



Incomprehensibility and Intersubjective Disambiguation: A Pragmatist Approach to Friedrich Schlegel

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Resumo:

O problema da incompreensibilidade em Friedrich Schlegel pode ser abordado de uma perspectiva pragmatista considerando também a crítica negativa de W. Benjamin ao Absoluto reflexivo do idealismo objetivo. Ao abordar a autoreflexividade pelo ponto de vista da intersubjetividade prática, o misticismo schlegeliano é desambiguado e desencantado. No entanto, sua proposta de unir filosofia e poesia pode receber um novo e viável sentido enquanto busca por analogias que facilitem a comunicação interdisciplinar.

Palavras-chave: Incompreensibilidade, Interdisciplinaridade, Friedrich Schlegel.

Abstract:

Friedrich Schlegel's problem of incomprehensibility can be approached from a Pragmatist perspective by way of Walter Benjamin's negative critique of the objective idealist reflexive Absolute. By approaching self-reflexivity from the standpoint of practical intersubjectivity, Schlegel's mysticism is disambiguated and disenchanting. However, his proposal to join philosophy and poetry can be given a new and viable meaning as a search for analogies that facilitate interdisciplinary communication.

Key words: Incomprehensibility, Interdisciplinarity, Friedrich Schlegel.

Introduction

282. When man can't progress any further, he resorts to some dictatorial command or despotic act or rash decision. Novalis, *Athenaeum*.

Much in the same way as the Enlightenment can still be considered an unfinished project, its opposing camp remains as strong and alive as ever, drawing inspiration from several sources, both modern and pre-modern. In this paper I would like to focus on the question of Early German Romantic incomprehensibility, its relation to rational intersubjective disambiguation, and consider the potential utility analogies may have to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue.

It is important to clarify first off that by 'disambiguation' I mean not only empirical testing of statements (verification or falsification) but also the assessment of a concept's utility as a classificatory procedure (Ros 1989 and Ros 2005). When employed as a logical weapon, intersubjective disambiguation has a powerful disenchanting effect upon traditional and Romantic world views. This negative use of intersubjective disambiguation has therefore a nihilistic effect frequently associated with the Enlightenment, particularly in its skeptical form. A positive use of intersubjective disambiguation is, however, also possible, and proceeds by presenting proposals to be developed in testable gradual steps. This avoids the danger of grandiose utopias that require drastic change that can only be made real by killing thousands or even millions of supposedly unenlightened victims.

As modernity advances further, philosophy becomes less and less capable of providing a system of knowledge, forcing upon us the realization that fragmentation is unavoidable. The Jena Romantics, in particular Friedrich Schlegel, struggled with this issue from a literary perspective while appropriating Kant's and Fichte's idealist philosophies. The issue of incomprehensibility arises out Schlegel's attempt to deal with cognitive and linguistic procedures such as reflection, irony, antinomies, infinity and contradiction, making it very difficult to present in a completely satisfactory way. Most of his fundamental assumptions have become by now highly implausible and confusing, such as the concept of an Absolute that thinks itself to infinity. While one might sincerely want to engage with such concepts to understand them better, the risk of running into great perplexity should not be underestimated.

I shall therefore limit myself in this paper to four basic issues Schlegel raises: (a) how is communication possible?; (b) can literature be used experimentally to probe the limits of

communicability?; (c) how can incomprehensibility be methodically prevented?; and (d) how can philosophy and poetry be united? In section 1, I shall show how these issues arise for Schlegel. In section 2, I will rely on Walter Benjamin's critique of Jena Romanticism to clarify why Schlegel has such a problem with issue (a) that it remains ultimately unsolvable within the framework of objective idealism. I also try to address issue (c) in that I suggest that a Pragmatist approach centered on interpersonal interaction (G. H. Mead, Hans Joas, Arno Ros) would make needed disambiguation possible even though this may be experienced as disenchantment. In section 3, I take note of Nicholas Gaskill's Pragmatist critical (but not entirely negative) response to issue (b). In my concluding remarks I suggest that the answer to (d) might be the exploration of interdisciplinary analogies established between the fragments of our scientific knowledge and general cultural experience.

