



Fichte's Ethical Thought

ALLEN W. WOOD

OXFORD

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*To my students
whom I have taught
and from whom I have learned
at
Cornell University
Yale University
Stanford University
Indiana University*

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Preface

This is the third book I have written about German idealist ethics. The others were *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (1990) and *Kant's Ethical Thought* (1999). *Fichte's Ethical Thought* is the last to be completed, and it has taken me longer to write than the other two combined.

Fichte is a great modern philosopher. He is the most original figure in the development of post-Kantian German idealism. In fact, Fichte is the most influential single figure on the entire tradition of continental European philosophy in the last two centuries. Despite this, he is not nearly as well known, or as well studied, as Kant or Hegel. There is less literature, and less good literature, on Fichte than there is on Kant or Hegel, or even on most of the philosophers influenced by Fichte. In Volume III of Terence Irwin's massive, impressive, comprehensive *The Development of Ethics* (2007–2009), there is a lot about Kant; there are also discussions of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and existentialism. But there is nothing at all on Fichte; his name does not even appear in the index. Until moral philosophers understand Fichte better than we presently do, we cannot properly understand where we have come from, or, therefore, properly understand even who we are.

Whenever I have said that Fichte is the most influential figure in the continental tradition since 1800 (for instance, see Wood 1992 and VKO, pp. xxiv–xxviii), this has been dismissed as exaggeration. That skepticism is only to be expected. If Fichte were generally recognized as occupying such a pivotal position, he would obviously be much more widely studied than he is. I nevertheless persist in the assertion. Here's my challenge: You pick any major figure in the continental philosophical tradition, and I will identify an idea (sometimes several ideas) that you will agree is absolutely central to that philosopher's thought—even constituting one of that philosopher's chief contributions. Then I can show you that the original author of that idea is Fichte. I first thought of documenting this claim in detail in this Preface, but decided that would both take too long and be excessively pedantic. However, in this book you will find along the way some very partial documentation for it regarding a number of thinkers: Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, Gadamer, and Habermas. I hope my presentation of Fichte in this book will enable readers at least to keep an open mind.

The title of the book is accurate, though only about half the book consists in a systematic exposition of Fichte's ethical theory. The rest is needed to provide the necessary context. Chapter 8 in particular is not about Fichte's ethics, since for Fichte *right* is wholly distinct from *ethics*. The aim of Chapter 8 is also not to provide a complete exposition of Fichte's theory of right, any more than Chapter 2 is intended to provide a full account of Fichte's Doctrine of Science (*Wissenschaftslehre*). But both chapters are

necessary, because we need to see how Fichte's ethical theory stands in relation to both his Doctrine of Science and his theory of right. Also necessary is Chapter 3, which deals with two doctrines absolutely fundamental to Fichte's ethics: freedom and intersubjectivity. A word must also be said about Chapter 1, since it is not customary to begin a book of this kind with a biographical chapter. I did not even think of beginning this way in writing about the ethical thought of Kant or Hegel.

Fichte wrote:

The kind of philosophy one chooses depends on the kind of person one is. For a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it. (EE 1:434).

Fichte's assertion might imply that in order to benefit from the study of anyone's philosophy you would need intimate acquaintance with the person or at least knowledge of their biography. Is this true in general? I think not. We don't know much about what sort of person Aristotle was, but don't feel much deprived by that ignorance. Some philosophers—such as Hegel—have even insisted that it is part of the job of philosophy to keep the philosopher's personality out of it, and I tend to agree. Nevertheless, Fichte spawned a philosophical tradition that encourages the idea that a philosopher's personality needs to be part of the subject matter of philosophy. It includes German Romanticism, and such later philosophers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Arendt. We do care about the lives and personalities of these philosophers, even when we do not like what we find when we investigate them. Fichte's statement might at least imply that this also holds of him.

Other reasons for beginning with Fichte's life emerge in Chapter 1 itself. Fichte was an interesting person; his life is inspiring but also tragic. He was born into extreme poverty, but was forcibly torn from his birth family at age eight, compelled to live among the privileged classes and address his thoughts to them. Other improbable events placed him in a position of fame and greatness, but also led to turmoil and his eventual downfall. Kant too experienced upward social mobility, but in his case the process was slower, and Kant adjusted to it gracefully. Fichte most definitely did not. He was thin-skinned, abrasive, and self-righteous. Fichte was convinced that humanity's only hope was that the wealthy and powerful should use their privileges to make the world a better place and live up to the dignity of their humanity—of *all* humanity. But he saw all too plainly, as we still see today, that most of those with wealth and power are of just the opposite disposition. He could not trust most of the people around him—those very people on whom his hopes for the moral progress of humanity of necessity had to rest.

Fichte had a powerful and original mind. I think his doctrines, his philosophical method, and his arguments are as much worth studying as those of any other great modern philosopher. I hope the critical exposition of them offered in this book will make that evident. Fichte was also a systematic philosopher, and one who laid special emphasis on the rigor of his philosophical deductions. But he never truly completed

his system, and his attempts at detailed and rigorous argument, whether or not we ultimately think they succeed, are often frustratingly obscure.

Nietzsche said: “The will to system is a lack of integrity” (Kaufmann, ed., 1954, p. 442). Like many of the famous sayings frequently quoted by Nietzsche’s admirers (often in a tone of fatuous self-confidence) this one is obviously false, bordering on self-contradictory. In philosophy the aspiration to a rigorous system is the only possible form that intellectual integrity could ever take. There is no such thing as the “integrity” of a detached fragment, however inspired, apart from a systematic context into which it might be integrated. But like many of Nietzsche’s bold paradoxes, this one nevertheless makes a valid point: Integrity always requires us to be prepared to acknowledge the inevitable failure of our systematic aspirations, which all too few systematic philosophers seem willing to do. Fichte did have the integrity to admit that he never finished his system, but he kept on trying. The tension of insightful inspiration, aspiration to rigor and system, willingness to admit failure: that unstable combination is what great philosophy is all about. Fichte illustrates that as well as any great philosopher.

Fichte was always seen, and always saw himself, as a follower of Kant. He also emphasized the *practical* side of philosophy (right, ethics, and religion). In fact, however, Fichte produced his first important treatise on all these topics independently of Kant. This is not an interpretive remark, but simply a fact of chronology. On religion, right, and ethics, Fichte published his main work shortly *before* Kant published each of his corresponding works on the same subject. Fichte’s first published work, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792), preceded Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793–1794); Fichte’s *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–1797) preceded Kant’s *Doctrine of Right* (1797); Fichte’s *System of Ethics* was published the same year as Kant’s complete *Metaphysics of Morals*, which included the *Doctrine of Virtue* (1798). Owing to these purely chronological facts, Fichte’s philosophy, while having a Kantian point of departure, always extends Kant’s ideas in new directions. This also means that Fichte’s ethical thought should be accessible to anyone conversant with Kant’s ethical thought.

