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Hermeneutics, Individuality, and Tradition

Schleiermacher’s Idea of Bildung in the Landscape of Hegelian Thought

KRISTIN GJESDAL

It is a widespread assumption that early nineteenth-century philosophy bifurcates into a romantic and a Hegelian camp. One the one hand, we have a romantic turn to individuality, feeling, and immediacy; on the other Hegel’s focus on Bildung, historicity, and the sociality of reason. Countering Hegel’s hyperbolic worries about romanticism, defenders of this paradigm often proceed by calling for a reevaluation of individuality, aesthetics, and feeling—and, by implication, art and literature, the domains where these aspects of subjectivity are expressed and sheltered—and not by asking if this is what romantic philosophy is all about in the first place.¹

It is the aim of this paper to shed critical light on the notion that there is a sharp, unbridgeable division between the romantics and Hegel or, more precisely, between the emphasis on individuality and the commitment to philosophy of Bildung, that is, education in and through culture. My point of departure—my test case, as it were—is Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theory of interpretation, a model that is often viewed as a proto-example of aesthetic-romantic attitudes, be it taken as a point of criticism (Hegel and Gadamer) or as an occasion for praise and laudation (Szondi, Ricoeur, Frank). In my view, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics is not about aesthetic feeling or a celebration of style. His is a model that addresses meaning and thought as expressed in the communal medium of language and thus views Bildung and understanding as two sides of the same coin.²
For Schleiermacher, language is always marked by individuality as well as the cultural and symbolic resources of a given, historical era. Yet the living individuality of a text and its insights tends to be stifled as it is integrated into the dominant patterns of understanding. Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics seeks to shake up such hardened patterns of understanding. As such, it finds its form as a critical theory of interpretation. Further, this critical theory is motivated by a wish to keep tradition alive and dynamic—a self-renewing source of education and Bildung.

From this point of view, the chief difference between Hegel and the romantics is not that Hegel has a notion of Bildung and the romantics do not. In early nineteenth-century philosophy, we do not encounter positions for or against Bildung. Instead we face a set of alternative conceptions of Bildung, be it, with Hegel, along the lines of a rational, continuous tradition, or, with Schleiermacher, with the awareness that tradition carries with it the risk of turning into a stifling interpretative scheme and is thus in need of revitalization from the point of view of critical engagement with concrete, symbolic expressions. This latter notion of Bildung complements Hegel's model, and is, as such, deserving of rehabilitation—be it within the field of interpretation studies or within the larger, philosophical discourse of Bildung.

5.1. THE UNIVERSALITY OF HERMENEUTICS

Schleiermacher taught hermeneutics in the years between 1805 and 1833. Yet he never produced a book-length study in this area. The available material consists in part of lecture notes and student annotations. This has given rise to extensive discussion of the chronology of the texts as well as their thematic organization. 3 Interesting as it is, this debate must be put aside in order to allow for a brief overview of Schleiermacher’s place within the hermeneutic tradition. 4 What is the chief concern of Schleiermacher’s theory of interpretation? How is his contribution different from those of his predecessors? And why is his work ascribed such an important role within the history of hermeneutics? The initial answer to these questions is simple enough. Schleiermacher’s main idea, and the source of his historical influence, is his universalization of hermeneutics. What is implied by this formulation is less straightforward. There are at least two aspects of Schleiermacher’s universalization-thesis: The first (a) relates to the self-understanding of the humanities. The second (b) concerns the emphasis on individuality. Each of these points must be spelled out in more detail.

(a) It is helpful to keep in mind that before Schleiermacher, philologically minded theoreticians such as Friederich Ast, Johann August Ernesti, and Friedrich August Wolf had seen hermeneutics as a tool for the study of certain academic areas, in particular the study of temporally or culturally
distant texts (the Bible and texts from classical antiquity being two examples). Schleiermacher, by contrast, insists that hermeneutics not only concerns the untangling of old, knotty, or incomplete texts, but also deals with language use across the board: past as well as present, culturally distant as well as near. In his words, hermeneutics is "the art of understanding particularly the written discourse of another person correctly" (HC 3).

The significance of this turn should not be underestimated. With Schleiermacher's universalization thesis, hermeneutics is no longer viewed as an aid to specific groups of scholars engaging in specific kinds of textual explanation or exegesis (theology and classical studies). Hermeneutics now emerges as a discourse of the epistemic conditions for reflected and academically adequate interpretation as such. In this form, it shelters the systematic self-reflection of the humanities, the domain of research in which the scholar encounters the symbolic self-presentation of subjectivity in and through history and culture. It is with reference to hermeneutics that the human sciences justify and realize their scientific status.