1 Schlegel: Incomprehensibility and the Fusion of Philosophy and Literature

Friedrich Schlegel begins his essay "On Incomprehensibility" by raising the fundamental issue of how communication is at all possible.

Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible? And where could one find a better opportunity for carrying out a variety of experiments to test this possibility or impossibility than in either writing a journal like the *Athenaeum* oneself or else taking part in it as a reader? (SCHLEGEL, 1971, p.259).

The importance of this passage can hardly be overestimated, as it raises four crucial questions: (a) if ideas are private mental representations, how could their content be transmitted to other minds at all, except by some kind of telepathy?, and (b) how can literature, understood as creative writing that mobilizes imagination (*Phantasie*) in the author and in the reader, be used to experimentally probe the limits of mutual understanding?

A third point emerges in the passage that follows the above quote, in which Schlegel reveals his actually negative attitude towards incomprehensibility and explains how he intends to overcome it in the reader.

Now, it is a peculiarity of mine that I absolutely detest incomprehension, not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending. For this reason, I made a resolution quite some time ago to have a talk about this matter with my reader, and then create before his eyes — in spite of him as it were — another new reader to my own liking: yes, even to deduce him if need be. (SCHLEGEL, 1971, p.260).

This should make clear that, unless Schlegel is being ironic in the classical Socratic sense of not meaning what he says, incomprehensibility is something to be left behind by deductively constructing a new model of a reader. This project itself requires a radical reconsideration of fundamental philosophical concepts proposed by Kant and Fichte. This raises our question (c): how can this approach to avoid incomprehensibility be systematically constructed and applied?

Although there is such a wealth of insights into what philosophy should become throughout his writings, perhaps the most relevant today, in our post- or late modern age, is the following aphorism from *Ideas*:

108. Whatever can be done while poetry and philosophy are separated has been done and accomplished. So the time has come to unite the two. (SCHLEGEL, 1971, p.251).

This provides us with our final question (d): is the fusion of philosophy and poetry possible and desirable?

2 Benjamin: Criticism as Intersubjective Completion of the Artwork

Although Walter Benjamin's discussion of Jena Romanticism is widely recognized as being very influential, one should not overestimate his agreement with Schlegel or Novalis. As Rodolphe Gasché notes,

At times, Benjamin shows little sympathy, or even hostility toward the Romantics' insights. As we shall see, he accuses the Romantics of obscurity, of failing to clearly differentiate between their concepts, of having become embroiled in unresolvable contradictions, of having developed a metaphysics of limited interest, and finally, and not least, of having committed the philosophically unforgivable crime of confusing and mixing levels of thought - a *metabasis allo eis genos*. (GASCHÉ, 2002, p.52).

And indeed, much of this is justified. In addition, if we take this negative side of Benjamin's assessment of Jena Romanticism as a point of departure and then explore the intersubjective dimension of criticism (*Kritik*) as the completion (*Vollendung*) of the work of art, it becomes possible to discern a way out of Schlegel's incomprehensibility that leads in interesting ways to John Dewey's transactive aesthetics. Unfortunately, however, in a misguided attempt to avoid subjectivism and relativism, Benjamin's theorizing remains to a considerable degree dependent upon theological and metaphysical assumptions drawn from Counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as J. G. Hamann.

As is well known, Benjamin's early critique of Kant seeks to develop a concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) that could overcome the limitations of mere *Erlebnis*, a lived-through but spiritless kind of experience, unconnected to the dreams of our youth. In his view, Kant remained captive to a naive empiricist concept of experience¹ that followed a mathematical-mechanical orientation, and Hamann's theological conception of language would be its necessary corrective. However, Benjamin also refuses to acknowledge Kant's claim to subjective universality for pure aesthetic judgment. Instead of Kantian contemplative disinterestedness, Benjamin prefers an objective idealist approach that attributes truth value to artworks. As Eberhard Ortland aptly sums it up,

