

## Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Political Philosopher<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The First System of Freedom

The philosophical work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) is political through and through. His thinking, no matter how abstract, arid and seemingly removed from current affairs, reflected the dramatic developments of his age: from the French Revolution through the European Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte to the German national uprising in the Liberation Wars against the Corsican conqueror. The key concept of Fichte's eminently political philosophy was freedom: political freedom from oppression and domination, but also cognitive freedom from error and illusion, cultural freedom from foreign influences and manipulation, moral freedom from the dictates of selfish interests, social freedom from economic inequality and injustice, religious freedom from superstition and blind faith, and philosophical freedom from prejudice and presumption.

But the multiform freedom pursued by Fichte was not merely negative and geared at the removal of obstacles and detractions. Freedom for Fichte meant primarily the positive freedom of self-determination, politically speaking of self-governance and of the deliberate subjection to rules of one's own making or consenting. Accordingly, freedom for Fichte essentially involved norms for the proper use of freedom – laws that guide its employment in the pursuit of ends set and means chosen. More yet, for Fichte freedom understood as autonomy also served as the final end of human existence, something to be pursued for its own sake and not trumped by any other aim or object.

Fichte inherited the focus on freedom as the motor and goal of all worthy human life and as the chief concern of sustained philosophical reflection from Kant, who had devoted his mature philosophy to delimiting the conceptual space for freedom in a world otherwise governed by natural causal laws and their thoroughgoing determination of things and events. In particular, Kant had placed the human being in a twofold relation to reality: one of subordination to the laws of nature and one of exemption from such laws and subordination to the alternative legislation of freedom, chiefly manifest in the moral law governing self-determined agency.

The price Kant had paid for this dual image of human existence was a two-layered account of reality. The order of nature, manifestly real and governed by strict physical laws, was downgraded

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to the level of appearances, which, while not only semblance or mere illusion, had no subsistence of their own and pointed beyond themselves to their grounding in an inscrutable substratum of reality ("things in themselves"). On Kant's idealist account, the ordinary world of objects and persons in space and time reflected both the underlying but unknowable presence of the things (in) themselves and the shaping influence of universal human forms of knowing (space, time, and the categories, chiefly among them causality) that accounted for the lawful regularity of the spatio-temporal world.

Having been released from the binding laws of physical reality, the realm of things in themselves received its non-cognitive, practical interpretation in Kant's moral philosophy, where it served as the sphere for the grounds and bounds of human rational agency. Kant envisioned the conceptual space of freedom as a sphere of normative directions and constraints combining the negative freedom from natural determination with the formal freedom of choice and the positive freedom of rational self-determination.

Fichte followed Kant closely in the idealist interpretation of the natural world as involving mere, though real representations and in the correlation of free agency with an underlying stratum of reality outside of space, time and the natural causal order – a realm of radical freedom governed by non-natural, "moral" laws that involved norms rather than facts and commands ("ought") rather than descriptions ("is"). But he also sought to outdo Kant in extending the scope of the cognitive forms for the shaping of reality and in minimizing the role of the inscrutable things in themselves, which he reduced to formal limiting points providing resistance to human self-induced, spontaneous activity by holding the latter in "check".

Most importantly, Fichte aimed at expanding the foundational function of freedom, which Kant had limited to the moral world order, to include the physical world, now viewed as nothing but the natural sphere for the exercise of supra-natural freedom. Fichte's declared aim was to institute freedom as a truly universal and unitary principle that would provide the ultimate grounding for both worlds and provide for their integration by way of reciprocal interaction, with the natural world materially informing the moral order, and the moral order normatively enhancing the natural world.

In the process, Fichte sought to turn philosophy, which in Kant had been divided into the theoretical philosophy of nature and the practical philosophy of freedom, into an all-encompassing "system of freedom," and the first such system at that. In a closely related move, Fichte set out to establish reason, which in Kant had been divided into theoretical reason involved in the determination of

objects and practical reason involved in the determination of the will, as the unitary source and ultimate resource for normative claims of all kinds. Freedom, which for Kant had been the "cap stone" in the architecture of reason, was to become the common ground and unitary foundation for each and all of the integrated parts of the philosophical system.

For Fichte the unity of theoretical and practical reason, which already had been envisioned by Kant but located by him alternatively in an original dimension beyond human reach or grasp and in a final perspective aiming at an unreachable goal, was to find concrete realization in the convergence of theory and practice, of nature and freedom, of self and world. The basic modes of human spontaneous accomplishment, knowing and doing, previously correlated and compared but not actually integrated, were to be traced to a basic form or condition of self-determined and self-governed, "free" human activity.