Today Kant’s ethical writings are widely studied; Fichte’s still are not. But it was not always so. Michelle Kosch has convincingly documented the surprising fact that for much of the nineteenth century, the text from which most moral philosophers got their account of Kantian ethics was Fichte’s *System of Ethics* (Kosch 2015). People who have studied Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* can see clearly that it was plainly true of him. In this there was a serious distortion in the reception of Kant, but unless students of Kantian ethics also study Fichte, they will inevitably be blind to certain ways in which their own understanding of the history of ethics—of Kantian ethics in particular—has been distorted. My own work on Kant’s ethics has been devoted to showing how much of what now passes for “Kant’s ethics” involves a serious misunderstanding of Kant. Some of the common misinterpretations reflect the role of Fichte in the past reception of Kantian ethics, even when people are entirely oblivious to it. For example,

the variations on Kantian themes developed by Rawls and his followers seldom show any awareness at all of Fichte, but (at least in my opinion) they often end up sounding like Fichteans without realizing it. Kantian ethics would be greatly enriched if Kantians looked more closely at Fichte.

Much the same is true of Fichte's relation to Hegel. Many of the most famous ideas associated with Hegel's name were founded quite directly on Fichtean models, though Hegel seldom directly admits it. This includes even Hegel's dialectical method itself, as well as his theories of recognition and right, and his conviction that philosophical ethics must include a conception of the rational society. Hegel's ethical thought is at many points in critical dialogue with Fichte's. The influence of Fichte on Hegel was often negative: Hegel accepted Fichte's formulation of certain issues but took a contrasting position on them. For all these reasons, Hegel's ethical thought cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of Fichte.

Fichte is an important philosopher for our own time, especially in morality and politics. The rising generation knows that there is a great deal that is wrong with the world. As any decent person would think about it, the course of history has not gone well for our species in the twentieth century. To thinking people, the old ways, the old answers, the old traditions, are as hollow as they are hallowed. But we no longer have any clear conception of what earlier philosophers, including Fichte, might have called humanity's *historic mission*. It has become fashionable to doubt or deny that it even has one. If it does, we are short on faith and hope when it comes to fulfilling it. When we let ourselves entertain such thoughts, we are always in danger of becoming both desperate and cynical. Fichte speaks to just such a situation. He was a philosopher whose time was out of joint. He saw himself condemned, against overwhelming odds ("O curséd spite"), to undertake the task of trying to set things right.

Nothing is more central to Fichte's thought than the conception of a human *vocation* (*Bestimmung*). An important part of Fichte's moral philosophy is his thesis that our moral vocation is bound up with our positive contribution to the future of humanity—to what Samuel Scheffler (2013) has very appropriately called "the afterlife." This is especially appropriate in relation to Fichte, because Fichte sees the "afterlife" in just this sense as the only true immortality that our human condition affords us, and the sole source of any meaning that our individual lives can ever have.

Fichte especially concentrates on the specific vocation of scholars, intellectuals, philosophers, whose task it is to help define the human vocation. In Fichte's philosophy, the best and most radical social and political ideals of the modern world achieve a particularly pure, sharp, and vibrant articulation that still has the power to inspire. Fichte's obsessive emotions on this topic, which are always close to the surface, also waver passionately at the cusp where faith and hope are in danger of falling into confusion and despair. He addresses this personal scholarly vocation, just as he did his audience, with an existential passion that shines through even his most abstract philosophical arguments and constructions.

My own first interest in philosophy—when I was still in my teens—began with the existentialists: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Beauvoir—a bit later, Heidegger. But neither I nor my professors at Reed College and Yale University who taught me about existentialism had any knowledge of Fichte. The writings of the existentialists have a vividness and popularity lacking in Fichte's writings—or at least in his more rigorous and systematic writings, such as those expounded in this book. I now see Fichte as offering existentialist philosophers, as he offered the Romantics in his own time, a philosophical theory that served as the background for their less philosophically disciplined intellectual adventures. For many of the existentialists themselves, this function was fulfilled more directly by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. As I have learned from my Stanford colleague Dagfinn Føllesdal, Husserl's philosophy after 1917 was directly influenced by his study of Fichte. I now see Fichte's philosophy as providing a more rigorous and systematic foundation for the view of things championed by those very philosophers who long ago got me interested in philosophy in the first place.

My first real acquaintance with Fichte's philosophy had to wait until in the mid-1980s. In the early 1960s, I read Roderick Chisholm's translation of the *Vocation of Man* (BM), but neither understood it nor took to it. In the 1970s, I tried reading the Peter Heath-John Lachs translation of the *Science of Knowledge* (GWL) but it made no sense to me. A lot of it still doesn't. In Chapter 1 §3, when we look at the conditions of its composition, we will see why it doesn't. It is part of Fichte's tragedy that people still regard this text as his most important work, and imagine that they have to master it before they move on to anything else. It is hardly surprising that your writings remain largely unread if your reputedly "most important work"—the supposed gateway to your philosophy—is virtually unintelligible.

Then one day in the mid-1980s I was asked by Cornell University Press to read the manuscript of Daniel Breazeale's translations of *Fichte: The Early Writings* (1988). I knew next to nothing about Fichte, but at the time I was the only philosopher around Cornell with an interest in German idealism or the continental tradition. Reluctantly, therefore, I agreed. It was a life-changing decision. I was seized with an immediate enthusiasm, especially for Fichte's 1794 *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation*. My interest was further excited when I read some of Fichte's other writings in German—the ones on which this book is focused. I even tried teaching Fichte's writings on right and ethics to a few bewildered Cornell graduate students, using photocopies of nineteenth-century translations. That attempt was not repeated.

At the time I was working on *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (1990) and also editing H.B. Nisbet's new translation of Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1991). It was sometime around 1990 that I formed the intention to write the present book. It has taken a quarter-century to fulfill the intention. In the meantime, new translations of both Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* (2000) and *System of Ethics* (2006) have appeared. I myself edited the reissue of Garrett Green's translation of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (2010). Other good English translations of works of Fichte

have also appeared in recent years. I hope their availability will make more accessible both Fichte's philosophy itself and a book like the present one.

Although the study, thinking, teaching, and writing that have led to this book have occupied me for a long time, the final push toward its completion began shortly after the bicentenary of Fichte's death: the first half of 2014. This book was completed during the following year.

In the long time I have been working on this book, occasional exchanges with Breazeale, and attention to his writings, especially the collection of his papers published in 2013, have helped me understand Fichte better. He knows more about Fichte than anyone else I've ever met. He gave me a detailed set of comments on a draft of this book, which saved me from a number of errors. I fear he may not think it saved me from all the errors he tried to correct, since we do not agree on all aspects of Fichte interpretation. I still think of Breazeale as the one person to whom I most owe my interest in Fichte.

I have also especially benefited from personal exchanges with two other Fichte scholars: Frederick Neuhouser, with whom I taught a mini-course on Fichte at Stanford in spring 2014, and Michelle Kosch, with whom I have had frequent exchanges about Fichte's ethics, especially on the issues where our interpretations disagree. Those two, more than any others, illustrate the fact that Fichte is beginning to attract the attention of some of the best scholarly and philosophical minds. Other rising scholars include Owen Ware, from whom I have had helpful comments on parts of this book, and David James. There is no better measure of a philosopher's greatness than the fact that the best minds are attracted to the philosopher's writings.