However, if hermeneutics is viewed as the epistemic self-reflection of the human sciences (as anchored in the human capacity for symbolic expression), only one humanistic discipline can outline its nature and principles, namely philosophy. Other human sciences are limited to the study of specific areas of symbol production and the application of interpretation theory within these areas. Philosophy, by contrast, maps the conditions of possibility for understanding as such. Hence, with Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is established as the general methodology of the humanities, as an intellectual domain deserving of study in its own right, and as an area to which philosophy has privileged access. Needless to say, this move has gained approval in the philosophical camps. Even Hans-Georg Gadamer, who often comes across as Schleiermacher's harshest critic, welcomes this maneuver by quoting, as the epigram to the third part of Truth and Method, Schleiermacher's claim that "everything presupposed in hermeneutics is but language."

(b) According to Schleiermacher, the universality of hermeneutics must be led back to the fact that all language use, all symbolic expression, is marked by a dimension of individuality. As he puts it, "Every person is on the one hand a location in which a given language forms itself in an individual manner, on the other their discourse can only be understood via the totality of language" (HC 8). Hence, the force of Schleiermacher's universality claim ultimately rests with the plausibility of his turn to individuality. In this context, three further points will need to be made.

With regard to Schleiermacher's notion of individuality, the first thing that must be noted is that it does not, within the context of his hermeneutics, refer to the feelings or inner life of a particular person. It refers to a given use of language, an aspect of our symbolic-expressive capacity (HC 10). As such,
individuality serves as a generic concept that covers all aspects of language use that cannot be understood solely with reference to a universal genre, rule, concept, or grammatical grid. The literature of a certain period can emerge as individual. The same applies to a constellation of writers that work together or are being exposed to the same source of influence and thus share a certain literary orientation. Further, a given language-user might be characterized by reference to an individual style, gesture, or use of language that differs from that of his or her peers. But there might also be differences within 'his or her language-use that make it plausible to speak, in the case of a literary expression, about a given author's early as opposed to his or her late work. In this way, individuality functions as an interpretative lens with different scopes and adjustments.¹⁰

The second point that must be emphasized is that there is no opposition in Schleiermacher's model between creative-individual and ordinary or communal uses of language. Individual use of language is not understood in contrast to but as enabled by and enriching the shared symbolic resources of a given language area. Individual language-use concerns the way that, at any point in time, a given speaker, author, or group of such shapes the available linguistic resources—how these resources are realized only from within or with reference to a given point of view, a given outlook on the world, that is, from within the perspective of a particular, human being (or group of such) with a particular history, cultural context, and set of experiences (HC 91). For Schleiermacher, every individual is unique and irreducible. Yet all symbolic expressions voice a shared world of experience, events, and entities.

Third, Schleiermacher's notion of individuality shows how thought is always articulated by a concrete individual. Every person represents, potentially, a unique point of view, a particular perspective on the world. In some kinds of discourse, Schleiermacher suggests, this uniqueness plays a comparatively insignificant role. Scientific texts make up one such example. In other cases, such as modern poetry, individuality is played up (HC 19, 64). Most discourse finds itself situated somewhere in the middle. In engaging the infinite spectrum of human expressivity, the reader, if attentive to the uniqueness of the author's point of view, may expand her horizon by, so to speak, allowing her imagination to go visiting the outlook of another. For Schleiermacher, there is an epistemic aspect of this expansion of one's own horizon, though in his early work it is ultimately pitched as an ethical enterprise, one that is related to the very constitution of the self through the interplay between self and other.

5.2. INDIVIDUALITY RECONSIDERED

Schleiermacher's notion of individuality, as discussed above, is not opposed to the idea of a shared linguistic community but targets the way that language
takes form when concretely applied. How, then, should the critical interpreter proceed in order to get a grasp on the individual-universal aspect of a given text or utterance? And, further, what exactly is gained or understood in the act of understanding? Schleiermacher answers these questions by (a) outlining his thoughts on the hermeneutic procedure and (b) discussing what kind of meaning the interpreter is focusing on.

(a) Schleiermacher's guidelines for interpretative work are obscured by his use of technical terms and a somewhat inconsistent application of his chosen vocabulary. He speaks about the need to proceed through a combination of grammatical interpretation, geared towards the universal linguistic resources available to the given language-user and his peers, and technical interpretation, geared towards the individual application of the shared resources (HC 94). However, sometimes Schleiermacher also talks about psychological interpretation. Even though Schleiermacher wavers between these two terms, it is fair to say that both designate the concrete use, and thus the realization, of communal symbolic resources (and not an inner individual realm of intentionality, emotions, and feelings).