Fichte used or coined various terms to describe the elusive ground of human reason in order to lend expression to its unitary but complexly structured and dynamically constituted character and its unique modality of freedom. Those terms – chiefly among them "positing" (*setzen*), "factual act" or "(f)act" (*Tathandlung*), and "intellectual intuition" (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) – were designed to convey the "original duplicity" of cognition and volition in a grounding dimension or a foundational layer preparing subsequent differentiation as much as transcending it.

The overall practical orientation of Fichte's intended first-ever system of freedom brought with it the constitutive character of willing in Fichte. For Fichte the primary reality was volitional – directly so in the immediate practical consciousness of the motives, objectives and norms of one's willing, and indirectly so in the mediated theoretical consciousness of the objects and products of willed action. At points Fichte even considered willing to be the only reality and all other seemingly real entities, including the subjects doing the willing and the objects willed, being nothing but projections and vehicles for the conveyance of willing.

The outlook on the world that resulted from Fichte's system of freedom and the primacy it granted to willing was that of a natural world fit and designed to be shaped by human work and of a socio-cultural ("moral") world suited and to be subject to change and innovation under the guiding principle of universal freedom. For Fichte the material world in general and human bodily existence in particular were but the sphere and instrument, respectively, for the material manifestation of a spontaneous mental activity attributable to the reign of "spirit" over matter and of minds over things.

Its spiritual origin combined with its somatic and social orientation made the system of freedom envisioned by Fichte unsuitable for conventional presentation and instruction. Rather than resulting in a body of philosophical doctrines to be transmitted by the spoken or written word, Fichte intended his public philosophical thinking to inspire his readers and listeners to their own free thinking about the grounds and bounds of freedom and to draw the consequences therefrom for their own lives. Taking up the principle of enlightenment, as formulated by Kant, viz., to think for oneself, Fichte challenged the intellectual public to make freedom and the rational self-determination it entailed the guiding principle of each and everyone's thinking and doing.

## 2. The Transcendental Science

The system of freedom projected by Fichte early on did not come to fruition all at once and completely. Fichte spent his entire professional life from 1793 through 1814 developing, revising and publicizing the system-to-be, producing over a dozens versions of it, all but the very first of which never were published during his life time. The elusive character of the system of freedom chiefly was owed to its ambitious aim of lending formal rigor and scientific method to the presentation of a subject matter that essentially eluded treatment in fixed concepts and concise doctrines, viz., the status and function of the unconditioned and infinite – freedom – in finite, conditioned life.

In its basic outlook Fichte's attempted scientific system of freedom followed Kant's project of a transcendental philosophy intent and able to provide the necessary conditions for the very possibility of the experience of objects in space and time. By distinguishing between the unlimited, non-empirical ("a priori") origin of transcendental principles and their limited, empirical ("a posteriori") use, Kant had sought to establish a "metaphysics of experience" (H. J. Paton) that combined the empiricist concern with the sensory bounds of reason with the rationalist focus on a kind of knowledge that was to be valid independent of experience.

Fichte set out to continue Kant's transcendental project of a non-empirical meta-knowledge about the conditions and limits of possible knowledge and of the possible objects of knowledge. He renamed transcendental philosophy "*Wissenschaftslehre*," alternatively translated as "doctrine of science" and "science of knowledge," in order to indicate the scientific status of philosophy as the foundational discipline for cognitive claims of all kinds. Unlike Kant, who had limited transcendental philosophy to theoretical philosophy concerned with the cognition of what is, Fichte was intent on including practical philosophy, specifically moral philosophy, in the scope of the

meta-science that philosophy was to be, even according it the prime position in the set-up of the system.

Fichte also followed Kant – and some early post-Kantians – closely in basing the transcendental-scientific system of freedom on a set of principles inspired by the Kantian first principle of apperception that involved the spontaneous generation of the basic structure of thinking, expressed in the universal proto-thought, "I think." In order to render the Kantian principle of apperception truly universal, Fichte expanded its scope to include the grounding of all kinds of cognition, volition and feeling. In the process, he replaced the specific terms, "thinking" and "intuiting," with the generic term, "positing," designed to convey the spontaneous pre-conscious mental activity underlying all conscious mental acts and any (self-)consciousness of them. Fichte also followed Kant in designating the alleged agency manifesting itself in conscious as well as pre-conscious mental acts with the nominalized pronoun of the first person, "the I."