I am especially grateful to two of my students for helpful comments on many details in the manuscript. Tobey Scharding's comments displayed an affection for Fichte's philosophy that is like my own. I hope the changes made in response to her questions have helped to make Fichte's thought more accessible. Alyssa Bernstein sent me helpful and detailed comments on every chapter, and even on one preliminary draft that fortunately didn't make it into the final version. She is not an aggressive person—she's as sensitive and gentle as she is intelligent—but she told me bluntly when I was wrong and challenged me to think about Fichte's concept of God, the ethics of care, and several other things which led to significant changes throughout the book.

I am also grateful to all those other students at Stanford University and Indiana University, who—in ever increasing numbers, I am happy to say—have been willing to sign up for courses on a difficult and too often marginalized German idealist philosopher, when I have had the time and temerity to offer them. That explains why the dedication of this book reads as it does.

This book also goes to press less than a month after my wife Rega and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Palo Alto, California, July 14, 2015 (Bastille Day)

Allen W. Wood

Sources

Works by Fichte, Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Engels are referenced using the abbreviations listed below. Where an item also appears in the author's collected works, the number of the volume in which it appears is given. Unless otherwise stated, any English translation appearing in the text is the author's own, though standard English translations are used where possible for the reader's convenience.

Fichte

- GA (1962–) *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann. Cited by part/volume:page number or in the case of letters in III, by letter number.
- SW (1970) *Fichtes Sammtliche Werke*, edited by I.H. Fichte. Berlin: W. deGruyter. Cited by volume: page number.
- EW Daniel Breazeale (ed.) *Fichte: Early Writings*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. Cited by page number.
- IW Daniel Breazeale (ed. and tr.) *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
- ARD *Aphorisms on Religion and Deism* (1790), SW 5, tr. R.W. Stine, in Stine (ed.) *The Doctrine of God in the Philosophy of Fichte*. Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1945.
- ASL *The Way Toward the Blessed Life, or: The Doctrine of Religion* (1806), SW 5, tr. William Smith. London: John Chapman, 1849.
- BHW *On Stimulating and Increasing the Pure Interest in Truth* (1795), SW 8, EW
- BM *The Vocation of Man* (1800), SW 2, tr. Roderick Chisholm. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958
- EE *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), Erste Einleitung, SW 1, IW, also GWL
- ZE *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), Zweite Einleitung, SW 1, IW, also GWL
- K1 *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), Kapitel 1, SW 1
Chapter One, IW

- GEW *Outline of the distinctive character of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1795), SW 1, EW
- GGW *On the basis of our belief in a divine governance of the world* (1798), SW 8, IW
- GGZ *The Characteristics of the Present Age* (1805), SW 7, tr. William Smith. London: Chapman, 1848.
- GH *The Closed Commercial State* (1800), SW 3, tr. Anthony Curtis Adler. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012.
- GWL *The Science of Knowledge* (1794), SW 1, tr. Peter Heath and John Lachs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- NR *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796), SW 3, tr. Michael Baur, ed. F. Neuhauser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- RDN *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), SW 7, tr. Gregory Moore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- SB *Sun-Clear Report* (1801), SW 2, tr. Ernst Behler, *The Philosophy of German Idealism*. London: Bloomsbury-Continuum, 1987.
- SL *System of Ethics* (1798), SW 4, tr. D. Breazeale and G. Zöllner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- UGB *On the Distinction between Letter and Spirit in Philosophy* (1795), GA II/3, EW
- VBG *Some lectures concerning the scholar's vocation* (1794), SW 6, EW
- VKO *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792, 1793), SW 5, translated by Garrett Green, edited by Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- WL1804 *The Science of Knowing* (1804), SW 10, tr. Walter Wright. Albany: SUNY Press, 2005
- WLn_m *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, GA IV/2, ed. and transl. Daniel Breazeale. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992
- ZE *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), *Zweite Einleitung*, SW 1, IW, GWL

Hegel

- Werke Hegel* *Werke: Theoriewerkausgabe*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970. Cited by volume:page number.
- EL *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften: Logik, Werke* 8. Cited by paragraph (§) number.

- PhG *Phänomenologie des Geistes, Werke 3*. Cited by paragraph (§) number in the A.V. Miller translation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- NP *Nürnberger Propädeutik, Werke 4*.
- PR *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, Werke 7*. Cited by paragraph (§) number; ‘R’ means “Remark”; ‘A’ means “Addition.” *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, tr. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- TJ *Theologische Jugendschriften (1793–1800), Werke 1*. Cited by page number. *Early Theological Writings*, tr. T.M. Knox. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.
- WNR *Über die wissenschaftliche Behandlungsarten der Naturrecht, Werke 2, Natural Law*, tr. T.M. Knox. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975. Cited by German volume:page/English page.
- Kant*
- Ak *Immanuel Kants Schriften*. Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902-. Unless otherwise footnoted, writings of Immanuel Kant will be cited by volume:page number in this edition.
- Ca *Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–2016. This edition provides marginal Ak volume:page citations. Specific works will be cited using the following system of abbreviations (works not abbreviated below will be cited simply as Ak volume:page).
- Anth *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (1798)*, Ak 7
Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view, Ca
Anthropology, History and Education
- EF *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf (1795)*, Ak 8
Toward perpetual peace: A philosophical project, Ca
Practical Philosophy
- G *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (1785)*, Ak 4
Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals, Ca
Practical Philosophy
- I *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (1784)*, Ak 8
Idea toward a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim, Ca
Anthropology History and Education

- KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 1787). Cited by A/B pagination.
Critique of pure reason, Ca Critique of Pure Reason
- KpV *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), Ak 5
Critique of practical reason, Ca Practical Philosophy
- KU *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), Ak 5
Critique of the power of judgment, Ca Critique of the Power of Judgment
- MA *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* (1786), Ak 8
Conjectural beginning of human history, Ca Anthropology
History and Education
- MS *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797–1798), Ak 6
Metaphysics of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy
- NRF *Naturrecht Feyerabend* (1784), Ak 27
Kant's Natural Right Gottfried Feyerabend, Ca Lectures and
Drafts on Political Philosophy
- O *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?* (1786), Ak 8
What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking? Ca Religion
and Rational Theology
- P *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik* (1783), Ak 4
Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Ca Theoretical
Philosophy after 1781
- R *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*
(1793–1794), Ak 6
Religion within the boundaries of mere reason, Ca Religion and
Rational Theology
- Refl *Reflexionen*, Ak 14–23
Ca Notes and Fragments
- RH *Recension von Gottlieb Hufeland*, Versuch über den Grundsatz
des Naturrechts (1786), Ak 8
Review of Gottlieb Hufeland, Essay on the Principle of Natural
Right, Ca Practical Philosophy
- SF *Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), Ak 7
Conflict of the faculties, Ca Religion and Rational Theology
- TP *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein,
taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (1793), Ak 8

- On the common saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice*, Ca Practical philosophy
- VA *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie*, VA 25
Lectures on Anthropology, Ca Lectures on Anthropology
- VE *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Ak 27, 29
Lectures on Ethics, Ca Lectures on Ethics
- VL *Vorlesungen über Logik*, Ak 9, 24
Lectures on Logic, Ca Lectures on Logic
- VP [*Vorlesungen über*] *Pädagogik*, Ak 9
Lectures on Pedagogy, Ca Anthropology, History and Education
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1

Who was Johann Gottlieb Fichte?