Already in his dissertation on « The Concept of Criticism in the German Romantic Movement » (1919) Benjamin rejects the Kantian notion of the purely aesthetic judgement of taste as «subjectively reflecting behaviour». The motive for this opposition (which has striking parallels in Heidegger and Gadamer) lies in a certain appropriation of the Romantic, in a special sense «objectively idealistic», concept of reflection which is understood as the achieved «form of representation of the work» itself. Along with the Romantics, Benjamin insists on the claim that works of art contain some truth of their own and that the only appropriate way of dealing with them would be to enforce that truth. For Benjamin and the Romantics, a work of art is a cognitive medium; there is something to be known, something to be learned from it about historical reality -- hence the task of understanding it as well as the history of its reception. The expression of private feelings of pleasure or disapproval has nothing to do with the essential core attributed to the eminent work of art in the Romantic tradition. (ORTLAND, 1998, p.1)

This objective-idealist, cognitivist, and representationalist rejection of aesthetic experience (because of its irreducibly subjective character) is understandable but it distorts

¹ It is interesting to note that G. H. Mead also saw an empiricist influence in Kant's concept of inclination (JOAS, 1989, p. 123).

our relation to artworks as it is not capable either of anything but a dogmatic foundation. It is at precisely this point that J. Dewey and G. H. Mead offer a more viable concept of experience in general as an interpersonal transaction that prevents aesthetics from becoming an isolated sphere of Neo-Platonic mysticism. If we want to build a logical bridge between Benjamin and the Pragmatists it is important to reconstruct the Romantic concept of criticism as a completion of the artwork on a more proper foundation provided by what Hans Joas (1989, p. 19) calls practical intersubjectivity.² This is a crucial step to avoid Schlegel's doubts about communicability of aesthetic ideas because it treats communication not as form of mental data transmission but as a behavioral interaction centered on obtaining and directing our interlocutor's attention to ourselves.

The great difficulty we encounter in this reconstruction is the paradigm shift from the Jena Romantics' idealist reflexive Absolute to an interpersonal behavior-based approach. Benjamin's explicit misgivings can be used, however, as a useful starting point towards practical intersubjectivity.

Romantic criticism, Benjamin explains, is very much a matter of revealing the occult in the work and allowing it, as it were, to achieve its own ends, including its self-reflection aimed towards infinity. Whereas Enlightenment criticism on the one hand privileged rules and form grounded on dogmatic rationalism and Storm and Stress on the other hand could not go beyond the mere affirmation of brute expressive force, Romantic criticism revealed the objective value of the artwork in its immanent rules and self-unfolding structure. Instead of regarding criticism as the judgment of an artwork according to external standards of taste, Romantics conceptualized criticism as a reflective completion of the artwork by means of an immanent dynamic.

... criticism is not meant to do anything other than discover the secret plans of the work itself, [i.e.] execute its concealed intentions. It belongs to the meaning of the work itself, i.e. it is in its reflected form that the criticism should go beyond the work itself, make it absolute. It is clear: for the Romantics criticism is much less the judgement of a work than the method of its completion. (BENJAMIN, 1974, v.1, p. 69)

² Joas understands intersubjectivity as a theoretical concept of communication among subjects that avoids the false dilemma between individualistic action theory and actionless and subjectless structural theory. As a political concept, it proposes a model of social order that overcomes atomization by means of argued, dialogal participation instead of submission to collectivist demands. Intersubjectivity is practical as opposed to being merely contemplative or symbolic in so far as it emphasizes embodied action.

How is this supposed to work? We may begin by recalling the basic distinction between sensation (for ex., feeling cold, without a definite object), perception (for ex., seeing an artwork) and reflection (for ex., trying to think about thought). The Romantics follow Fichte in considering the "thinking of thinking" the highest form of cognition, in that it is "immediate" (i.e., not mediated by linguistic behavior, for ex.) and "intuitive" (i.e., not conceptually defined in a clear way). Fichte starts from an individualist, not intersubjective, model of the mind and reality in which self-consciousness (the "I") generates ("posits") itself without limits ("absolutely"). This free act of self-generation (*Tathandlung*) is a precondition for us to understand ourselves and can only happen in so far as we are aware of ourselves as subjects but also as objects. By reflecting on its own representational contents, self-consciousness comes to realize the need for basic distinctions such as that between the I and the not-I and thus "deduces" them. While the Fichtean model is problematic enough as a starting point for any kind of theory whatsoever, the Romantics radicalized the mechanism of reflection to what Benjamin calls third-level reflection (*Ur-Reflection*), i.e., thinking of thinking of thinking, which, being boundless, allows them to speculate about an infinity that is not empty, but filled and substantial, and which dissolves reflection, now a kind of ambiguous and formless metathought, in face of the Absolute. This naturally leads to Schlegel's incomprehensibility problem.

