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978-0-521-11279-6 - Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation  
Johann Gottlieb Fichte  
Excerpt  
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## ATTEMPT AT A CRITIQUE OF ALL REVELATION

To  
*Dr Franz Volkmar Reinhard*  
Chief Court Chaplain  
As a pure sacrifice of the freest devotion  
By the author<sup>1</sup>

II

Most honored Sir:

Not my own opinion of this writing but rather the favorable judgment of it by worthy men made me so bold as to give it that designation, so honorable to it, in this second edition.

It is no more within my province to praise your merits before the public than it would be possible for you to listen to it even from one more worthy: the greatest merit was always the most modest.

Yet even the Deity allows his rational creatures to let their feelings of devotion and love for him pour forth in words in order to satisfy the need of their overflowing hearts, and the good man will surely not deny this to his fellow man.

Therefore, you will certainly accept kindly the assurance of similar feelings flowing from the same source.

From the sincerest admirer of Your Reverence,  
Johann Gottlieb Fichte

<sup>1</sup> This dedication was added in the second edition.

## Preface to the first edition

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This essay is called an *Attempt*, not as though one had in general to grope about blindly and feel for the ground in investigations of this kind and were unable ever to find a sure result, but rather because *I* may not yet credit myself with the maturity to set forth this sure result. In any event, this writing was not at first intended for publication; honorable men judged it kindly, and they were the ones who gave me the first notion of submitting it to the public.

Here it is. The style and wording are mine, and censure or disdain affecting these matters affects only me, and that is not much. The result is a matter of truth, and that is more. This result must be subjected to a strict, but careful and impartial, examination. I, at least, proceeded impartially.

I may have erred, and it would be a wonder if I had not. What form of reprimand I deserve is for the public to decide.

I will gratefully acknowledge every correction in whatever tone it may be couched and will counter as best I can every objection that seems to me to be contrary to the cause of truth. To it, to the truth, I solemnly devote myself upon the occasion of my first appearance in public. Without regard for party or for my own honor, I will always acknowledge as true what I consider to be true, from wherever it may come, and will never acknowledge as true what I do not consider to be true.

This preface was originally omitted from the first edition (see Introduction, p. ix above). It was printed in the second edition with the following note: "Through an oversight this preface and the genuine title page signed by the author were omitted in the Easter Fair edition but issued later. *The Publisher*."

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*Preface to the first edition*

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13      May the public forgive me for having spoken about myself in their presence this first and only time. This assurance may be quite unimportant to them; but it was important to me for my own sake to make them witnesses to my solemn vow.

Königsberg, December 1791

## Preface to the second edition

Even with this second edition the present writing still remains an attempt, embarrassing as it has been for me to approximate – though from a great distance – the kind opinion that a respectable portion of the public may have formed about the author. However firmly, in my opinion, the critique of revelation may stand on the foundation of practical philosophy as a separate adjacent structure, it only becomes joined to the whole structure by means of a critical investigation of the entire family to which that concept belongs, and which I would like to call the family of the ideas of reflection, and only by this means does it become inseparably united with it.

It was this critique of the ideas of reflection that I would have offered rather than a second edition of the present text if I had had sufficient leisure to accomplish more than I have actually accomplished. However, I shall proceed without delay to work on the materials gathered for this purpose, and this text will then be a further analysis of a portion of that critique which is to be treated only briefly there.

What I have added or changed in this second edition, and why – every expert, I hope, will perceive for himself. A few reminders, among which I mention with respect those in the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*,<sup>1</sup> caught my eye too late for me to be able to take them into consideration expressly. Since, however, they do not concern my treatment as a whole but can be satisfied by a more extensive elucidation of specific results, I hope to satisfy the worthy reviewer fully in the prospective critique of the ideas of reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> A review, written by Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, appeared in two parts in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, in the editions of November 24 and December, 1, 1792, pp. 1873–87 and 1917–23.

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*Preface to the second edition*

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I still owe the public a closer definition of the promise I made in the first preface to answer every objection to this critique that seems to me to be unfounded. I was able to make this promise only in this sense: to the extent that it would appear to me that truth itself, or its presentation, might profit by a discussion of the objections. And there seems to me to be no worthier way of achieving this purpose than by taking objections only tacitly into account in my future works, when I could not name the objector with the highest esteem – objections, that is, against what I actually assert or seem to assert, but not against what I expressly deny.

For the Jubilate Fair, 1793<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The book appeared at the Easter or Jubilate Fair, one of the three annual trade fairs in Leipzig, which was also the center of the German publishing industry. The fair began officially on the third Sunday after Easter (Jubilate Sunday).

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§I *Introduction*

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§I

Introduction

It is a remarkable phenomenon, to say the least, that in the case of all nations as soon as they have raised themselves from the condition of complete savagery to sociality, the observer encounters notions of a communication between higher beings and humans, traditions of supernatural inspirations and influences of the Deity on mortals. Sometimes more crude, sometimes more refined, but nevertheless universal, he encounters the concept of *revelation*. This concept in itself seems to deserve some respect, therefore, even if only in virtue of its universality. And for a thorough philosophy it seems more fitting to trace its origin, to investigate its presumptions and warrants, and to pronounce judgment on it according to these discoveries than to relegate it directly and unexamined either to the fabrications of swindlers or to the land of dreams. If this investigation is to be philosophical, it must be undertaken from a priori principles – and specifically from those of practical reason if this concept should be related solely to religion, as is to be assumed at least at the outset. This investigation will also abstract completely from anything particular that might be possible in a given revelation; indeed, it will even ignore the question of whether any revelation is given, in order generally to establish principles valid for every revelation. 16

One is only too easily carried away by a preconceived opinion in examining a topic that seems to have such important consequences for humanity, concerning which every one of its members has the right to vote – and by far the majority exercise it – and which is therefore

*Gesamtausgabe*, p. 18.