Fichte insisted that one's philosophy depends on the kind of person one is (EE 1:434). But that is not the only reason, or even the best reason, to begin a book on Fichte's ethics with a biographical chapter.¹ Fichte was a complicated and fascinating person. His life was eventful and interesting. Its early stages make for a gratifying narrative, even an inspiring one, as we trace the career of a man of lowly background who rises through a series of improbable events to a position of fame and greatness. Then, however, the story takes a darker turn. Fichte could even be called an Aristotelian tragic hero: he was a great man, of lofty and noble accomplishments, brought low through a cruel fate acting on a decisive flaw in his own character. His tragic fate may be considered to include the undeserved neglect from which his thought still suffers, and even the world's failure to take the path his thought marked out. His tragedy may be the tragedy of us all.

§1: Background and Education

The story properly begins on one Sunday morning early in the year 1771, in the bedroom of the Baron Ernst Haubold von Miltitz, a well-to-do nobleman who lived on his country estate in Saxony, not far from the city of Meissen. The Baron was accustomed to getting into his carriage and travelling on Sundays to hear the sermons of Pastor Nestler in the village of Rammenau. But on this particular Sunday, the Baron was ill in bed, which greatly vexed him because he was especially looking forward to Nestler's sermon that week. When he mentioned his displeasure to a servant, the Baron was told of a little uneducated eight-year-old boy who lived in the village, herded geese to help support his poor family, and attended the Pastor's sermons regularly. This boy had shown the astonishing ability to repeat a sermon virtually verbatim, and with comprehension, shortly after he had heard it. That child was brought before Baron Miltitz by his local pastor Dinndorf, and to his pleasure and amazement, the youngster was able to do what the servant had promised. The Baron was so

¹ For those interested in more, there is an excellent recent book-length biography of Fichte in German: Kühn (2012). There is also a fine biographical sketch in English by Bykova (2014).

impressed that he undertook to see that the little lad should get an education that would prepare him for the clergy, so that he might learn to preach sermons of his own when he grew up.²

That remarkable little boy was Johann Gottlieb Fichte. He was born on May 19, 1762, near Rammenau. His father was a poor ribbon-weaver, an emancipated serf. Baron Miltitz took Fichte away from his family and placed him under the care of Pastor Krebel in Niederau, about 30 km west of Rammenau. He was then sent to school at Meissen, and three years later at the Baron's expense to the famous Internat (or boarding school) at Pforta, near Naumburg. This is the same school where, some thirty years earlier, the poet Friedrich Gottlob Klopstock (1724–1803)—the brother of Fichte's future mother-in-law—had been a pupil. It is also where, some seventy years later, the young Friedrich Nietzsche was to receive his schooling.

The Baron died in 1774, but included provisions in his will for Fichte's university education. These studies began in 1780, first at Jena, then Wittenberg, and finally Leipzig, where he stayed longer than the Baron's heirs had intended his education to last. They generously continued supporting him for some time even after it was clear that he had no intention of becoming a minister of the Gospel, but aspired instead to an academic career in philosophy.

§2: An Impoverished Upstart Philosopher Makes his Way in a Hostile World

Fichte later wrote: "Our philosophy becomes the history of our own heart and life; and according to how we find ourselves do we think about the human being in general and his vocation" (BM 2:293). We will see that Fichte holds that in acting freely, the human self must tear itself away from what it is. This I—the pure rational principle present in every human being—is fundamentally in conflict with the not-I—the world outside the I, which the I experiences as resisting its striving. Fichte's highly abstract, philosophical conception of human action was meant to apply universally; at the same time, these propositions might serve as metaphors for the bizarre series of events through which Fichte himself rose to intellectual prominence. From childhood onward, he tore himself away from the life that a cruel social order had chosen for him as the illiterate son of a destitute weaver. His improbable rise in the world, occasioned equally by his extraordinary ability, his tireless effort, and a series of fortunate occurrences, was at the same time a constant struggle against the same social order that would have condemned him to a life of poverty and obscurity.

² Kühn (2012), p. 45, casts doubt on this story, suggesting that it may be only a Fichte family legend. It seems impossible to verify at this point precisely how it came about that Baron Miltitz and his family came to provide for Fichte's education. But this account, involving Fichte's verbatim recitation of a sermon, is the only one we have.

Private tutor. By 1784, the patience of the Baron's heirs had been exhausted. They were no longer willing to support his education. Fichte had to leave the university—without a degree. Financial necessity required him to begin making a living, which he did as a teacher of children in wealthy households near Leipzig and Dresden. Such was the usual life-path at that time and place for someone of modest means who had academic ambitions: It was the same path Kant had taken forty years earlier, and that Hegel would take ten years later.

Fichte seldom stayed long in any one position. He apparently did not feel much gratitude for the advantages he had received through the Baron Miltitz's beneficence. Most household tutors were treated like family servants. Fichte was haughty and ambitious, jealous of the dignity and authority to which he thought his intelligence and education entitled him. He resented having to work for the aristocrats or wealthy bourgeois whose elevated station in life he regarded as the undeserved privileges of an unjust social order. If not dismissed for insubordination, Fichte resigned a teaching post as soon as he had saved enough money to live without it—only to be compelled all too soon by need to seek similar employment once again.

Zürich. In 1788 Fichte managed to better his position by leaving Saxony for a household in Zürich, Switzerland. This move was the second major turning point in Fichte's life, changing it almost as much as his boyhood encounter with the Baron. In Zürich he made the acquaintance of Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), a religious thinker who had connections to some of the most influential intellectuals of the day. Through Lavater, Fichte was also introduced to the social circle of the famous poet Klopstock. This is how he met Klopstock's brother-in-law Hartmann Rahn (1719–1795), a well-to-do customs official, with whom he began a close friendship. Like Fichte, Rahn was an ardent supporter of the ideals of the revolution then taking place in France.

Fichte also met Rahn's daughter Johanna Marie (1755–1819), and they fell in love. As Fichte says in a letter to her: "At first sight, at our first conversation, my entire heart was open for you" (GA III, no. 21). Johanna was intelligent, of strong character, and very much in love with Fichte. She was a woman whose social station was far above Fichte's—someone whom nobody of Fichte's lowly background could ever expect to marry. She was, however, already past the age of thirty-five, seven years older than Fichte, and never a beauty. At the time she met Fichte, she must have long since despaired of ever having the opportunity to marry. They made for an improbable pair; the very awkwardness of their romance is touching. Their eventual marriage was by all accounts a successful and happy one.