For Fichte the I served not only as the origin and basic form of self-awareness of self-consciousness but also as the basis of all consciousness of objects and, by extension, of all objects of such consciousness. In particular, Fichte sought to trace the very fact of objects being given in experience to the original introduction – by the actively producing, "positing" I – of a produced, "posited" Not-I subject to further differentiation and determination into an entire world of objects. Fichte's covering term for the I in its dual function for the constitution of self-consciousness (subjectivity) and the constitution of the consciousness of objects (objectivity) was "subject-object" or "subject-objectivity."

When the first (and only) published version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – presented as "Foundation of the Entire *Wissenschaftslehre*" (1794/95) – met with hostile and polemic reception targeting the alleged solipsism and subjective idealism of the reformed transcendental philosophy, Fichte attempted a new presentation (*Wissenschaftslehre "nova methodo"*), in which he integrated the previously separate foundational, theoretical and practical parts of his first philosophy into a continuing philosophical narrative ("history of self-consciousness") about the emergence of self- and world-awareness on the part of a practically intelligent being whose will is formally free in its choice but materially bound by the theoretical and practical norms of correct cognition and right conduct. Chiefly among the norms of intelligent willing were the principles of law and ethics, to both of which Fichte devoted substantial book publications that lent a good measure of specificity and concreteness to the more general and abstract foundations of transcendental philosophy he had

provided previously. Other planned material extensions of the system of philosophy into the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of religion remained unrealized or merely sketched.

### 3. The State of Right

Fichte's philosophy of law appeared, under the title *Foundations of Natural Right*, in 1796/97, in advance of Kant's corresponding work, the "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right" from the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). Fichte's early philosophy of law differed considerably from Kant's slightly later work, which was to treat law together with ethics as an integral parts of moral philosophy subject to the moral law and based on the categorical imperative of right that unconditionally constrained everyone to limit the outward use of their own freedom to its compatibility with the corresponding freedom of everyone else. By contrast, Fichte – drawing on the early modern tradition of the social contract (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) – treated law as an object of prudential considerations based on the enlightened self-interest that individuals have in an association that affords them the security from each other and the solidarity with each other deemed essential for the productive pursuit of their own ends.

The move from a specifically moral to a decidedly political conception of right in general and of legal obligation and lawful constraint in particular marked a radical break, on Fichte's part, with the tradition of natural law that had tied the juridical sphere to moral norms allegedly based in the nature of things, including human nature. Still Fichte shared the intent of natural law to subject positive, historically actual law to supra-positive and transhistorical conditions in order to assure the freedom of law from arbitrary choice based on the partial interests of power and domination. But unlike the cosmological or theological grounding of traditional natural law in a world order or a divine will, law in Fichte – to the extent that it was natural, as opposed to historical, universal, as opposed to particular, and necessary, as opposed to contingent – was founded upon the requirements of self-conscious intelligent agency. Fichte extended his transcendental argumentation to the legal and political sphere, claiming that the establishment of a juridico-political order in general and of a liberal such order in particular was a necessary condition for the emergence and flourishing of fully human individuals.

More specifically, Fichte argued that human beings could achieve consciousness of themselves not in isolation from each other but only in community with each other and in a "free community" at that. While centering the political order of law around the self-determined, free individual human being and introducing right as a legal principle along with its plural realizations (rights) for the ulterior purpose of individual freedom, Fichte considered individuality and its legal entitlements not

natural occurrences but the result of a legal and political formative process that turned pre-social intelligent animals into free citizens.

For Fichte the transition from the single, asocial and pre-political human individual to a juridico-political community of socialized and freely associating individuals involved an act of "recognition," more precisely the recognition of one intelligent agent by another such being and as such a being. In a fictitious original scene of congregation Fichte had an already emerged, practically rational human being seek to initiate the emergence of freely chosen rational conduct in a human being of only dormant practical rationality. The "solicitation" or "summons" to a life of rational willing was to be based on facial and other bodily features that indicated the rational potential in a still pre-rational individual.

As a call to conscious practical freedom, the educational influence exercised by one individual on another was not to operate through sheer physical force. Rather the summons to a life of practical reason was to take the form of symbolically mediated communication, such as speech. Moreover, the recognition involved was not to remain a singular and one-sided event but was to result in reciprocal and continuing recognitional conduct and to extend beyond the two parties involved in the original social scene to include an entire community constituted and maintained by free mutual influence.

According to Fichte, the instrument for enabling and assuring consistent communal recognitional conduct was the principle of right, according to which everyone was to have the use of their individual freedom informed – in effect, limited – by the notion of everyone else's individual freedom. The sphere of right so established allowed and assured the socially compatible exercise of freedom in a common space delimited by the multilateral recognition of everyone's equal status as a free rational agent.