From the point of view of practical intersubjectivity, persons develop their sense of self by interacting with others. Fichte's *Tathandlung*, in so far as it is an act, might seem at first glance interesting, but upon further consideration can only be understood as a serious illusion concerning our capacity to be conscious about ourselves. Idealism, in its usual sense as a belief in the mind-dependence of reality, can be responded to in a variety of ways, but one has to be able to bring the believer to realize that at least in so far as matter is concerned, for persons trying to interact effectively in the world by means of useful classificatory procedures (concepts) it will lead to several practical difficulties. Dr. Samuel Johnson's notorious "refutation" of Berkeley by kicking a nearby stone is very much in the spirit of Pragmatism, and it would be easy to imagine situations in which holding idealist beliefs, perhaps of a religious kind concerning favorable divine spiritual intervention, could have survival value for the individual and maximize the replication of his or her genes in the next generation. However this may be, practical intersubjectivity remains open to the

different ways groups may want to conceptualize their relation to reality in response to their everyday needs.

We just saw how the Romantics maintained that reflection could generate the Absolute. This Absolute, a product of our mental activity, supposedly cognizes itself in unmediated reflection. As Benjamin puts it, "Reflection constitutes the Absolute and it constitutes it as a medium." (BENJAMIN, 1974, v.1, p. 37). This means that the Absolute is made of reflection but also becomes the vehicle of ever increasing formlessness and ambiguity. Benjamin understandably realizes that this Romantic proposal of a self-knowing Absolute required an untenable claim that forms from lower levels of reflection somehow belonged to the Absolute itself at the highest level. He therefore draws the conclusion that Schlegel "did not investigate the Absolute systematically, but instead sought to grasp the system absolutely. This was the essence of his mysticism." (BENJAMIN, 1974, v.1, p. 45). This means that instead of trying to methodically develop classificatory procedures (concepts) that could be intersubjectively disambiguated, Schlegel resorted to a purportedly direct mystical access to a system that could also be treated as an individual, further complicating the relation between intuition and language.

Benjamin's negative assessment of Jena Romantics' speculations about the Absolute is both more detailed and more extensive than I could ever hope to cover here. It is a pity, however, that while probing so deeply into the difficulties of their type of objective idealism, Benjamin could not succeed in breaking the grip of this mentally generated Absolute and direct it towards the intersubjective model that G. H. Mead would develop based on behavioral interpretation. As Gaskill (2008, p. 169) notes, Pragmatists such as "Dewey and Peirce never worry that literary analysis might expose our conscious lives as hopelessly trapped in linguistic signs." Regrettably, Benjamin's theological concept of language undermines the power of the speaker may have over words and meanings. As Bettine Menke and Jeanne Marie Gagnebin (1994, p. 25f.) show, Benjamin believes that humans are linguistic beings, but it is only when speakers abandon the illusion of having command over what is actually a divine gift (i.e., language) that they can speak and find meaning, even though this meaning remains indefinite and not transcendent in a conventional religious sense.

3 Gaskill: Pragmatist Literary Criticism

Nicholas Gaskill (2008) has recently undertaken the task of establishing literary criticism on Pragmatist assumptions, notwithstanding Richard Rorty's skepticism in this regard. As Gaskill sees it, contemporary criticism is too concerned with textual meaning, while it would benefit from a reconsideration of how texts themselves are related to processes, actions and experience. We would then try to understand literary meaning as a causal effect generated by literary texts themselves.