They could not marry immediately: Fichte's social inferiority was probably the chief obstacle. It could be overcome only with time, as Fichte made new social contacts, in Zürich and beyond. To this end, Lavater and Rahn soon used their influence to get Fichte a still better tutoring position in Leipzig, nearer his birthplace. On the way to Leipzig, he stopped in Weimar, where—with letters of introduction from Lavater—he

made the acquaintance of both Herder and Goethe, contacts that were later to benefit him greatly. Fichte's wedding was further postponed when a commercial disaster in 1791 deprived Rahn of a good part of his fortune. Consequently, for the next couple of years Fichte was to be on his own financially.

Early Spinozism. We do not know much about Fichte's philosophical views up to this time. He had been educated in the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, and during his school days, he had read with enthusiasm the *Anti-Goeze* and other theological writings of G.E. Lessing (1729–1781). These writings must have contributed to an increasingly critical attitude toward traditional Christianity. This seems to be what led Fichte away from a clerical vocation. The famous “pantheism controversy” between Jacobi and Mendelssohn in the middle of the 1780s had just focused attention on Lessing's Spinozism. Spinozism would have put Fichte in intellectual harmony with a fashionable group of German intellectuals who were emboldened to declare themselves as Spinozists following this renowned controversy. This is what Herder had just done, for instance, in his dialogues, *God: Some Conversations* (1787). Goethe too soon became an avowed Spinozist.

In 1790, Fichte composed a set of *Aphorisms on Religion and Deism* (ARD 5:1–8). These were first published only in the mid-nineteenth century, in his son's first edition of his works. In the *Aphorisms*, Fichte embraced a species of “deism” characterized by the adoption of a Spinozistic monism about God and also a strict determinism regarding human characters and actions:

There is an eternal being whose existence, and whose way of existing, is necessary... Every alteration in this world is determined necessarily, just as it is, through a sufficient cause.—The first cause of every alteration is the original thought of divinity.

(ARD 5:6)

The *Aphorisms* seem centrally concerned with the religious problem of sin and salvation.

What common human sentiment calls *sin* arises out of the necessary—greater or lesser—limitation of finite beings. It has its necessary consequences for the state of this being, which is just as necessary as the existence of divinity, and these are therefore ineradicable.

(ARD 5:7)

The Christian religion, Fichte holds, is merely a subjective expression of human feeling, which has a generally useful influence on morality (again, a Spinozistic position on the role of religion in human life). Christianity teaches the same reconciliation with God that comes from the acceptance of necessity, although it presents this reconciliation not in the form of philosophical “speculation” but instead anthropomorphically, as God's forgiveness of sins. Fichte ends the *Aphorisms* with a set of questions about “certain moments in which the heart avenges itself on speculation,” leading to a “feeling of God's displeasure” and an “urgent longing for reconciliation” which may remain

unfulfilled and therefore a source of human misery (ARD 5:7). True salvation for a person in this condition would be to believe in the necessity of the divine order; but although this might be proven to him on the intellectual level, it is questionable whether belief in it will be subjectively possible for a person whose feelings are so determined (ARD 5:7–8).

In the *Aphorisms*, Fichte's conception of God is that of a metaphysical infinite that transcends all finite categories, in particular that of personality. The influence of Spinozism seems to have persisted even after Fichte's conversion to Kantianism in 1790. For Fichte, the I or active person is necessarily finite and materially embodied. No such a thing as an "infinite person" is even conceivable. In later writings, such as *The Vocation of Man* (1800), God is represented not as one person among others but as the common spiritual life through which human spirits live, the spiritual medium in which they form a community, even the never realizable ideal spiritual unity toward which they strive. It was Fichte's conception of God as nothing beyond the "living and effective moral order" of the world that brought on the tragic crisis in his academic career (GGW 5:186).

This is not a book about Fichte's conception of God, but we will see that these different characterizations of the divine play a role in his ethics, especially after 1800. We will try to make consistent sense of them in Chapter 7 §9. Although God cannot be a person, Fichte thinks human beings necessarily represent God as personal. Fichte understands any talk about God not in a literal, supernatural sense, but rather as a symbolic, aesthetically charged religious expression of truths about human life that also have a purely secular expression. In the *Aphorisms*, this includes the truth that human beings are morally flawed because the perfection of every human being is limited. Fichte is drawn to traditional religious expressions of these truths because he thinks the version favored by dogmatic materialists denies human freedom and deprives human existence of its significance. Religious symbolism is the way to preserve our humanity against the shallowness and depravity of an utterly spiritless world outlook.

The *Aphorisms* are also continuous with Fichte's later philosophy in the way they concern themselves with the intimate relationship between a philosophical outlook and the individual personality of the one whose outlook it is. Fichte worries about the impossibility of persuading a person of philosophical truth through reason, however evident the arguments for it may be, when it is contrary to the person's life-orientation, self-feeling, and hardened individual identity.

Return to Leipzig; conversion to Kantianism. Soon after his arrival back in Leipzig, Fichte was approached by a university student who wanted to be tutored in the latest fashionable philosophy—that of Immanuel Kant, with which Fichte up to that point had been entirely unacquainted. He agreed, and began reading Kant, starting with the most recent book, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, but soon proceeding to the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Fichte became an immediate and ardent convert to Kant's critical philosophy. Decisive was the critical philosophy's strong commitment to freedom of the will. From this point onward, Fichte regarded a practical commitment to freedom as foundational to his entire outlook, not only as grounding any possible theoretical system, but also as basic to the practical moral and political commitments that animated Fichte's entire philosophy. Fichte associated necessitarianism not only with materialism, and hence with moral laxity and unbelief, but also with social and political complacency. Those who deny freedom of the will are the kind of people who stand in the way of the moral progress and enlightenment of humanity because they benefit from social injustice. This stark opposition must remind us of Friedrich Engels' later contrast between "idealism" and "materialism" (MECW 26:357–65)—though with an ironic total reversal in the political and historical implications attaching respectively to the two opposed world outlooks.

The Spinozistic beginning of Fichte's philosophy still shows itself in Fichte's later writings in many different ways. Fichte adopts many concepts directly from Spinoza, such as that of the imagination (as a wavering between opposites) or freedom (as the conscious absence of any determining cause). Thus even when Fichte's position on an issue is diametrically opposed to Spinoza's, he often poses the issue in Spinoza's terms. Fichte's conceptions of sense perception and the mind-body relation are strikingly original due largely to the way he incorporates much that is distinctive about Spinoza's views on these matters into a theory of selfhood and free action that is about as far from Spinoza's as could be imagined. In Fichte's thought, moreover, Spinoza's philosophy is always treated with respect, even when (or perhaps precisely because) it represents to Fichte the most consistent and fully developed expression of the view of life that he sees as directly opposed to his own. We will also see that on many points of direct relevance to ethics, Spinoza's philosophy is not at all opposed to Fichte's. He always remained at least as much a Spinozist as he ever became a Kantian.