These two aspects of understanding, grammatical and technical interpretation, highlight different aspects of the text (the author as being shaped by his or her culture and the author as he or she shapes her culture). Yet they serve as general guidelines only. In encountering a given utterance, the interpreter cannot a priori know whether the text in question requires an emphasis on grammatical or technical interpretation. This is a matter that begets a certain 
Gefühl, sensitivity, or hypothesis-making on the part of the interpreter. Schleiermacher terms this hypothesis-making "divination" (HC 92–93). In a typical scenario, the interpreter will have to start out, on the basis of the available text, with an interpretative hypothesis, measure it against the available historical material (other texts by the same author, texts by his or her peers, the larger cultural horizon), and then, if needed, revise her initial hypothesis. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics thus includes a reference to the interplay between divination, intuitive hypothesis-making, and comparison, that is, historical-philological work (HC 93, see also HC 100). Just like technical and grammatical interpretation, divination and comparison are mutually constituting aspects of hermeneutics. Under ideal circumstances each should yield the same result as the other. Yet the world of the interpreter is real, not ideal, and the interpreter must move between hypothesis-formation (divination) and the support or rejection of this hypothesis by reference to other works by the same author, works written by his or her contemporaries, and other historical circumstances (comparison). Schleiermacher views this as an infinite process (HC 23). To grasp once and for all the one and only correct and irrefutable meaning will always be beyond the reach of a finite, individual interpreter (HC 88).
Does that, then, mean that Schleiermacher ditches the idea of correct interpretation? Not necessarily. For Schleiermacher—and here he clearly distinguishes himself from hermeneuticians of a more Heideggerian persuasion—interpretations vary by degree of adequacy and correctness. The meaning of the text does not, as in the case of Gadamer, rest with its being applied in ever new contexts of understanding. Interpretations are not simply different, they are also more or less plausible when assessed in light of their purported claim to validity. The idea of correct interpretation serves as a point of orientation, a regulative idea, lending the interpreter purpose, direction, and motivation. A correct interpretation would be one in which the historical situatedness of the interpreter is quelled, suspended, or otherwise put out of play. However, in Schleiermacher’s understanding, the interpreter is always already individualized and situated in history. A neutral interpretative “point of nowhere” is not within reach. Interpretation is, by definition, fallible and subject to constant revision. Precisely because interpretation is fallible and subject to constant revision, is it crucial that the interpreter distinguish between the activity of understanding, on the one hand, and the application of the insights she arrives at, on the other. If the distinction between interpretation and application of the meaning (truth or insight) of the text collapses, there would be no way that the interpreter could make the encounter with a text from a culturally or temporally distant context challenge her own prejudices and beliefs.

In my view, this is one of the most important insights of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. Only by acknowledging how the interpreter challenges her outlook through the encounter with the points of view of an other can we see how Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, while clearly responding to an epistemological problem, is also driven by a strong and underlying ethical motivation circling around the notion of mutual recognition. This is a point that, in equal measures, has been overlooked by Schleiermacher’s critics (who accuse him of centering in on an aesthetic notion of individuality) and his defenders (to the extent that they celebrate his notion of style for its own sake). So much about Schleiermacher’s procedure or method of interpretation.

(b) What, then, is understood in and through a successful interpretation (an interpretation that strikes the right balance between technical and grammatical analysis)? This question has received little attention in the scholarship. Again, this may be due to the relative consensus about Schleiermacher’s interest in style. Another reason may be that Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics has been read as a transcendently oriented theory, that is, a contribution that brings to light the enabling conditions for understanding and thus conducts, as it were, a Copernican turn away from the textual material to the methodological tools or procedures of the interpreter. However, the question of how understanding is possible is not,
in Schleiermacher's work, detached from the question of what is understood. Quite to the contrary, the two are closely related. Schleiermacher's reflection on the object of understanding—what the interpreter is getting at, the meaning of the text—is rather abstract in nature (as it has to be, given his wish to cover symbolic expression and understanding across cultures, ages, and subjective dispositions). In this context, two aspects of Schleiermacher's theory of meaning must be singled out for further discussion: first, his insistence on the intersubjective dimension of meaning, and, second, his analysis of the distinction between primary and secondary thoughts.