The right so derived, as a condition of the original emergence and continued existence of self-conscious intelligent agency, was not, as in Kant, a moral necessity but a matter of pragmatic rationality. On Fichte's account, it would constitute an illogical inconsistency in the conduct of one's life to first benefit from the social initiation into intelligent agency and subsequently negate and even undermine the very conditions of such rational socialization by refusing to continually and reciprocally recognize other intelligent agents as such in one's own continuing conduct toward them.

In order to lend stability and reliability to the rationally indicated practice of continued recognitional conduct, Fichte had the original institution of right include the establishment of a power sufficiently strong to assure and effectively enforce compliance with the rightful conduct. That social power was the state understood as a state of right in which the exercise of power and the use of force were subject to restricting conditions reflecting the state's narrow purpose as a guarantor of the legal order and not as a guardian of morality or a provider of social welfare.

The basic outlines of political governance provided by Fichte's philosophy of right stood in the early-modern tradition of the social contract and included an entire series of such contracts by means of which the state was first instituted and the citizens originally submitted to its power. Most notable among the further features that make up the Fichtean state as the political protector of right were: an account of property that sought to balance private ownership and social utility, a conception of punishment for legal transgression that considered the transgressor as someone who, by disregarding the law's constraining force, also has placed himself outside the law's protective force, and the institution of a supervisory body ("ephorate") overseeing the just order and operation of the state and entitled as well as called upon to intervene in circumstances of bad governance.

A certain tendency to legal overregulation of citizens' compliance with the law notwithstanding, Fichte's early philosophy of law belongs into the modern tradition of the liberal state according to which the state is set up to enable and safeguard the citizens' personal freedom in the exercise of their rights, which involve the acquisition and exchange of material and immaterial property. Accordingly, the equality involved in mutual recognitional conduct is primarily a legal equality, at the exclusion of the political freedom expressed in participatory legislation or popular rule.

Neither did Fichte's legal egalitarianism include a specifically legal concern with social equality. Fichte was to address the latter issue outside the confines of legal philosophy proper in the sphere of "applied politics." In particular, in his later work in political economy (*The Closed Commercial State*; 1800) he advocated from a juridico-political standpoint the socio-political goal of individual and national economic self-sufficiency, arguing for its legal basis in the universal right to be able to live from one's work and its political grounding in the state's extensive governance of the market of goods and labor.

#### 4. A Concrete Ethics

By assigning the philosophical foundation of law and politics to contractual rules of prudence governing the institution and preservation of socially enabled individual flourishing Fichte had



reduced practical philosophy in the Kantian sense of a moral philosophy based on an unconditional law of conduct (moral law) to the narrow field of ethics. Still Fichte's *System of Ethics*, published in 1798 closely after the appearance of Kant's late material ethics, the "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue" in Part Two of the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), differed considerably from his predecessor's ethics of unconditional command (categorical imperative). For Fichte ethics was not a matter of imposed instruction or even of self-imposed lawfulness in one's ethical intentions (maxims) but of enhancing naturally and socially embedded individual life by means of rational choice in light of the ultimate end of complete freedom. Accordingly, ethics was not to focus on curbing affects and passions but on seeking out and marshaling those natural forces inside and outside the human being which, in a given situation, could best contribute to the ever-closer approximation of the elusive final goal of supreme self-determination.

The methodological ideal of a naturally and socially embedded, concrete ethics notwithstanding, Fichte's *System of Ethics* was for the most part not concerned with specifying ethical obligations (duties) according to social circumstance but with the derivation ("deduction") of the chief rule of ethical conduct and of the formal and material conditions that assure its possible effective application under suitable circumstances. Given the preponderance of basic reflections on the conditions of the very possibility of ethical action, Fichte's *System of Ethics* presented itself, to a large extent, as a proto-ethics addressing the pre-ethical requirements for an ethical life, which chiefly included a constitution of the self and of the world amenable to the ethical project of transforming determined nature into self-determining freedom.

In its core Fichte's (proto-)ethics offered a transcendental theory of free willing. Fichte had the self ("I") originally come to self-awareness as a being that wills, i.e., that self-determines its actions through the concept of an end to be chosen, intended and enacted. Fichte's specific claim was that a finite intelligent being originally encounters itself *only* as willing; no other relation to itself would afford such a being an incipient awareness of itself as a self – as a being essentially involved in a self-relation that lets it both grasp and generate its own, free being. At the most basic level, the originally free, will-endowed being was said to will itself, more precisely its own freedom in the practice of self-determination. For Fichte, being free of any alienating determination from within and without and self-constituting oneself in genuine, pure self-determination required that one's willing be guided by concepts, and by a conception of free agency at that.

