history and geography that make a nation, they can never be brought about deliberately, “on the contrary, the fusing of different elements into a single people can only come about where it is physically predetermined, only ever, no doubt, within the confines of the race; for a people has never yet been formed from half-breeds.”[58] The separation of the races is part of the divine order, “. . . for God has imparted to each its own nature, and has therefore marked out bounds and limits for the habitations of the different races of men on the face of the earth.”[59] The idea of a state is inherent in the nature of a race and it is actualized by a powerful leader when the time is right:

Let us now suppose that some person for the first time combines a naturally cohesive group into a civil community (legend tells of such cases in plenty); what happens is that the idea of the state first comes to consciousness in him, and takes possession of his personality as its immediate dwelling place. Then he assumes the rest into the living fellowship of the idea. He does so by making them clearly conscious of the unsatisfactoriness of their present condition by effective speech. The power remains with the founder of forming in them the idea which is the innermost principle of his own life, and of assuming them into the fellowship of that life. The result is, not only that there arises among them a new corporate life, in complete contrast to the old, but also that each of them becomes in themselves new persons – that is to say, citizens. And everything resulting from this is the corporate life – developing variously with the process of time, yet remaining essentially the same – of this idea which emerged at that particular point of time, but was always predestined in the nature of that particular racial stock.[60]

Schleiermacher’s ideal ruler is the philosopher king of *The Republic*, who is the source of all freedom and justice, who has no private interest above the state, and who personifies the spirit of the nation.[61]

The End of Schleiermacher’s Life

A wave of revolutions went through Europe in 1830 and 1831. Schleiermacher was deeply hurt by the prospect of seeing the German people having to go through revolutions before a unified Germany could be realized. In September 1832, seventeen months before his death, he wrote in a letter to his wife Henriette: “It often makes me sad to think, that after all our bright hopes and good beginnings, I shall, when I depart this life, leave our German world in such a precarious state – for this will most probably be my lot.”[62]

Although Schleiermacher never lived to see the unification of Germany himself, he used his sermons and classes to infuse his listeners with the ideals of German nationalism. Some of them would be influential in German politics in the following decades. It seems providential almost, that in Schleiermacher’s confirmation class of 1830 was one sixteen year old, Otto von Bismarck, who would later realize what Schleiermacher had long believed was God’s destiny for Germany.[63] Many Prussians who knew little of Schleiermacher’s theology, recognized him as a national hero and patriot. [64]

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher died in February 1834 from pneumonia. On the day of his funeral around 30,000 Berliners joined the funeral procession, including the king, which was unparalleled at the time for an academic.[\[65\]](#) His friend, Steffens reported of the funeral:

Never has a funeral similar to this taken place. It was not something arranged but a completely unconscious, natural outpouring of mourning love, an inner boundless feeling which gripped the entire city and gathered about his grave; these were hours of inward unity such as have never been seen in a metropolis of modern times.[\[66\]](#)

Notes