First, Schleiermacher claims that understanding presupposes the interpreter's familiarity with the subject matter discussed in the text. In the context of reconceptualizing Schleiermacher's notion of individuality, this point is significant. In the hermeneutic process, the interpreter, taking into account the perspectives of technical and grammatical analysis, is not intentionally directed towards the feelings of another or the style of the text, but towards the issue, topic, problem, or subject matter addressed. As he aspires to clarify the conditions of possibility for validity in understanding (overlapping, in his view, with the conditions of possibility for understanding as such), Schleiermacher centers on the kind of interpretation that is directed towards thought, as it is given shape by and expressed through language. By definition, language is ascribed an intersubjective dimension. According to Schleiermacher, "Speech is the mediation of the communal nature of thought" (HC 7). Hermeneutics is thus made possible by a shared orientation towards a given idea or subject matter and seeks to bring this to the level of full, reflective awareness. As Schleiermacher elaborates, "Every act of understanding is the inversion of a speech-act, during which the thought which was the basis of the speech must become conscious" (HC 7). If understanding presupposes a shared orientation towards that which is understood, the reflective interpreter seeks to grasp how a given expression, being shaped by its time and culture, sheds light on a particular problem or subject matter. At stake is an orientation towards a mutual understanding of a given subject matter, problem, or issue as seen or experienced by another concrete, historical human being.

Second, Schleiermacher elaborates this point by introducing a distinction between primary and secondary thoughts (thoughts that are crucial and thoughts that are merely facilitating the exposition of the main arguments, ideas, or intuitions). This distinction is needed to help the interpreter hone in on central claims or ideas and bracket that which is peripheral. In his account, the distinction between primary and secondary thoughts sometimes requires a laborious and cognitively uncertain process of interpretation. Neither in relating to a text from a geographically or temporally distant culture, nor in relating to language use that is closer to the interpreter's own symbolic practice, does
there exist an absolutely certain way to determine whether or not the interpreter has arrived at the central thoughts of a given text. Whether a text is close to or distant from the horizon of the interpreter, there is always a risk that the interpreter hypostatizes thoughts that are peripheral to the concerns of the author (and possibly more congenial to the interpreter's horizon of interpretation), and, as a consequence, allows the interpretation to be colored by prejudices. By referring to historical context or other works by the same author, the interpreter can support his or her interpretation or point out how a given reading of a text misrepresents its meaning or is lacking in justification. A positive and concluding justification of a given account of the relationship between primary and secondary thoughts cannot, however, be provided. As such, these terms do not present a methodological device that guarantees the successful outcome of interpretation, but, again, only a heuristic guideline that grants direction to the process of understanding.  

Summing up the discussion so far, it is clear that Schleiermacher's hermeneutics does not represent a hypostatization of aesthetic individuality, but is built on the notion of language as historical and concretely used (this was the point made in section 1 above). Further, hermeneutic activity, in his work, is not geared towards feeling, intention, or psychology, but towards the thought-content of the utterance (as argued in section 2). Together, these points indicate how Schleiermacher's orientation towards individuality transcends the scope of a merely literary or broader stylistic analysis and that it, as such, can, in principle, contribute to a theory of Bildung.

5.3. CRITIQUE AND TRADITION

The purpose of my reinterpretation of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is not simply to avoid an aestheticizing reading of the romantic theory of interpretation, but also to enable a reading of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics that situates it within his larger turn to Bildung. In my view, it is unfortunate that Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is often read in isolation, and that, to the extent that it is discussed in the context of his broader philosophical engagement, it is usually his Dialectics that is brought in. Schleiermacher's work in dialectics is no doubt important. However, a one-sided emphasis on his dialectics may easily lead to a bias in favor of the epistemological aspects of hermeneutics and, as a consequence, an overlooking of the social and ethical motivation that drives his philosophy as a whole.

I have already mentioned that present readers of Schleiermacher only have access to a fragmented version of his hermeneutic lectures. In the existing editions of the text, Schleiermacher lays out the basic principles of hermeneutics, but he does not say much about why it matters so much that we understand other
human beings or the texts of the past. It is an open question whether or not such reflections—reflections on the relevance of hermeneutics—were ever included in the lectures. In the existing version of the lectures, Schleiermacher focuses more on the principles of hermeneutics (What does it mean to say that I understand a text or spoken language? What do I understand when I understand a text?) than the question of its relevance and motivation (Why is it worthwhile engaging in hermeneutic activity in the first place?). Thus, in order to address the relevance of hermeneutics, we need to move from Schleiermacher’s reflections on interpretation proper to the broader context of his work. Only in this way is it possible to see how Schleiermacher’s philosophy can help us overcome the notion of the opposing paradigms of Hegel and romantic thought. Two points prove central in this context: (a) Schleiermacher’s critique of tradition and (b) his understanding of the self and its interpreting relationship to others.

