

“Conscious, Consciousness, and Guilt in the Works of Fichte and Tieck”

Stephen Klemm, Department of German Studies

In this paper I address recent scholarly debate that seeks to situate the movement of Early German Romanticism in relation to a form philosophical Foundationalism, which attempts to ground philosophical knowledge on an indubitable first principle. In contrast to recent narratives, I argue that the work of Ludwig Tieck represents a fundamental shift away from a philosophy of first principles towards a position that is much more skeptical about the ability to ground a system of knowledge on a first principle.

I argue for this claim by comparing what I call the “moral universe” as it is described by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte in his *Sittenlehre* (System of Ethics), a work in which he deduces a system of ethics from an established first principle, with the “moral universe” that the Romantic author Ludwig Tieck creates for his protagonists in his fairy tale *Der blonde Eckbert* (The Blonde Eckbert). In comparing these two visions of morality, I delineate how Fichte and Tieck come to diametrically opposed conclusions regarding the ability of reason to deduce a moral system from a well-established first principle as well as the ability for any individual to engage in moral decision-making procedures capable of arriving at a secure conclusion concerning what is morally correct conduct. Unlike Fichte, Tieck remains fundamentally skeptical regarding both the possibility of deducing a moral system from a secure first principle and the ability of reason to develop a deliberation procedure capable of making accurate moral decisions. Tieck’s skepticism with respect to these issues marks a fundamental distinction between his world-view and that of his more Foundationalist predecessor Fichte, a distinction, I argue, that is indicative of the shift from a philosophy of first principles to Early German Romanticism.