Considered in its overall design, Fichte's ethics was marked by the seemingly contrary characters of aiming at concreteness in terms of the content of ethical action and at absoluteness in the modality

of the overall pursuit of freedom for freedom's sake. Fichte sought to reconcile these contrary tendencies by distinguishing between the matter of ethical freedom, which was provided by changing circumstances and specific situations, and its identical form, which consisted in free self-determination for its own sake. Moreover, he placed the material and the formal factor of ethical action in a developmental relation according to which a given ethical action was to be identified and chosen in view of its hypothetical standing in an infinite sequence of interrelated acts ("series") ideally terminating in the final purpose of absolute freedom.

The claimed correlation of a given ethical act to an ideal ethical series reflected Fichte's concern with the integration of nature and morality. Natural ends as well as means were to be regarded as instrumental in view of a supranatural project – the project of complete, absolute freedom – that could only be realized, or rather infinitely approximated, in the natural world and under the latter's conditions, which were therefore to be regarded as enabling as much as limiting conditions for the free final end of ethics.

But it was not only the natural world that was subordinated to ethical ends. On Fichte's account, the human individual, too, ultimately was only an instrument for the supra-individual end of reason realized across individuals and beyond personal limits. Rather than being the subject and author of ethical perfection, the individual human being was but the vehicle and medium for the implementation of the moral law. For Fichte the point of ethics was to assure that, in the long run, all would act in the same, perfectly rational way.

In order to assure the proper match of a particular end or action willed with the infinite series terminating in sheer self-determination and perfect freedom Fichte resorted to "conscience" as an ethical arbiter. He considered the latter's unreflected consent to a considered course of action an infallible indicator of the action's ethical qualification for advancing the long-term goal of all ethical pursuits, i.e., the exclusive rule of reason in the world within and without. For Fichte ethical qualification did not involve the possible universalization of subjective principles of action (maxims), as maintained by Kant, but the action's possible integration into the road to reason revealed by the inner voice of conscience.

In addition to seeking to correlate natural and ethical ends of willing Fichte's concrete ethics also aimed at coordinating the independent course of ethical action of plural and even infinitely many individual human agents. Drawing on older metaphysical speculations, chiefly to be found in Leibniz, about a divinely prearranged match and fit between independent, self-sufficiently operating

individual beings (monads) Fichte maintained a pre-established harmony of sorts between individual agents that assured, in principle, the effective cooperation of ethical agents in pursuit of the common goal of reason's rule. Fichte sought to avoid the deterministic implications of such a preordained ethical world order by distinguishing between the ethical necessity of a given action and the factual contingency as to who would carry out the preordained action at what point in time and place in space.

The dual concern with the natural embeddedness and the supranatural freedom of ethical action also animated Fichte's account of the "drives" that were said to orient and motivate all human activity including specifically ethical pursuits. Kant had entrusted pure practical, "moral" reason with the exceptional ability to sufficiently determine the will to action entirely independent from other motivating grounds such as sensory impulses ("incentives"), in the process construing morality as anti-nature and burdening reason with complete responsibility for moral motivation. For Fichte any ethical efficacy on the part of practical reason had to be grounded in the agent's nature broadly conceived. The latter chiefly included the agent being driven in one way or another to this or that end. On Fichte's account there could be no action without a corresponding directing and driving force in the agent.

Rather than juxtaposing drive-ridden and reason-driven action Fichte sought to integrate rational and ethical action into a comprehensive account of human agency. In particular, Fichte distinguished as well as conjoined the "natural drive," originating in human sensory nature, and the "pure drive," issuing from human rational nature. The two drives were said to merge to form the "ethical drive" as a "mixed drive," reputedly taking its content from the natural drive and its form from the pure drive. Alternatively to this compositional, synthetic account, Fichte considered the duality of formal and material drives as one-sided and complementary manifestations of an originally unitary drive ("proto-drive") that eluded direct presentation.

While Fichte's integrationist construal of the mixed drive managed to combine natural and rational determining factors in the constitution of the ethical drive, it did not address the essential element of freedom in human action in general and in ethical action in particular. With respect to human freedom Fichte argued for the need of any drive-based action to require the approval through freely given consent, without which no drive could become effective in a being acting not on impulse alone but in view of a conception of ends. The freedom so exercised was the "formal freedom" involved in each action to be called free, as opposed to the "material freedom" that constituted the specific end of ethical action, viz., complete self-determination as an end in itself.