(a) In the secondary literature, little attention has been paid to Schleiermacher’s notion of tradition. One reason for this oversight might be that his reflection on tradition emerges out of his early theological writings, which, in turn, have often been isolated from his more technical hermeneutical work. Particularly important in this context is On Religion, a work in which Schleiermacher discusses the challenges of a tradition that no longer appears alive and worthy of real, intellectual engagement.20

Schleiermacher addresses his fellow philosophers’ denouncement of religion, that is, their self-proclaimed status as “cultured despisers” of religion (thus On Religion is significantly subtitled Speeches to its Cultural Despisers).21 With their knowledge of the tradition and its canonical texts, the cultured despisers believe that they are familiar with the Christian scriptures and, by implication, know exactly what they are rejecting when rejecting Christian faith and practice. Schleiermacher, by contrast, argues that the central texts of the Christian religion have been caught in a deadlock of interpretative stagnation. Generations of readers abide by the predominant doctrines of understanding. Generations of readers think they know what these texts are about. A consensus of interpretation is gradually brought about, the consensus hardens, and eventually it is virtually impossible to read the texts of tradition independently of the lens provided by the established paradigm. In this way, religion is subject to a barren uniformity (OR 108). We face dead letters (OR 108, see also OR 85 and 91), not a disclosure of philosophical, theological, or existential meaning. Interpretation is reduced to a scholastic quibbling, a hermeneutic lethargy that Schleiermacher deems the sign of a new barbarism (OR 151). Schleiermacher draws from this that what the despisers of religion really despise, though they themselves may not know it, is the passive mediation of older texts. The despisers of religion conflate the meaning that a dominant interpretative tradition has ascribed to a given text with the meaning of the text as such.
In *On Religion*, Schleiermacher stages a contrast between stifling textual exegesis and true religious feeling, which is expressed in the intuition of the universe as a whole. In the hermeneutics lectures, by contrast, he asks how the meaning of ancient texts, including the cornerstones of the Christian religion, can be resuscitated by hermeneutic work. The assumed presumption is, again, that the philosopher, theologian, or humanist starts out with a text or body of texts whose meaning has been handed down through generations and centuries of scholarship that, eventually, turns into prejudice and dead doctrines. Schleiermacher encourages us not to take for granted the traditional interpretation of these texts. We think we understand, but the challenge for the hermeneutician is critically and reflectively to ask whether his or her presumed understanding is adequate or merely prejudicial. On passively assuming familiarity with a given text or body of literature, the interpreter risks confirming and cementing misunderstanding rather than avoiding it. In Schleiermacher's view, this is why we need a critical and reflective hermeneutics; this is why we, for all its technical and scholastic distinctions, need a standard or checklist with reference to which we can assess and reflect on the validity of our interpretative endeavors.

(b) In the hermeneutics lectures, Schleiermacher draws attention to this point when he discusses the special cases of ancient scientific and ethical texts (which also exemplifies his point about primary and secondary thought). Given his background in classical Greek philosophy, Schleiermacher is concerned with the difficulties that potentially arise when the interpreter deals with texts from a scientific or ethical paradigm other than her own. As Schleiermacher puts it, "Revolution in the area of natural science and ethics have produced new systems and rejected old ones" (HC 65). As a consequence of this, the interpreter, when dealing with older texts, cannot appeal to the criteria or guidelines of contemporary science, ethics, or models of thought. Schleiermacher begs caution when moving between the paradigm or mindset of the present period and that of the text. He advises that in such an interpretative situation it is easy to mistake key thoughts and ideas (primary thoughts) for peripheral ones (secondary thoughts) and vice versa. Schleiermacher further counsels that it would be a mistake at this point to try "immediately to compare details in the new system with details in the preceding system" (HC 65), that is, to read old texts in light of or as providing answers to contemporary concerns and questions. The relationship between the whole and the parts, between primary and secondary thought, "is different in every whole" (HC 65). Through the circular movement between a hypothesis about the meaning of the text as a whole and a reading of the whole in light of its various parts, argumentative steps, and supporting material (from a larger textual corpus, to chapters, sections, and
down to the level of the single sentence, the smallest hermeneutic unit), the
interpreter must attempt to ferret out the intrinsic structure and organiza-
tion of the individual expression at stake. It is within this wider hermeneutic
context—that of facing a tradition we think we know, but which may prove
to be the results of prejudice and doctrine—that Schleiermacher’s concrete
guidelines for interpretation finds philosophical meaning.