Königsberg. Fichte's new tutoring post in Leipzig did not work out as planned due to a quarrel between Fichte and his employer early in their association, which resulted in Fichte's angry resignation. He soon accepted another post in Warsaw, to which he traveled (mostly on foot) in spring 1791. This position too came to nothing after another quarrel between Fichte and his prospective employer upon their very first meeting. But Warsaw was not far from East Prussia, so Fichte decided to travel on to Königsberg with the aim of meeting the great Kant.

The first encounter between the two men, on July 4, 1791, apparently left Kant unimpressed. Fichte remained in Königsberg for several more weeks, however, during which he wrote a little book, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*; he presented it to Kant in mid-August. By this time Fichte was in such desperate financial straits that he also asked Kant for a loan of sufficient funds to enable him to travel back to Saxony. Kant's counter-proposal was that Fichte should instead obtain the money he needed by selling his manuscript, with Kant's recommendation, to Kant's publisher, Hartung.

Krakow. With the aid of his colleague, the court chaplain J.F. Schultz, Kant also obtained a tutoring position for Fichte in Krakow, near Danzig. Unlike the last two, this position worked out tolerably well, and Fichte remained there about a year. During this time he composed a radical political tract with the provocative title *Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, Who have Suppressed It* (SW 6:1–35). Fichte also began work on a long and impassioned reply to an influential conservative critique of the French Revolution authored by a fellow Kantian, August Wilhelm Rehberg (SW 6:37–288).

In the meantime, the publication of Fichte's book on revelation had hit a roadblock. After the death of Frederick the Great in 1786, his successor Friedrich Wilhelm II had instituted a censorship of all religious publications with the aim of beating back the dangerous tendencies of free thought and religious heterodoxy that had blossomed during Frederick's reign, which now presented themselves unashamed in many religious books as well as from university lecterns and church pulpits. (Kant himself was soon to come into conflict with this censorship when he published *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.) Fichte was required to submit his manuscript to the theological faculty at Halle for approval. In January 1792, the dean of the faculty declined to accept it unless Fichte affirmed that revelation could be accepted on the basis of miracles. Of course such a change would have totally contradicted Fichte's critical rationalist position; he absolutely refused to make it. Although a new dean soon reversed the censorship ruling, paving the way for a smoother publication process, Hartung had already made plans to publish Fichte's book anonymously and without Fichte's Preface, which explained the circumstances of the book's composition. Thus in the spring of 1792, Fichte's first publication, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, finally appeared in this mysterious and provocative form.

In this first book, Fichte holds, along with Kant, that the sole function of religion is moral, and he thinks the closest we can come to establishing the genuineness of a particular putative divine revelation (in a holy scripture, for instance) is to determine that as regards its moral content, it might be consistent with what a good God would reveal to us. Fichte makes divine revelation a more essential part of the moral life than Kant ever would—insisting that the moral law given by our own will attains to objectivity only when we regard it as having been addressed to us by a being outside us (VKO §3, 5:49–58, §7, 5:79–84). As in the early *Aphorisms*, Fichte thinks God is beyond finite categories such as personality (VKO 5:42–3), but human beings cannot think of commands of reason except in the form of commands issued by a divine person (VKO 5:55).

Fichte's first publication thus already makes the "second-person standpoint" essential to morality. It offers transcendental derivations of moral self-respect, of God as guarantor of the harmony of virtue and happiness, of God as moral lawgiver, of religion, and of the need for revelation. In these arguments Fichte already makes use of what he was later to call the "synthetic method"—which also served Hegel as the prototype for the dialectic employed throughout his speculative system. Fichte's

development of the concept of volition in the second edition (1793) also anticipates much of the account he was to use later in his *System of Ethics* (1798). Although Fichte's critique of revelation is recognizably Kantian in inspiration, it is by no means a mere obsequious imitation of Kant. Nor can it be dismissed as mere juvenilia: at its publication, Fichte was already within a month of his thirtieth birthday.³

The reception of Fichte's first book by its earliest readers was the third decisive and improbable turning point in Fichte's life. Education at the hands of Baron Miltitz had wrenched Fichte from his lowly station in life; acquaintance with Lavater and Rahn had connected him to the learned world; the surprising reception of his book on revelation would suddenly turn him into an important philosopher, even a kind of intellectual celebrity.

Many readers of Fichte's anonymously published book on religion knew already that Kant himself was planning a work on that subject, and Kant was known to be having problems with the Prussian censorship that might well have resulted in the anonymous publication of such a work. The contents of Fichte's book, especially in this first edition, and without the changes Fichte made in 1793 for the second edition, easily led many of Kant's followers—including Karl Leonhard Reinhold, then Kant's leading exponent, and the novelist Jean Paul (Jean Paul Richter)—to suspect that the author was Kant himself. A lengthy and favorable review in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* in Jena claimed that Kant was obviously its author. In the next month's issue of the same journal, Kant published a letter graciously identifying Fichte as the author of the book on revelation and declaring that the honor of having written it belonged entirely to him. This suddenly made the hitherto unknown Fichte into a significant figure in the philosophical world.

Return to Zürich. By 1793, Hartmann Rahn's finances had recovered somewhat from the setback two years earlier. In the spring, Fichte resigned his tutoring post and returned to Zürich for his wedding, taking up residence with the Rahn family. Legal complications further delayed the wedding until the autumn. Fichte used the time to complete his reply to Rehberg, which he entitled *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution* (1793). In this book he attacked the hereditary privileges of the nobility, endorsed a contractualist defense of popular sovereignty, and defended the right of revolution.

At the same time, Fichte was working on a reply to an important book on theoretical philosophy that had just appeared anonymously: *Aenesidemus, or Concerning the Foundations of the Elementary Philosophy Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold* (1792). This was a critique of Kantian philosophy from a self-described Humean or skeptical standpoint. Its direct target was the so-called *Elementarphilosophie* put forward by Reinhold, then professor at Jena. The author of *Aenesidemus*, whose identity was known to many of its readers, was Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761–1833), Professor at Helmstedt, later at Göttingen (one of his later students there was Arthur Schopenhauer).

³ There is a good discussion of the first edition version of Fichte's *Attempt* in Breazeale (2013), pp. 1–22. See also my Introduction to VKO.

Fichte knew Schulze well—they had been students together both at Pforta and at Wittenberg. In composing his reply to Schulze, and then in working out his own system of transcendental philosophy, Fichte was also much influenced by the writings of Salomon Maimon, a largely self-educated rabbi from Lithuania, whom Kant had described as the critic of his system who had best understood it.

Fichte labored long and hard on his reply to *Aenesidemus*, finding in Schulze's skeptical critique a fundamental challenge to Kantianism and especially to Reinhold's project of grounding Kantian philosophy ultimately on a single first principle that was proof against any and every skeptical objection. Fichte worked on the review for nearly the whole of 1793, convincing himself in the process that the critical philosophy needed a new foundation, different both from Kant's own and from the one Reinhold had offered for it.⁴

§3: Professor in Jena: the Years of Greatness

In the fall of 1793, Fichte was suddenly offered an appointment to Reinhold's own chair in philosophy at Jena, which was vacated when Reinhold accepted a more lucrative professorship from the northern German university of Kiel. This surprising offer to a young man with no academic degree and no experience whatever in university teaching was obviously inspired by Fichte's new-found fame as author of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. But the hand of Goethe—privy counselor at the ducal court of Weimar with special influence over educational matters—is recognizable as well. The choice had evidently been made to teach the new Kantian philosophy, and if Kant's best-known exponent was leaving Jena for Kiel, he was to be replaced by the latest Kantian star to appear on the horizon.