Its strict separation from law and politics notwithstanding, Fichte's concrete ethics included a critical perspective on human social existence in the modern state. For Fichte the state as a legal instrument for the institution and preservation of right relying on force and constraint was an essentially temporary measure eventually to be supplanted by a genuinely ethical community. The alternative socio-political organization envisioned in Fichte's *System of Ethics* was an ethical, inner state or a "church," where the latter term was not being understood to designate a particular religious community with a special creed and a specific set of beliefs but the potentially universal quasi-political body of ethically minded human beings that have overcome the limitations of selfish individuality in favor of regarding and treating their individuality as a vehicle for the ethical state.

Fichte's supra-political conception of a universal ethical community added to the rather liberal features of his philosophy of law, which had stressed the rule of law and the equality of rights, a more communitarian ethos of social life marked by the subordination of the individual under the whole of which it was at once a constitutive member and a resultant function. For Fichte the ethical purpose of social existence was not the material and moral flourishing of the individual but the latter's integration into a "world of spirits" that transcended spatial and temporal location and limitation and was expressive of the unconditional, "absolute" nature of reason.

#### 5. Philosophical Teacher and Public Intellectual

Fichte's innovative and rapid development of philosophy as a comprehensive system of knowledge based on human spontaneity and freedom had taken place in the institutional context of his academic teaching and publishing. But within four years Fichte's prominent position as a professor of philosophy at the University of Jena came to a sudden end when he lost this influential post over charges of atheism leveled against his published views on religion, according to which what was traditionally called "God" amounted to nothing but the sum-total of the world viewed in a perfectionist moral perspective ("moral world order"). Further accusations included the identification of idealism with "nihilism" or the denial of any reality other than the one brought forth ("posited") by the human being. Fichte spent the next decade mainly in Berlin, giving private instruction and offering public lecture courses to an adult audience, before eventually assuming a professorship at the newly founded University of Berlin (1810-1814), where he served as rector, dean and professor until his early death from an infectious disease contracted from his wife, who had worked as a nurse in a Berlin military hospital.

The willful misrepresentations and grotesque misunderstandings of his published views made Fichte ever more skeptical of lending a fixed form to his ongoing philosophical work. On the average once every year during the fourteen remaining years of his life Fichte offered a new, substantially revised, if not radically altered presentation of his core philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*), none of them brought to publication by him and made available only in the posthumous publication of his complete works. His contemporaries only knew of Fichte's further work through a number of published lecture series in the philosophy of history, philosophy of religion, philosophy of education and philosophy of culture that built on his core philosophy but substituted systematic rigor for popular appeal, exhortation for argument and rejection for refutation.

The pronounced parallelism of scholarship and popularity in Fichte's mature and late thinking was philosophically motivated. For Fichte philosophy was not to be a self-sufficient academic exercise in pursuit of some rare and superior knowledge but the acquisition and application of a range of insights informed by natural and social reality and bent on acting back on that reality by way of transformation and with the end of emendation. In line with Fichte's thorough conviction of the essential freedom of human existence, any such improving influence of philosophy on the wider population had to take the form of intelligent instruction rather than indolent indoctrination.

Fichte's covering term for the extra-philosophical origin of philosophical insight as well as for its extra-philosophical *telos* was "life," the latter term not taken in a narrow biological sense but as a designation for the self-contained inherently dynamic realm of reality which philosophy might mirror in sustained reflection ("speculation") without ever achieving the latter's vitality and independence. The point of philosophy for Fichte was to give a comprehensive account of life that could in turn serve to redirect the latter's course.

The overall trajectory of Fichte's mature and late philosophy was marked by his growing concern with the distance that separated philosophical speculation from a real life that was to exhibit the very freedom considered in the abstract by his own system of freedom. Rather than offering his philosophical insights as lessons to be learned, Fichte came to understand and present them as insights that the philosopher-apprentice had to *become*. Philosophy was not to be a matter of simply *having* some knowledge but of actually *being* that knowledge – of instantiating the knowledge about the grounds and conditions of reality in one's own thinking and doing, in the process turning knowledge obtained into wisdom lived.

The chief step toward the serial presentations of *Wissenschaftslehre* from Fichte's later years was undertaken with the second lecture course from the year 1804. The later Fichte abandoned the earlier focus on the (positing, opposing and compositing) I in favor of a two-stage account of knowledge as grounded unconditionally or absolutely in some inscrutable prior dimension ("the absolute," "being," "God") and grounding in turn the world as the sum-total of possible or actual objects of knowledge. According to Fichte, the basic move from being to knowing was marked by conditional necessity. While it was to be regarded as a matter of cosmic contingency, not to be derived from any law or decree, that the absolute manifested itself or "appeared," the appearance itself, once it has to be taken to have occurred, followed strict rules, chiefly including the absolute's original manifestation as knowledge, rather than as (objective) being, and the derivative status of thingly being as a lawful product of non-empirical, "transcendental" subjectivity ("knowledge").