In focusing on ancient scientific and ethical texts, Schleiermacher’s point is
not to argue that these texts constitute a special hermeneutic subgroup. The
particular cases of old scientific and ethical texts are expressive of a global
risk, namely that the interpreter allows her present-day views, her prejudices
or horizon of understanding, to skew her reading. Thus Schleiermacher’s
hermeneutics draws a distinction between, on the one hand, the tacit every-
day understanding that serves as a basis for the interpreter and his or her
prereflexed relation to tradition and, on the other, a critical understand-
ing that seeks systematically to question the legitimacy of existing patterns
of interpretation. The real hermeneutic problem typically occurs when the
interpreter is confident that he or she understands and thus fails to question
the limits of his or her preconceptions. The allure of prejudices is not only
that they thematically guide the interpreter’s reading of a given text, but also
that they have him or her look for confirmation of his or her own inter-
pretative hypothesis rather than critically reflecting on its validity. As finite
beings, we tend to reconstruct meaning in light of what appears plausible
from our own point of view, rather than questioning whether our own point
of view is adequate or hermeneutically helpful. An obvious example, taken
from Schleiermacher’s own time, is the way that Winckelmann, Hegel, and
a whole generation of German philosophers of art would follow their prede-
cessors in emphasizing the whiteness of ancient Greek sculpture, claim-
ing that the remaining traces of paint were the result of medieval vandalism
(thus barring the possibility that the marble had been painted from the very
beginning).

Facing this predicament, as it is baked into the dialectics of tradition itself,
Schleiermacher’s point is not that we should carry with us a whole arsenal of
hermeneutic doctrines in order to make sense of everyday utterances in our
own language. What he suggests, rather, is that the critical hermeneutician,
when striving to avoid misunderstanding, must anchor her interpretative
hypothesis in a reflected point of view, a point of view that can be discursively
accounted for and justified.24 In order to do so, the interpreter needs a theory,
a set of directions and guidelines by reference to which it is possible for him
or her to reflect on and critique his or her preconception of a given text, utter-
ance, or subject area. To provide such directions and guidelines is the mission
of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics.
5.4. SELFHOOD AND SOCIALITY

Why, then, does it matter that the interpreter reaches a more adequate understanding of the text, that he or she is able, critically and reflectively, to break through petrified patterns of understanding? Again this question must be answered with reference to Schleiermacher’s broader philosophical program. His notion of selfhood is particularly important in this context. For if we are to argue, as I wish to do in this article, that Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, with its critical turn to tradition, can serve to undermine the perceived dichotomy between romanticism and philosophy of Bildung, it needs to be shown that understanding, by his lights, is not simply a matter of getting an objectivized tradition “right,” but that the interpreter’s being situated in history and tradition interferes, at a much deeper level, with his or her self-understanding.

As far as his theological writings go, Schleiermacher’s philosophy of selfhood (and, ultimately, self-understanding) has been read in light of his notion of absolute dependency. Against the Fichtean turn to an I that, at a transcendent level, posits itself as absolutely self-positing, thus ensuring the noumenal freedom of subjectivity, Schleiermacher, in The Christian Faith (1830–31), argues that the I, though furnished with a capacity for freedom, is not responsible for or the author of its own being (as free). That is, the I must understand itself as both constituted and constituting, both dependent and free. The freedom of subjectivity is expressed through the structuring capacity of discursive reasoning. The feeling I, however, experiences itself as dependent on a nonsubjective world, a dimension of being that enables the exercise of spontaneity and the capacity to create the order and structure that experience presupposes.

However, Schleiermacher’s notion of absolute dependency and his idea of the linguistic mediation of thought is balanced by an account of how the self—finite and dependent—realizes itself in free interaction with other selves. There are traces of this kind of thinking in Schleiermacher’s Dialectics, in which the contemplation of another individual’s point of view is ascribed a fundamental epistemic importance. Yet this aspect of his theory is most clearly laid out in an earlier, unfinished text, Essay on a Theory of Social Behavior, from 1799 (that is, the same year as the publication of On Religion).

Articulating the dos and don’ts of a free social life, Schleiermacher’s Essay on a Theory of Social Behavior has been read as a philosophical defense of the romantic salon. Schleiermacher, indeed, was a regular in the Berlin salons at the time and was seen, even by his contemporaries, as the philosopher who had theorized its dynamic of free sociality. However, Schleiermacher’s text is not simply a historical documentation of the spirit of the salon, but also a complex
philosophical contribution to a debate initiated by another aspect of Fichte's philosophy, namely his theory of intersubjective recognition.  

