

# Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798)

## Abstract

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The *Athenaeum Fragments* first appeared in June 1798 in *Athenaeum*, the literary journal published by the Schlegel brothers. Originally, there were 451 aphorisms written by different authors, including A. W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Novalis. 320 aphorisms were written by Friedrich Schlegel. The aphorisms by Friedrich Schlegel selected here are all dealing with social, political and cultural themes. The *Fragments* are in part a manifesto for sexual equality, the emancipation of the senses, and the sovereign rights of the individual to lead his or her life as he or she wants, regardless of social conventions and antiquated laws. But its social radicalism is balanced by a growing political conservatism. In recognizing the need for elite rule (no. 214), in permitting some degree of arbitrary power in the state (no. 385), and in characterizing the Revolution as a grotesque and tragi-comedy (no. 424), Schlegel tempers and qualifies the more radical standpoint of his *Essay on Republicanism*.

## Source

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5 What is called good society is usually only a mosaic of polished caricatures.

15 Suicide is usually only an event, not an action. If it is the former, the perpetrator is always wrong; it is like a child trying to free itself. But if it is an action, then there can be no question of right and wrong, but only one of decorum. For matters of decorum are subject to only the will. The will should determine everything that is not laid down precisely by the pure law, such as the here and now; and it may determine everything that does not destroy the free will of others and that of oneself. It is not wrong to die voluntarily; but it is often indecent to live longer.

27 Most people are, like Leibniz's possible worlds, only equally justified pretenders to existence. There are few who actually exist.

31 Prudery is the pretension to innocence without innocence. Women will probably have to remain prudish as long as men remain sentimental, stupid and bad enough to demand for them eternal innocence and a lack of education. For innocence is the only thing that can ennoble the loss of education.<sup>[1]</sup>

34 Almost all marriages are only concubinages, morganatic marriages,<sup>[2]</sup> or rather provisional attempts and distant approximations to a real marriage, whose true essence - according to not the paradoxes of this or that system but all spiritual and worldly rights - consists in several persons becoming one. A nice idea, whose realization seems to be beset with great difficulties. For this reason the will, which surely should have a say when it comes to deciding whether to be an independent individual or an integral part of a common personality, should be restricted as little as possible.<sup>[3]</sup> It is hard to see what solid objection could be made against a marriage *à quatre*. But if the state wants to hold together with force even unhappy attempts at marriage, it hinders the possibility of true marriage, which could be promoted through new, perhaps more successful experiments.

49 Women are treated as unjustly in poetry as in life. The feminine is not ideal, and the ideal is not feminine.

63 Every uncultivated person is a caricature of himself.

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64 The ethic of moderation is the spirit of castrated intolerance.

80 The historian is a prophet facing backwards.

86 Real sympathy concerns itself with promoting the freedom of others, not with securing their animal pleasures.

87 The first principle in love is to have a sense for another, and the highest principle is to have faith in one another. Devotion is the expression of faith, and pleasure can enliven and intensify the senses, even if it cannot create them, which is the common opinion. Hence, for a short while, sensuality can deceive bad people into thinking that they love one another.

90 The subject of history is the realization of everything that is practically necessary.

102 Women have absolutely no sense for art, but certainly for poetry. They have no capacity for science, but probably for philosophy. For speculation, the inner intuition of the universe, they are lacking nothing. They are missing only in the power of abstraction, which can be more easily learned.