Fichte's appointment was to begin in the spring of 1794, but he was reluctant to accept it as soon as that, and pled that he needed more time to "complete his philosophical system." Fichte was already busy on a programmatic essay, *Concerning the Concept of a Doctrine of Science*, which he had delivered to the printer by the time he moved to Jena in May 1794. His evident hope was that he could be given some time (at least a year) to execute the project described in it before having to take up his professorial duties. The university refused to permit any delay, however, and this is probably just as well: in the next twenty years Fichte repeatedly revisited the foundations of the philosophical system he called the *Wissenschaftslehre* ("Doctrine of Science"), but without ever coming anywhere close to completing it, or even giving it a definitive grounding. Fichte therefore assumed the new post at Jena in the late spring of 1794. This began an all-too-brief five-year period which was fateful not only for his

⁴ The importance of this review is stressed by Breazeale (2013), pp. 23–41. The role of Fichte's reception of Maimon is presented on pp. 42–69. For a good overview of the reception of Kant at this time, see Piché (1995).

own philosophical development but also (it is no exaggeration to say) for the entire history of modern philosophy as well.

Lectures. Before leaving Zürich, Fichte was asked by Lavater to give some lectures developing his new system of philosophy. This he apparently did in April 1794. We have Lavater's transcription of the first five lectures on the Doctrine of Science given in Zürich (GA, IV/3: 1–47). They apparently concluded with a short inspirational speech later published under the title “On Human Dignity” (SW 1:412–16), which anticipates some of the ideas Fichte was to present only a short time later in his first series of popular lectures in Jena, during the summer term of 1794.

Beginning in May 1794, Fichte gave *two* series of lectures. One was a series of “private” lectures for a small audience of tuition-paying philosophy students. In it he attempted to work out the foundations of his system following the program he had outlined in *Concerning the Concept of a Doctrine of Science*. For this Fichte produced, week by week, a series of difficult exploratory texts which he had copied out for his students and which he used as the basis of his lectures. These weekly fragments were later assembled into a book, *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science*, published in the fall of 1794. This text has often been regarded as the unavoidable gateway to Fichte's philosophical system; its extreme obscurity has accordingly often constituted an insuperable obstacle to the study of Fichte's thought. When the circumstances of its composition are taken into account, however, we should appreciate how far this text is from being anything that a reader new to Fichte ought to think he or she must master before going on to other writings. Fichte himself insisted that it could not be understood without the lectures that accompanied it, and he later even regretted permitting its publication.⁵

On Friday evenings in the spring and summer of 1794, Fichte gave another set of lectures, open without cost to the general public, whose topic he described informally as “morality for scholars.” These were given in an imposingly large lecture hall—which, however, was often filled to capacity or even beyond. Fichte's training as a preacher, as well as his native talents as a public speaker, made him an inspiring lecturer. He immediately became the most popular professor at the University. His reputation as a radical and a Jacobin also preceded him: rumor had it that Fichte taught that “in ten or twenty years there will be no more kings or princes.”⁶ Such stories excited not only the interest of those sympathetic to his message but also the suspicions of those hostile to it, as well as the curiosity of the crowd that is always drawn by any public spectacle. Fichte's passionate commitment to progressive Enlightenment ideals challenged his audience; it won him many adherents and made him many enemies. These lectures of 1794 were wildly popular. They were in some ways the high point of Fichte's career, even of his entire life. More than any other single event, they helped to turn Jena in

⁵ For good recent expositions of the *Foundation* of 1794, see Neuhouser (1990), pp. 1–66, Zöller (1996), pp. 1–43, Förster (2012), pp. 179–204, and Breazeale (2013), pp. 96–123.

⁶ Voigt to Goethe, June 15, 1794. Tümmeler (ed.) (1949), pp. 138–9.

the mid- to late 1790s into the center of philosophical and cultural developments in Germany. The published version of these lectures still has the power to inspire us today, for in them Fichte's basic motives and message come through more directly than anywhere else. For someone with little or no acquaintance with Fichte's philosophy, *Some Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation* is the right place to start.

Fichte's joy at the enthusiastic reception of his lectures was conveyed in a letter to his wife and father-in-law (who did not join him in Jena for several months): "Last Friday I delivered my first public lecture. The largest auditorium in Jena was too small. The entire entrance hall and courtyard were filled; people were standing on tables, benches, and each other's heads."⁷ We have several other accounts of the striking impression—by no means uniformly favorable—that Fichte made on his audience. The most memorable may be that of his student Johann Georg Rist:

Fichte really was an impressive person. Jokingly, I often called him "the Bonaparte of philosophy," and there are many similarities between the two. This small, broad-shouldered man did not stand calmly at his lectern like a secular sage, but stood angrily and combatively. His unkempt brown hair really stood out around the furrowed face, which resembled both the face of an old woman and that of an eagle. Whether standing or striding about upon his sturdy legs, he was always planted firmly in the earth upon which he stood, secure and immovable in the sense of his own strength. No gentle word passed his lips, nor did any laughter. He seemed to have declared war upon the world which stood over against his I.⁸

(Rist 1880, 1:70; EW, pp. 19–20)

Fichte was aware how far the opportunity for a decent education had brought him. He was determined to use that education to make the world a better place. He saw the sons of the privileged who sat listening to his lectures as spoiled and selfish, taking for granted their own opportunity for an education, which they were probably destined to waste in luxury and dissipation. He was determined to change their view of the world, to make them aware of the heavy duties their privileged existence imposed on them. His third lecture on the scholar's vocation contains the following pointed declaration:

Everyone is bound to apply his education for the benefit of society. No one has the right to work merely for his own private enjoyment, to shut himself off from his fellow human beings and to make his education useless to them; for it is precisely the labor of society which has put him in a position to acquire this education for himself. In a certain sense education is itself the product and the property of society, and thus the man who does not want to use it to benefit society robs it of its property.

(VBG 6:314–15, 320–21)

Fichte's popular lectures on "Morality for Scholars" continued throughout the summer. The five lectures on the scholar's vocation were followed by another series *Concerning*

⁷ Letter of May 26, 1794. EW, p. 19.

⁸ Several other accounts of Fichte at this time are quoted by Breazeale in the course of his extremely informative introduction (EW, pp. 20–22).

*the Difference between the Letter and the Spirit in Philosophy.*⁹ The conclusion to one lecture displays their radical tone and also the astonishing claims Fichte made for his philosophy:

With the discovery of this philosophy an entirely new epoch in the history of the human species has begun—or, if one prefers, an entirely new and different human species has arisen, one for which all previous forms of human nature and activity on earth are no more than preparatory, if they retain any value at all. This is the philosophy to which our age summons us all and which we can all take a hand in developing just as soon as we have a desire to do so.