The individual, for Schleiermacher, is determined as unique and representing an irreducible point of view, a particular realization of humanity. In Schleiermacher's own words: “As a finite being, every individual has his or her definitive sphere in which he or she alone can think and act and thus also impart him or herself” (ESB 160). Hence Schleiermacher calls for a sociality that is not based on abstract identification, but on a kind of community that allows individuals to encounter each other freely, a sociality that is not justified with reference to external, unifying aims but is a goal in itself (ESB 154, 157). Such a sociality is based on reciprocal contribution and respect for difference. It is based, in short, on individual diversity, on identity in difference and not in spite of it. This is a sociality that encourages a free play of feeling and thought in the individual, but also a free interaction among individuals (ESB 158–59). Showing off or underplaying one's own individuality threatens such sociality (ESB 158). Schleiermacher's idealized notion of enlightened sociality aims to create relationships based on mutual respect and acknowledgment. As a regulative ideal, as a goal towards which we ought to strive, such a sociality would involve nothing less than an ongoing education in humanity (ESB 154). As Schleiermacher puts it, all manifestations of humanity will become known, one after the other (ESB 154).

Now, if the manifestations of humanity, understood as the maximum of possible outlooks or viewpoints on the world, are gradually to be revealed, the capacity to understand—and the quest for self-critique and reflection on limiting prejudices—moves to the very center of philosophy. It is at one and the same time expressive of an epistemological commitment that has to do with a finite being's ability to expand its own horizon of understanding and knowledge, and an ethical commitment having to do with the fact that such understanding is based on a will to recognize the other as somebody whose perspective might be as valid as my own. Disagreement is only possible to the extent that the interlocutor is recognized as a rational agent and as defending a position worth taking seriously. Only through such recognition, ethical and epistemological, can the individual gain education in culture, that is, Bildung.

Understood in this way, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is not, as his critics as well as his defenders have often suggested, a theory of aesthetic individuality or style. It is, rather, a theory that reflects the finality of reason in the sense that each individual, in his or her epistemic endeavors and ethical orientations, is situated in a given historical culture. One way that the individual, as a finite historical being, can reflect on this culture and try to keep it alive and expanding, is by encountering symbolic expressions from temporally or culturally distant contexts of origins. But in facilitating such encounters, the interpreter needs, as
a regulative ideal or a practical-hermeneutic maxim, a normative set of guidelines in light of which he or she can reflect on and critique his or her prejudices so as to allow the other to speak as a possible other and thus as somebody who can, potentially, challenge the outlook or view of the interpreter him- or herself. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is an effort to discuss and take seriously the idea of such a critical-dialogical interaction.

5.5. CONCLUSION

Against the background of such a reading, the notion of a bifurcation of nineteenth-century thought into the clearly marked-off constellations of the romantics and Hegel will have to be questioned. As represented by Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, the romantic project does itself entail a notion of tradition and the individual's formation in and through engagement with the past. This, however, does not imply that Schleiermacher (or, for that sake, romanticism more broadly) and Hegel represent the same view. What it does imply, though, is that rather than pitching Hegel's relation to the romantics in light of a contrast between aesthetic individuality and Bildung, we should take these models to represent two different responses to one and the same problem: the interrelation between selfhood and historicity, criticism and prejudice in tradition, that is captured in the nineteenth-century turn to Bildung in the first place. When viewed in this light, the contrast between the romantics and Hegel is not a matter of being for or against Bildung, historicity, or a notion of the self as intersubjectively mediated. From Schleiermacher's point of view, such a contrast would make no sense: as a meaning-producing agent, the self is always already situated within a context of tradition—that is, a shared space of action and meaning. Hence the problem—ethically as well as epistemologically speaking—is how to keep tradition, as a space of understanding, open, dynamic, and achieving a balanced relationship between preservation and criticism. Understood in this way, Hegel and Schleiermacher present two different ways of thinking about Bildung: on the one hand, an emphasis on the continuity and intrinsic rationality of tradition (as a space of possible meaning), on the other, a stressing of the constitutive importance of a plurality of different historical and individual perspectives that constantly transcend and challenge the synthesis of tradition.

As such, Schleiermacher's understanding of Bildung deserves to be revisited. His is a theory that seeks to unify a notion of Bildung with a hermeneutic model that is committed to the diversity of individual outlooks. Further, it is Schleiermacher's achievement to show that the commitment to a reflective standard or method in interpretation is not opposed to a turn to Bildung, but, rather, a condition of possibility for it. Only when the interpreter critically and
reflectively evaluates his or her own prejudices, only when a given historical expression is situated within its own horizon of meaning, can it challenge, and possibly also expand, the horizon of the interpreter. Finally, Schleiermacher does not take as his point of departure the notion of a unifying and totalizing tradition. For Schleiermacher, tradition is a condition of possibility for understanding. However, tradition is also a field in which prejudices and systematically distorted beliefs can be bolstered and handed down. For him, hermeneutics is committed to a consideration of individual points of view, an acknowledgment of the diversity of standpoints and the need for a gradually expanding understanding of the world. This is in my view where Schleiermacher’s philosophy should be located—in the very intersection between nineteenth-century philosophy of Bildung and interpretation theory more broadly conceived.