116 Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its goal is not merely to reunite all the separate forms of poetry, and to put poetry in contact with philosophy and rhetoric. It also wants to and should now mix, and then fuse, poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and that of nature; to make poetry lively and social and to make life and society poetic; to poeticize wit and to fill and saturate the forms of art with very kind of solid material for instruction, and then to animate them with the pulsations of humour. It embraces everything that is only poetic, from the great system of art, which encompasses all systems within itself, to the sigh and kiss that the poetic child breathes in artless song. It can so lose itself in its object that one would like to think that its one-and-all is to characterize poetic individuals of every kind; and still there is no form that is perfectly made to express perfectly the spirit of the author, so that many artists, who only wanted to write a novel, have only by accident portrayed themselves. Only it can be, like the epic, a mirror of the whole surrounding world, a portrait of the age. And yet, on the wings of reflection, it can hover in the middle between the portrayed and the portrayer, free from all real and ideal interests, and then raise that reflection to a higher power in an endless series of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most diverse development, not merely from the inside out but also from the outside in; for, in what should be the whole of its creation, it organizes all parts alike, so that the view is opened up of an endlessly expanding classicism. Among the arts, romantic poetry is what wit is to philosophy, and what society company, friendship and love are to life. Other kinds of poetry are fixed and can be completely analysed. Romantic poetry is still in a process of becoming; indeed, that is its true essence, that it can only eternally become and never be perfected. It cannot be exhausted by any theory, and only a prophetic criticism may dare to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; it recognizes as its first law, that the will of the artist does not suffer any law above himself. The romantic form of poetry is the only one that is more than a form and is, as it were, poetry itself; for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.

211 Not to respect the masses is moral; but to honour them is lawful.

212 Perhaps no people deserves freedom; but that is a matter for the *forum dei*.<sup>[4]</sup>

213 Only that state deserves to be called an aristocracy in which at least the smaller mass that despotizes over the larger has a republican constitution.

214 The perfect republic must be not only democratic but also aristocratic and monarchical. Within the realm of freedom and equality, the educated must outweigh and guide the uneducated and organize everything into an absolute whole.

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215 Can legislation be called moral when it punishes attacks on the honour of its citizens less severely than attacks on their lives?

216 The French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe's *Meister* are the great tendencies of the age.<sup>[5]</sup> Whoever is offended by this juxtaposition, whoever takes seriously only a revolution that is noisy and materialistic, has still not elevated themselves to the broader, higher perspective on the history of mankind. Even in our shabby histories of civilization, which usually resemble a collection of variants with running commentary for a lost classical text, many a little book has played a larger role than anything done by the noisy rabble, who took no notice of it at the time.

222 The revolutionary wish to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive development, and the beginning of modern history. What stands in no relation to the kingdom of God is only of secondary importance in it.

227 The appearance of lawlessness in the history of mankind arises only from the collisions between heterogeneous spheres of nature, which all coincide and interconnect. For, otherwise, the absolute will has, in this realm of free necessity and necessary freedom, neither constitutive nor legislative power and only the deceptive title of the executive and judicial. The sketchy idea of an historical dynamic does as much credit to Condorcet's mind as his more than French enthusiasm for the now almost trivial idea of infinite perfection does to his heart.<sup>[6]</sup>

228 The historical tendency of his actions determines the positive morality of the statesman and cosmopolitan.

230 Through the unceasing conflict in which they involve reason and faith, the mysteries of Christianity must lead to either a sceptical resignation in all non-empirical knowledge or critical idealism.<sup>[7]</sup>

231 Catholicism is naive Christianity. Protestantism is sentimental Christianity. Besides its polemical revolutionary contribution, Protestantism, through its worship of the Bible, has also had the positive result of giving rise to philology, which is essential to any universal and progressive religion.<sup>[8]</sup> Perhaps Protestant Christianity is still missing only urbanity. To travesty some biblical stories in a Homeric epic, to describe others with the candour of Herodotus or the strictness of Tacitus in classical style, or to review the whole Bible as the work of one author: that would be paradoxical to everyone, annoying to many, and superfluous and improper to a few. But should something seem superfluous that makes religion more liberal?

233 Religion is mostly only a supplement or surrogate for education. Nothing is religious in the strict sense that is not a product of freedom. One can therefore say: the more free, the more religious; and the more education, the less religion.