This essay seeks to put theories of meaning and representation in literary criticism on the stretching bar by reorienting them towards pragmatist conceptions of process, action, and experience. In particular, it asks "What does a text do?" rather than "What does a text mean?" and then traces the difference that this difference makes. (GASKILL, 2008, p.165).

Gaskill's project tries to combine C. S. Peirce's semiotics and J. Dewey's aesthetics by relying on their respective concepts of Firstness and quality. To avoid excessive complication I will limit my discussion here to his interesting comments on Dewey and G. H. Mead because they are relevant to the issues we have seen in Schlegel and Benjamin.

Dewey's situational concept of quality plays a central role in Gaskill's exposition, as it explains how art affects and enriches our experience, and is also related our continual meaningful adjustment to a changing world. Dewey's qualities (red, sweet, etc.) do not belong to an object, but are part of a situation. Their directness (or Firstness) transforms them into a kind of impersonal experience, binding their elements, granting them cognitive priority to logic and providing them a goal. In this way, Dewey's radical empiricism follows W. James' suggestion that abstract relations could be had immediately in experience as something real and constitutive, thus fusing sensation and language, the intellectual and the corporeal. As Gaskill puts it,

Pragmatist aesthetics supplements and nourishes logical inquiry by investigating the world of qualitative Firstness that antecedes and influences discourse. (GASKILL, 2008, p.169).

Aesthetic experience is not cordoned off from daily life but is dynamically integrated into it. Artistic meaning is to be found as a process, by engaging with the dynamics of a situation generated by the artwork, not in isolated texts, readers, structures, language and so on.

Pragmatism is all process. It recognizes change and variation as rules rather than exceptions, and it counts a creative capacity for novel adaptation among the characteristic features of experience. Experience grows, and as it does so it holds a relation to its own unfolding, its own capacity to become something other than it is. Call this the relation to the possible. Discrete elements of a situation exist as virtual possibilities that might be actualized, though within experience they are indistinguishable. Experience is not subjective, though it does have possible subjects in it. Dewey needs this account of "pure" experience for his philosophy of effective human action; his empiricism, like James's, must be radical. For our efforts to make a difference, the world must be in process and the future must not be settled. A transactional notion of experience thus prepares the way for a concrete program of action. For his theory of art, this means that aesthetic experiences create new, unprecedented modes of experience and manners of living in relation to the qualities, contexts, and readers involved. (GASKILL, 2008, p.167).

At this point we seem to have come full circle from the earlier extreme of the Jena Romantics' objective idealism to James' and Dewey's radical empiricism. Both attempt to avoid subjectivism. Benjamin and Dewey are equally concerned with the concept of experience and reject art for art's sake. Benjamin is trying to understand the loss of richer *Erfahrung* and account for its reduction to mere *Erlebnis*. Dewey is trying to develop an impersonal concept of experience that contains minds. However, it is really G. H. Mead who breaks through the foundational aporias of both objective idealism and radical empiricism by placing intersubjectivity as the starting point for the constitution of the self. Gaskill is not sufficiently critical of Dewey's radical empiricism but is aware of Mead's importance.

Mead explores the social implications of art's impact on our modes of relating. (...) Mead makes the experience of social relations the very fabric of aesthetic experience, and, in so doing, he emphasizes the ways in which art affects our experiences of relations with others. He praises novels for their ability to foster "enlarged thinking" through which we imagine ourselves connected to wider networks of people and thus become able to consider those people's feelings and ideas in the reconstruction of social praxis. Yet we should not infer from Mead's emphasis on "identification" that he thinks of the world as consisting of static perspectives that we are increasingly recognizing on the way to complete understanding. Pragmatism's emphasis on novelty and emergence check such conclusions. Instead, we should think of artworks as providing occasions for an individual to enter into a dynamic aggregate of self, world, culture, and object that issues in a new experience and mutual alteration. These new configurations of experience, once emerged, enter into the reconstructive social process as elements of real relations that determine behavior. (GASKILL, 2008, p.173-4).