NOTES
2. This is an aspect of Schleiermacher’s philosophy that is left out in Manfred Frank’s study. While Frank gets beyond Szondi’s efforts to read Schleiermacher as a modernist philosopher avant la lettre, his chief motivation is to show that Schleiermacher’s work anticipates insights later to be associated with what he terms existential-ontological and semological-structuralistic approaches to literature. See Peter Szondi, “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics Today,” On Textual Understanding and Other Essays, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 97. For Frank’s reading, see Das individuelle Allgemeine. Textstrukturierung und Textinterpretation nach Schleiermacher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 13 and 23.
6. It should be added that Schleiermacher’s claim that he is the first to articulate a universal hermeneutics is exaggerated and betrays either a lack of knowledge of the hermeneutic tradition or a wish to stand forth as original in this respect. For a discussion of this point, see Werner Alexander, *Hermeneutica Generalis. Zur Konzeption und Entwicklung der allgemeinen Verstehenslehre im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: M&P, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1993), 3–5.


10. Thus Schleiermacher even sees language, as originating in speech-acts, as “an individual in relation to others” (HC 10).

11. Thus Schleiermacher also contrasts divination to a historical method (HC 23).


13. As Schleiermacher puts it, “nobody can be satisfied with simple non-understanding” (HC 29).

14. Whereas Gadamer views interpretation and application as two sides of the same coin, Schleiermacher insists that the hermeneutician may encounter texts that can be understood (i.e., they can be seen as coherent, meaningful, and a rational response to a given problem), yet their meaning cannot be applied (if, say, the problem to which the text responds is no longer recognized as relevant). Further, he keeps open the possibility that a text, in its approach to a given subject matter, problem, or issue, can put into perspective, possibly also question, the way in which a problem or issue is typically addressed within the culture of the interpreter. Again this requires, for Schleiermacher, a distinction between interpretation (addressing the meaning of the text) and application (addressing the question how it can help the interpreter better understand a given subject matter).

15. Yet “style” in his work is defined as “individuality of presentation” (HC 95), thus implying that something is presented in the first place.

16. Thought, however, is not reduced to propositional content, but includes the free play of poetry (HC 64).

17. This mirrors the limits of grammatical and technical interpretation. As Schleiermacher puts it, both grammatical and technical interpretation “can only be reached by approximation” (HC 96).

18. This is particularly clear in the work of Manfred Frank. Not only does Frank draw on Schleiermacher’s dialectics in *Das individuelle Allgemeine*, but he also published a version of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics that is supported with excerpts from the dialectic lectures as well as his late ethics. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

19. Schleiermacher makes this point himself when he argues for "The dependence of both [hermeneutics and rhetoric] on dialectics" (HC 7).

20. As already Dilthey makes clear, this is in line with the broader orientation of Lutheran theology.


22. Indeed, in Schleiermacher's judgment, this puts hermeneutics on a par with philosophy: "If you put yourself on the highest standpoint of metaphysics and morals, you will find that both have the same object as religion, namely, the universe and the relationship of humanity to it" (OR 97).

23. Thus, in the hermeneutics lectures, no other text gets more attention than the Bible and the question as to how the Bible can and should best be understood. These discussions are ample; for an example, see HC 15–20.

24. Gadamer is in other words wrong in viewing Schleiermacher's hermeneutics as a universalization of misunderstanding (*Truth and Method*, 179–80, 184–85, 190–91). Schleiermacher does not claim that misunderstanding, de facto, is universal, but that no utterance, in principle, is safe from misunderstanding. Hence critical hermeneutics must approach all utterances in the same, reflected way. As he puts it, "The business of hermeneutics should not only begin where understanding is uncertain, but with the first beginning of the enterprise of wanting to understand an utterance" (HC 228).

25. See for example Frank's reading in *Das individuelle Allgemeine*, 91–94.


30. At this point, Schleiermacher goes beyond Schiller, whose 1795 letters on aesthetic education address the free play between the different aspects of humanity, but not the interplay between different individuals.
31. My focus on Schleiermacher should not be taken to indicate that he is the only romantic philosopher contributing to the area of hermeneutics. For a study of romantic hermeneutics more broadly speaking, see Reinhold Rieger, *Interpretation und Wissen. Zur philosophischen Begründung der Hermeneutik bei Friedrich Schleiermacher und ihrem geschichtlichen Hintergrund*, Schleiermacher-Archiv, vol. 6 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).