234 It is very one-sided and presumptuous to say that there should be only one mediator. For the perfect Christian, whom in this respect the peerless Spinoza comes closest to, everything must be a mediator.<sup>[9]</sup>

235 Nowadays Christ has been deduced a priori in various ways. But should not the Madonna have as much claim to be an original, eternal and necessary ideal, if not of pure at least of feminine and masculine reason?

251 How many people there are nowadays who are too soft and good-natured to see tragedies and too noble and dignified to hear comedies – a perfect proof of the tender sensibility of our age, which wanted only to slander the French Revolution.

262 Every good person becomes more and more God. To become God, to be human, to cultivate oneself, are expressions that all mean the same thing.

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263 Genuine mysticism is morals in its highest dignity.

272 Why should there not be immoral people, just as there are unphilosophical and unpoetic ones? Only anti-political or unlawful people cannot be tolerated.

369 The deputy is something quite different from the representative. The representative, whether elected or not, is he who symbolizes the political whole in his person, and is as it were identical with it; he is the visible soul of the state. This idea, which obviously was not seldom the spirit behind monarchies, was perhaps never so purely and consistently practised as in Sparta. The Spartan kings were the first priests, directors and presidents of public education. With the actual administration they had little to do; they were nothing but kings in the representative sense. The power of a priest, a director or an educator, is by its very nature indeterminate and universal, more or less a kind of lawful despotism. Only through the spirit of representation can it be softened and legitimated.

370 Is it not an absolute monarchy when everything essential happens secretly in a cabinet, and where a Parliament may speak and dispute publicly with pomp over formalities? An absolute monarchy could very easily have a kind of constitution, which appears even republican to the uninitiated.

397 Does the state have a right, purely arbitrarily, to make change of a constitution more sacred than other contracts, and so to deprive them of their force?

385 In the deeds and decisions that are necessary for the legislative, executive and judicial powers to achieve their ends, there is often something purely arbitrary, which is unavoidable and not deducible from the pure concept of those powers, and which therefore seems to be unjustifiable. But is the authority for it not borrowed from the constitutive power, which therefore must necessarily have a veto and not merely a right of interdiction? Are not all absolutely arbitrary decisions in a state in virtue of a constitutive power?

406 If every infinite individual is God, then there are as many gods as ideals. Even the relationship of the true artist, and the true human being, to his ideals is completely religious. Whoever makes this inner worship the goal and business of their life is a priest; everyone can and should become one.

414 If there is an invisible church,[\[10\]](#) then it is that of the great paradox, which is inseparable from morality, and which must be distinguished from the merely philosophical. People who are so eccentric that they are completely serious in being and becoming virtuous understand one another in everything, find one another easily, and form a silent opposition against the prevailing immorality that pretends to be morality. A certain mysticism of expression, which, joined with romantic fantasy and grammatical understanding, can be something very charming and good, often serves as a symbol of their beautiful secrets.[\[11\]](#)

420 Whether an educated woman, whose morality is questioned, is corrupt or pure can be very clearly decided. If she follows the general trend, if the external appearance of energy and spirit, and whatever relates to it, is her be-and-end-all, then she is corrupt. If she knows something greater than 'greatness'; if she can smile at her natural liking for energy; if she, in a word, is capable of enthusiasm; then she is innocent in the moral sense. In this respect, one can say that all virtue in a woman is religious. But that women might believe more in God or Christ than men, that good and beautiful free-thinking suits them less than men, is only one of the infinitely many platitudes that Rousseau built into a systematic theory of femininity.[\[12\]](#) Its nonsense was so purified and refined that it had to gain universal acclaim.

422 Mirabeau played a great role in the Revolution because his character and spirit were revolutionary; Robespierre because he obeyed the Revolution unconditionally, devoted himself to it entirely, prayed to it and regarded himself as its god; and Napoleon because he can create and shape revolutions and annihilate himself.

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423 Does not the present French character begin with Cardinal Richelieu?[13] His strange and almost tasteless universality reminds one of many of the most remarkable French phenomena after him.