The realization of the logical priority of intersubjective behavior to the constitution of the self is Mead's great contribution to overcome the strangeness of Dewey's radical empiricism. There is no clear methodical way for an external observer to differentiate between Firstness, quality and other kinds of experience, rendering them non-operational classificatory procedures (concepts). The radical empiricist's denial of the subjectivity of experience violates the standard use of the term 'experience' and the concept of a supra-personal experience is nonsensical, as there can be no experience beyond or outside a subject. Without Mead, and one might add, the latter Wittgenstein, the crucial paradigm shift towards practical intersubjectivity would not have been possible.

Schlegel's problem of incomprehensibility would usually seem to fall within the scope of textual interpretation. As we have seen above, however, Gaskill suggests that Pragmatist criticism ought to concern itself not so much with what texts mean but rather with what they "do", i.e. their effect upon readers. I do not take this to mean that Gaskill is treating texts as if they were autonomous entities or agents. One thing that a text might do is, for example, to generate doubt or confusion. This is what Schlegel's *Athenaeum* was accused of doing. Meaning, however, encompasses more than mere effect. J. L. Austin's performatives may have a perlocutionary effect but their meaning will certainly include not only the context but also the conventions of linguistic usage. By stressing the need to focus on effect we may run the risk of imposing a reductionist approach to literature.

Another difficulty is that Gaskill has very definite ideas about what literary language can and cannot do. This is rather strange, as there seems little if any *a priori* basis to determine the limits of literary effects. Let us take an example of one thing that literature does do according to Gaskill.

Literature's fictive elements solicit and demand the imagination's participation in ways that engage qualities not actually existing in the world and instantiates them within and through the aesthetic experience. As such, literary language is neither true nor false; it is creative and the configurations that it offers are novel, undetermined, and forceful because of this relation to Firstness as quality and possibility. (GASKILL, 2008, p.170).

From the point of view of an external observer who needs sharable criteria to know whether classificatory procedures (concepts) can be applied or not, Gaskill's description of

how imagination functions and operates with non-existing qualities does not seem free from a certain undecidability. How can we know this is indeed going on? Moreover, what is our standard for novelty? This has serious implications for the issue of supposed creativity.

Let us now take a look at what Gaskill says literature cannot do. Contrary to what most would consider common sense, he denies that it can help us identify with others.

Literature does not help us to “identify” with others; it helps us to experience nonpreexisting relations and to form new habits of relating that alter the possible configurations of self and community that inform social practice. (GASKILL, 2008, p.174).

In so far as a narrative, say, constructs a character that we relate to intensely, it will generate a powerful effect (interest) upon the reader. It is not clear what Gaskill gains by insisting upon his corrective redescription of what reader-character identification is. Neither is it clear why this effect should be excluded from the purview of Pragmatist literary criticism.

Gaskill applies similar restrictions to the attempt to use literature as a thought experiment. This is particularly relevant to Schlegel's issue (b) concerning the attempt to use the *Athenaeum* as a laboratory to test the limits of mutual comprehension.

Literature does not present possibilities given in a situation so that they might be assessed in a “thought experiment”; rather, it creates possibilities that might be carried into new situations. Its distinctive sign-structure enables it to reconfigure “habits of feeling” and social relations, and its effects reverberate through the individual vital body to the social process of community reconstruction. (GASKILL, 2008, p.174).

Gaskill's point seems to be that literature does indeed present possibilities, but the purpose of this presentation of possibilities is not theoretical or intellectual. Instead of this, these possibilities anticipate new behavioral patterns and social relations. Again, although all of this is fine, why disallow intellectualist uses of literary texts? Was not Kant engrossed by Rousseau's *Emile*? Why should not Schlegel try to use the *Athenaeum* as he intended it? This restriction does not seem consistent with, or necessary to, Pragmatist criticism.

A Pragmatist approach to criticism is a refreshing idea that deserves to be pursued, but without such restrictions to definite effects on the world.

Concluding Remarks: The Poetry of Interdisciplinary Analogies

It is hard to understand how Schlegel's stated dislike for incomprehensibility can be squared with preserving the interest that suggestive ambiguity may generate for the reader. Was he being disingenuous or sincere? If incomprehensibility is to be done away with, then intersubjective disambiguation can accomplish this and prioritize the literal sense of any type of linguistic practice. However, this is bound to render discourse prosaic and disenchanting.