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either boundlessly honored or excessively despised and hated. Since this is the case, it is here doubly necessary to look only at the path that criticism prescribes, to walk straight along it without having an eventual goal in mind, and to await its verdict without putting words into its mouth.

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§2 *Theory of the will*

§2

Theory of the will in preparation for a deduction  
 of religion in general

To determine oneself to produce a representation with the consciousness of one's own activity is called *volition*; the faculty of determining oneself with this consciousness of self-activity is called the *faculty of desire* (both [terms taken] in their broadest meaning). Volition is distinguished from the faculty of desire as the actual from the possible. Whether the consciousness of self-activity appearing in volition might not perhaps deceive us remains uninvestigated and undecided for the present.

The representation to be produced is either *given*, insofar namely as a representation can be given – as is presupposed from theoretical philosophy as settled and acknowledged as regards its *material* – or self-activity *produces* it even as regards its material as well, the possibility or impossibility of which we shall leave entirely aside for the time being.

I

The material of a representation, if it is not to be produced by absolute spontaneity, can be given only to receptivity, and this only in sensation. For even the forms of intuition and concepts that are given a priori, insofar as they are to constitute the *material* of a representation, must be given to sensation, in this case to inner sensation. Consequently, every object of the faculty of desire to which a representation corresponds, and whose material is not produced by absolute spontaneity, stands under the

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This chapter was added in the second edition. *Gasmetausgabe*, pp. 135–53.



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conditions of sensibility and is empirical. So in this regard the faculty of desire is not capable of an a priori determination at all; whatever is to become its object must be sensed, and let itself be sensed, and the representation of the *matter* of the volition (the *material* of the representation to be produced) must have preceded every volition.

Now in the mere faculty of determining oneself through the representation of the material of a representation to produce this representation itself, however, the determination is not yet posited, just as in the possible the actual is not yet posited. The representation, in other words, is not to determine, in which case the subject would be merely passive – would *be* determined but would not *determine* itself – but rather *we* are to determine ourselves by means of the representation, which “by means of” will become fully clear at once. Namely, there must be a *medium* that is determinable from one side by the representation, to which the subject is related merely passively, and from the other side by spontaneity, the consciousness of which is the distinguishing characteristic of all volition. And this medium we call the *impulse*.

18 That which affects the mind *from the one side* in sensation as merely passive is its material or matter, not its form, which is given to it by the mind through its self-activity.<sup>a</sup> The impulse is thus determinable, insofar as it involves a sensation, only by the material element of this sensation, by the element that is immediately sensed in being affected.

That element in the matter of the sensation which has the character of determining the impulse we call *pleasant*; and the impulse, insofar as it is thereby determined, we call the *sensuous* impulse. We offer these explanations for the present as nothing more than explanations of terms.

Now sensation in general is divided into that of *outer* and that of *inner* sense. The first of these intuitively indirectly the alterations of appearances in space; the second intuitively directly in time the modifications of our mind, insofar as it is appearance. And the impulse, insofar as it involves sensations of the first kind, can be called *coarsely sensuous*; and insofar as it is determined by sensations of the second kind, it can be called *finely sensuous*. In both cases, however, the impulse is related solely to the pleasant *because* and *insofar as* it is pleasant. A presumed superiority of the latter could be based, however, on nothing more than the fact that its objects

<sup>a</sup> This form of empirical intuition, insofar as it is empirical, is the object of the feeling of the beautiful. *Rightly understood*, this uncovers an easier way of penetrating into the field of aesthetic judgment.

§2 *Theory of the will*

afforded *more* pleasure but not a pleasure different *in kind*. Someone who preferred to be determined by it could at most pride himself that he better understood enjoyment; and he could not prove even that to someone who assured him that he didn't take his finer enjoyments seriously at all but praised his coarser ones – since that depends on sensuous taste, which is not subject to dispute, and since all pleasant affections of inner sense may finally be traced back to pleasant outer sensations.

*From the other side*, if this impulse is to be determinable through spontaneity, then this determination takes place *either* according to given laws that are merely applied to the impulse by spontaneity, hence not directly by spontaneity, *or* it takes place without any laws, hence directly by absolute spontaneity.

In the first case, that faculty in us which applies given laws to given material is judgment. Consequently, it would have to be judgment that determined the sensuous impulse in accordance with the laws of the understanding. Judgment cannot do this in the way that sensation does, by giving material to the impulse, for judgment gives nothing at all but only orders the given manifold under the synthetic unity.

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All the above mental faculties, to be sure, provide abundant material through their transactions *for* the sensuous impulse, but they do not give it *to* the impulse; sensation gives them to it. The activity of the understanding in thought, the lofty vistas that reason opens to us, the reciprocal communication of thoughts among rational beings, and the like – these are certainly fertile sources of enjoyment. But we draw from these sources precisely as we are affected by the tickling of the palate: through sensation.

Furthermore, the manifold that it orders *for the determination of the sensuous impulse* cannot be the manifold of *one* given intuition in itself, as it must for the understanding in order to lead it to concepts for the purpose of theoretical knowledge. Thus it cannot be a determination of the material by form, because the sensuous impulse is determined by the material alone, and not at all by concepts (a remark that is very important for the theory of the faculty of desire, for by neglecting it one is led astray into the field of aesthetic judgment). Rather, [there must be] *manifold* pleasant sensations. The faculty of judgment during this transaction stands completely and simply in the service of sensibility, which supplies both manifold and standard of comparison: the understanding furnishes nothing but the rules of the system.