424 One can regard the French Revolution as the greatest and most remarkable phenomenon in the history of states, as an almost universal earthquake, as an immeasurable flood in the political world, or as the model of revolutions, as the revolution. These are the usual standpoints. But one can also regard it as the centre and summit of the French national character, in which all its paradoxes are compressed together; or as the most horrible grotesque of the age, where all the most profound prejudices and their most powerful forebodings are mixed together in a terrible chaos and woven together as bizarrely as possible into a gigantic tragicomedy of humanity. One finds only isolated instances where these historical views are developed.

441 The liberal is he who is spontaneously free from all sides and directions; who lives in his whole humanity; who regards everything as holy that acts, is and becomes in the full measure of its powers; and who takes part in all life without letting himself become seduced by partial standpoints into hating or disparaging it.

## NOTES

[1] In his early essay 'Ueber die Diotima' (1795), Schlegel praised some of the ancient Greek philosophers - Plato, Diogenes, Zeno and Chrysippus - for including women within their schemes of education. He contended that many apparently natural sexual differences - such as 'the dominating impetuosity of the man', 'the selfless abandonment of the woman' - were the product of modern education, which repressed the potentialities of men and women alike. Sec KA 1, pp. 70- 115, esp. 99-100, 107.

[2] 2 Morganatic marriages (Ehen an der linken Hand): marriage between a royal or noble person and someone of inferior social rank with the provision that neither the spouse nor the children may claim to the property.

[3] A critique of the severe restrictions upon divorce in late eighteenth century Prussia. Such criticism was a *leitmotif* of the romantic school. It is also found in Wilhelm von Humboldt, who participated in the romantic salons in Berlin. See his *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*, Werke, I, pp. 78-82.

[4] 4 *Forum dei*: the divine tribunal, judgement seat of God.

[5] 5 The earlier version of this much quoted fragment adds: 'But they are all still only tendencies and not thoroughly executed.' See *Philosophical Fragments*, Epoche I, no. 662, KA XVIII, p. 85.

[6] 6 Schlegel refers to Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain*, which was written in 1794 and published posthumously. Schlegel reviewed this work in the *Philosophisches Journal* III (1795), pp. 161-72. His review is reprinted in KA VII, pp. 3-10.

[7] 7 Cf. *Philosophical Apprenticeship*, KA XVIII, para. 84, no. 658: 'With only a gleam of philosophy Christianity leads to the critical philosophy. To accept the concept of a mediator one must be a critical philosopher or crazy, ... For only in absolute idealism can one conceive the proposition "To be at once God and man"'

[8] 8 Cf. Novalis, *Christianity or Europe*, p. 66.

[9] 9 Cf. Novalis, *Pollen*, no. 74; *Universal Brouillon*, no. 398.

[10] Invisible church (*unsichtbare Kirche*): cf. Novalis, *Pollen*, no. 43, note 22, and *Philosophical Lectures*, note 5.

[11] Cf. Novalis, *Faith and Love*, no. 2.

[12] Schlegel criticizes book V of Rousseau's *Emile*, especially the following passage: 'Due to the very fact that in her conduct woman is enslaved by public opinion, in her belief she is enslaved by authority. Every girl ought to have her mother's religion, and every woman her husband's . . . Since

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women are not in a position to be judges themselves, they ought to receive the decision of fathers and husbands like that of the Church.’ See *Emile* edited and translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 377. In general, Schlegel’s theory of femininity could be regarded as a reaction to book V of the *Emile*. According to Rousseau, women are made to be pleasing to men, and because they have very different natures from men they should receive a different education.

[13] Armand Jean Richelieu (1585-1642), French cardinal and chief minister of Louis XIII. Although he had pretensions to culture and piety, he had a reputation for cunning, ruthlessness and extravagance. It has been said that his own religion was ‘reason of state’.

Source: Friedrich Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments” (excerpts), in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. and transl. Frederick C. Beiser, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 113-122.

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