Edgar Landgraf agrees that "The problem of incomprehensibility asserts itself most clearly in the Romantic reflections on the absolute. " (LANDGRAF, 2006. p. 594). He distinguishes between a representational and a pragmatic point of view concerning incomprehensibility. According to the former view, incomprehensibility itself cannot be comprehensible because meaning is conceived as a result of a supposed adequacy between mind and object and comprehension would be a successful conveyance to another speaker of one's mental states (thoughts, intentions, feelings). This generates a paradox, because if incomprehensibility refers to something by definition incomprehensible, then it must remain so and not be understandable. Any purported comprehension of incomprehensibility would then have to be a misunderstanding. And it gets worse.

Following this representational point of view, one might go one step further and argue that without the ability to comprehend incomprehensibility, we have no grounds to claim with any certainty that we comprehend anything; for we are unable to decide if what we thought we comprehended is perhaps not incomprehensible after all. And yet, if nothing is comprehensible with (representational) certainty, then this claim cannot be certain either. Which, in turn, might lead us back to the first point of view, claiming that everything is comprehensible—at the very least as incomprehensible. (LANDGRAF, 2006, p. 593-4).

In other words, the representationalist view ultimately leads to a general semantic skepticism that flies in the face of our daily communicative interactions, which are both pervaded by comprehension and misunderstanding, and yet life goes on as usual.

One might note that Benjamin's position is to a great degree still representationalist and metaphysical. He concentrates on experience but has yet to show how it is communicable. He does not seem to face this challenge adequately as G. H. Mead or the latter Wittgenstein did. Landgraf's thesis is that Novalis' *Monolog* and Schlegel's *On*

Incomprehensibility try to move away from the representationalist to the pragmatist view. Both Novalis and Schlegel use linguistic self-application to explore reflexivity, leading to the latter's irony of irony, where irony itself is understood as a communicative situation which is both comprehensible *and* incomprehensible. Irony can turn against the author, however, as Schlegel realizes, forcing him to set limits to what should be understood as ironic and where it ends (cf. ALBERT, 1993, p. 836). In such a situation, the author loses control over "his" or "her" text.

As Landgraf notes, a pragmatist approach can provide intersubjective disambiguation and make comprehending incomprehensibility unproblematic. But it can also avoid, as Dewey does, metaphysical assumptions behind the separation of artistic (auratic) and daily experience. Criticism can be construed as an intersubjective completion of the artwork.

As Márcio Suzuki (1998, p. 183) reminds us, Schlegel's concept of criticism emerges from the realization that philosophy and poetry cannot understand themselves in isolation, but need to interact with each other to achieve reflexive self-understanding. By fusing together into religion, they generate life and criticism, so that the critic understands the writer better than she does herself. This amounts to a holistic solution to the problem of incomprehensibility because it regards it as a result of cultural fragmentation. Formation (*Bildung*) requires that philosophy and philology enlighten each other dialogically.

Can Schlegel's problem of incomprehensibility be overcome today by means of a synthesis between poetry and philosophy? Perhaps not as he imagined, for it has become hard to make any sense of the self-reflecting Absolute. But a Pragmatist reconstruction points towards an understanding of meaning as embodied action that makes intersubjective disambiguation possible. So if Schlegel was sincere about overcoming incomprehensibility and would accept to dismantle ironic contradictions, disambiguation solves the problem, at least in principle.

Progress, however, may come to a dead end and, as Novalis realized, risks may then need to be taken. If philosophical argument can only go so far, then perhaps poetical analogies that facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue may be the way out. Scientists in different areas may encounter great difficulty in communicating their ideas and insights to one another due to lack of familiarity with other subjects and due to the limited command they have beyond the most basic concepts of other areas. This is where the use of analogies can be critical to overcome fragmentation. In teaching students whose usual concerns and

experiences are only remotely related to science or art, evidence supports the idea that efforts to establish effective comparisons can be decisive to maintain interest on their part, provided that they are carefully formulated (GLYNN, 2008). Perhaps such pedagogical and heuristic uses of analogies in science are the last refuge left for poetry in the modern world.

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