The overtly metaphysical, even theological language ("God," "revelation") to be encountered in the later Fichte was probably adopted in an attempt to comply with the changing conceptual practices of his philosophical contemporaries (F. H. Jacobi, F. W. J. Schelling) and resulted from Fichte's intent to reach an audience no longer inclined to Kant's sober critique of reason. The changed character of the later works more has led many interpreters past and present to sever the later Fichte from his earlier, specifically critical phase, even settling him with the diagnosis of mysticism, offered alternatively as an attribution of praise or of blame.

Still to the unprejudiced reader who takes into view Fichte's entire literary production, Fichte appears as far more consistent in his views and continuous in his developments. The "absolute I" of the early Fichte, which designated more the aspect of absoluteness or the unconditional character underlying the finite I than an independent entity of its own, anticipated the later figuration of the unconditional ground of knowledge as "the absolute." Just as the close connection of the absolute with knowledge in the later Fichte took up his earlier exclusive emphasis of the unconditional, self-regulated, "free" character of knowledge independent of natural factors and preternatural dictates.

The later Fichte went to great lengths in maintaining the close correlation between the absolute, which was said to manifest itself only in knowledge, as knowledge and for knowledge, and knowledge, which was essentially absolute in its basic character as objectively conceived cognition independent of psychological, physiological and physical conditions that might contribute to its occasional articulation but did not constitute its validity. In particular, Fichte presented the core insight of philosophy as the intuitive grasp of the mutual requirement of thinking and being, of the real and the ideal, of subject and object in an original point of unity that was as much the origin of

differentiation as of unification, of disjunction as of conjunction, and which properly constituted what was absolute and not subject anything else.

A further feature uniting the early and the later Fichte was the articulation of knowledge as the central topic of first philosophy into a five-fold structure of the chief domains of knowledge and their associated world views. Building on earlier discussions of the fivefold cyclical set-up of knowledge ("synthetic periodic structure"), the later Fichte distinguished and interrelated the ascending series of world views, reaching from nature through (juridical) law, ethics and religion to their integration and sublimation through philosophy.

Compared to the detailed doctrines contained in his earlier works, the elaborate reflections of the later Fichte on the absolute and its appearance, i.e., knowledge, can seem monotonous and repetitious. While limiting the doctrinal core of his later philosophy to ever fewer basic propositions, ultimately reducing them to the "one thought" that the absolute "is" and has knowledge as its "appearance," Fichte insisted ever more on the existential import of philosophical insight, eventually sending off his listeners with the adoration: "Now that you have knowledge, become wisdom!"

The basic continuity between the early and the later Fichte notwithstanding, one central feature is conspicuously absent from Fichte's later thinking in general and from the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in particular. The former "system of freedom," with its constitutive linkage of knowledge and freedom, seemed to have turned into a system of absolute knowledge – a system of knowledge as the absolute-in-appearance, which is at once a system of knowledge about the absolute and a system about knowledge instantiating the absolute. Freedom now resided primarily in the inscrutable contingency of the absolute's apparition, which involved, according to Fichte, an "irrational *hiatus*" that defied rational rules.

## 6. A Political Philosophy of History and Religion

The former focus on freedom that seemed to elude Fichte's later work in first philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) found a new outlet in Fichte's later popular philosophy, chiefly in his philosophical reflections on the course of political history past, present and future and the allied developmental account of religion. In these works – chiefly among them *Basic Traits of the Present Age* (1805-06), *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808) and *The Doctrine of the State* (1813) – Fichte stepped forth as a cultural critic, political preacher and religious philosopher bent on illuminating the past, castigating the present and preparing the future of humanity.

Drawing on Kant's conjectural history of human development in the juridico-ethical sphere as a natural history of freedom and anticipating Hegel's developmental history of the ever-increasing consciousness of freedom, Fichte read human history as the gradual emergence of regulated social life from instinctual guidance through selfishly employed reason to socially responsible practical rationality. The overall development of human history traced by Fichte ran from the initial clandestine rule of reason under the guise of instinctual control through the contrarian and chaotic liberation of reason from natural guidance to an eventual return to lawful order and secured stability on the basis of enlightened freedom and insight

After first having located the nadir of human history in his own present – citing the latter's materialist world view, naturalist philosophical outlook and cult of common sense –, Fichte came to see the beginnings of a world-historical reversal from selfish reason to social reason in the fateful situation of the German lands, in particular his adopted home country, Prussia, in a situation marked by the complete military defeat through Napoleon and the ensuing complete collapse of the old political life. Tracing an ancient German – or rather, Germanic – lineage of political freedom and quintessentially republican rule, Fichte appealed to his fellow countrymen to undertake a twofold cultural-political revolution, outwardly from imperial rule and inwardly from princely power, effectively calling for a unified "republic of the Germans."