(GA II/3:335, EW, p. 208)

These inspiring—yet also combative—popular lectures, as well as the more specialized ones that led to the *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science*, marked the beginning of the most productive period in Fichte's life. The writings Fichte produced during his Jena period were fateful in their influence on all philosophy in the European continental tradition ever since.

Wissenschaftslehre. Fichte's Doctrine of Science, though its project was never completed (and in some ways perhaps precisely due to that fact), served as the prototype for the systematic philosophical projects carried out during the next twenty years, most famously by Schelling and Hegel. Soon after producing the first foundations of his system, the *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science*, in 1794, he sketched the theoretical part of the system in *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Doctrine of Science With Respect to the Theoretical Faculty* (1795; SW 1:331–411). Within a couple of years, however, Fichte himself had begun to work out a new approach to the foundations of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, which he presented in lectures customarily called “*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*” between 1796 and 1799. A published version of the new approach was suggested (but never fully worked out) in the two *Introductions to the Doctrine of Science* published by Fichte in 1797. These were to be followed by a new systematic exposition of the Doctrine of Science from its foundations onward, of which, however, Fichte never produced anything but a few—though very interesting and suggestive—introductory pages (we will be discussing them in Chapter 2 §§5–7). Apparently Fichte intended at this point to complete his philosophical system not only with a new presentation of its foundations, but also with two other systematic works that would complement the systems of natural right and ethics: a philosophy of religion and a philosophy of nature.¹⁰ The only parts of Fichte's system that he ever really completed were the “practical”—moral and political—parts: *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–1797) and *System of Ethics* (1798). These texts, especially the latter, will be the focus of this book. But Fichte's plan for a system was to be suddenly interrupted, never to be resumed, by the turmoil that ended his promising career at Jena.

⁹ GA II/3:315–42, cf. EW, pp. 185–215.

¹⁰ An account of this intended system is presented by Lauth (1994), pp. 57–120. See also Zöller (1997), pp. 56–9.

Before the end of 1794, Fichte's wife and father-in-law joined him in Jena. From all accounts we have, Fichte must have been a difficult person to live with, but his marriage to Johanna seems to have been a happy one. On July 18, 1796, their only child, Immanuel Hermann, was born. According to a 1796 letter from Fichte to his friend Berger (GA III, No. 346), the child's middle name was not supposed to be Hermann but Hartmann, after his maternal grandfather. The parents later changed the name to "Hermann" because they thought it sounded better.

One might expect that, given the familial mores of the time, Johanna Fichte would have gotten along with her husband largely by deferring to him. But reports have it that she insisted, successfully, on bearing chief responsibility for the upbringing and education of their son. Immanuel Hermann Fichte (1796–1879) was to go on to have a distinguished career in philosophy in his own right, holding professorships at Bonn and Tübingen and producing a large output of philosophical writings, including a three-volume system of philosophy (1833–1846), a three-volume work on ethics (1850–1853), and a two-volume treatise on psychology (1864–1873). His career was not an easy one, however, because he too came into conflict with the authorities over his radical political views. In academic politics, he was controversial due to his opposition to the dominant Hegelian school of philosophy. Immanuel Hermann wrote a biography of his father, accompanying an edition of his correspondence, published in 1830–1831; he also served as editor of the first comprehensive edition of his father's philosophical writings, published in 1845–1846 (designated in my list of sources as "SW").

Fichte's brief years in Jena were fateful for the history of modern philosophy and even of modern culture—far more so than is now commonly appreciated.¹¹ This was due not only to Fichte's own accomplishments, but also because of the other important figures in German philosophy and intellectual life who were attracted to Jena in the 1790s and came under Fichte's direct influence. Among them was Johann Friedrich Herbart (1774–1881), who became the founder of the nineteenth-century discipline of empirical psychology. Herbart eventually broke with the approach of Fichte's Doctrine of Science, but for him it set self-consciousness as the basic problem of psychology. It was from Fichte that Herbart got the basic critique of traditional faculty psychology and his view that mental life was fundamentally active. Throughout the nineteenth century, Fichte was widely recognized as one of the founders of modern psychology.

Romanticism. Fichte's influence on the arts and literature was even more direct and profound than his influence on scientific psychology. The poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) produced early philosophical writings that are clearly Fichtean in their point of departure. Hölderlin's school-friend from Tübingen, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), came to Jena at Goethe's invitation as "Professor extraordinarius" in 1798. From 1795 onward, before he was even twenty years old,

¹¹ For good discussions of this influence, however, see Richards (2002), Chapter 2 and Beiser (2014), Chapter 2.

Schelling began writing philosophical treatises developing ideas drawn from Fichte's philosophy. They were so close to Fichte's position, in fact, that in polemics Fichte often treated criticisms of Schelling's treatises as criticisms of himself. It was only gradually that Schelling broke with Fichte philosophically, championing what Schelling called a "speculative" approach in contrast to what he saw as Fichte's "philosophy of reflection."¹²

Another school-friend of Hölderlin and Schelling, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), did not come to Jena until after Fichte's departure. His philosophy after 1800, however, grew out of his encounter with Fichte and Schelling. Hegel's first published work was on the *Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801). Schelling remained in Jena only until 1803, when his scandalous affair with Caroline Schlegel forced him to depart for Würzburg. Fichte's philosophy in the Jena period not only founded the German idealist philosophical movement but was also the philosophical inspiration for the intellectual (literary, political, religious) movement known as "early Romanticism." Fichte's dwelling in Jena, at Unterm Markt 12a, has now been turned into a museum called "das Romantikerhaus." It was the site of decisive events in modern philosophy, psychology, theology, and literature.

Early Romanticism was an intellectual circle centered on the family of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and his younger brother Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), together with their wives, Caroline (1763–1809) and Dorothea (1764–1839), who resided in Jena in the 1790s. The Schlegel brothers founded the influential journal *Athenaeum* in 1798. Their circle included Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853) and his sister Sophie (1775–1833), Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, known as Novalis (1772–1801). Novalis's noble family line included not only the later Prussian prime minister Karl August von Hardenberg (1750–1822) but also the family of Baron von Miltitz, so he was connected to Fichte's life from that direction as well.¹³

The early Romantics accepted much of Fichte's moral and political idealism, but they were by no means direct followers. They often took Fichte's emphasis on human community in an anti-Enlightenment or even anti-modernist direction. Above all, they rejected Fichte's conviction that philosophy must be rational and systematic. But rejections of philosophical systems are always parasitic on some specific systematic project; they can never survive without it. In the case of the early Romantics, it was Fichte's (never completed) system that served as this necessary background. The Romantic categories of "feeling" and "imagination" were taken over mainly from Fichte; so was the Romantic conception of the divine as an indeterminate transcendence to which we relate through action and aesthetic feeling

¹² For the texts documenting this break, see Vater and Wood (2012).

¹³ For an influential recent account of the early Romantic movement, and its connection to Fichte, see Frank (2003), especially Lecture 1.