While couched in a markedly nationalist language, involving aggressive appeals to the cultural and intellectual superiority of the "German nation" over the civilized nations in the orbit of the ancient Roman Empire, chiefly among them France, Fichte's philosophy of political liberation was cosmopolitan in scope and intent. Fichte outright defined patriotism as the political practice of advancing the universal human goal of equal freedom in one's own nation first, only to move on from there beyond national bounds and borders. On Fichte's instrumentalist understanding, nationalism was cosmopolitanism-in-progress. In Fichte's vision post-Napoleonic France and politically liberated Germany were to form the core of an enlightened Europe of the future.

The concrete outlines of the new European order that lay beyond the previously prevalent political oppression from within and without emerged in Fichte's late political philosophy, which was developed as a political history of religion from the ancient world to the new, modern world. In particular, Fichte stressed the political advances brought about by the universal claims of the Christian religion that had overturned the exclusive tie of human dignity to civic status, to be found



in the pagan ancient world, in favor of the dignity of each and every human being independent of socio-political status.

While evidencing a philosophical appreciation of its socio-political advancements, Fichte's selective appropriation of the Christianity disregarded, even discarded specific teachings, notably those concerning sin and salvation, maintaining instead the mutual corruption of human beings in social relations marked by the arbitrary exercise of power but also their ability to establish a political order based on the reign of right. For Fichte, as for Kant before him and Hegel after him, human history was - or rather, was to be – the history of establishing a rightful political order at the national and international level.

An integral part of the political progress from force to right and from unfree domination to free self-determination envisioned by Fichte was the eventual substitution of external constraint through free, voluntary compliance in the maintenance of just laws and political order. In particular, Fichte contrasted the earlier observance of law through "blind faith," characteristic of traditional societies and their casting of political obligations as religiously sanctioned rules, with the free compliance borne from "insight" into the nature of right and its basis in the equal freedom of everyone.

Still Fichte's writings, especially those from his later years, largely because of their overt theological language, lent themselves to religious appropriation, just as his insistence on the strict, moral or political laws correlated with universal freedom lent itself to a reading that stressed authority rather than autonomy and submission rather than liberation in the governance of human conduct. It should not come as a surprise then that the spectrum of positions that lay claim to Fichte's profoundly political philosophy ranged from liberals, even libertarians, through socialists and communists to nationalists and religious reactionaries. In contemporary academic philosophy, though, Fichte chiefly has been read, regarded and respected as a critical thinker in the tradition of Kant who made major contributions to the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of law, ethics and political philosophy and who initiated the move from Kant's plural foundations of philosophy to a unitary but complexly organized system of philosophy under the guiding principle of freedom.

#### Bibliographical Note

Fichte's works are available in two comprehensive German-language editions, the first one undertaken by his son, a philosopher in his own right, during the first half of the nineteenth century and available in a modern reprint, the second, more complete one undertaken by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences over the past sixty years: *Fichte's Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte, 11 vols. (Berlin: de

Gruyter, 1971) and *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. R. Lauth et al., 42 vols. in four series (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-2012).

Fichte's influential early works dating from his Jena period (1794-1799) are available in modern English translations, chiefly among them: *Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions*, transl. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and transl. D. Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo (1796/99)*, ed. and transl. D. Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, ed. and transl. D. Breazeale (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994); *Foundations of Natural Law*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser and transl. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and *The System of Ethics*, ed. and transl. D. Breazeale and G. Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Fichte's most widely read publication, a popular work from 1800 that summarizes his philosophical position at the end of the Jena years, is available in several modern English translations, among them *The Vocation of Man*, ed. R. Chisholm (New York: Macmillan, 1986). Major later works by Fichte available in reliable recent translations into English are the magisterial course on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804 – the second of three presentations from that year alone –, *The Science of Knowing. J. G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*, transl. and ed. W. Wright (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), and *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. G. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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Günter Zöllner, *Fichte lesen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Holzboog, 2013) is an expanded version of the present essay, including ample references to Fichte's texts and to recent research.