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978-0-521-79145-8 - Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762-1799

Anthony J. La Vopa

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

“The fate we share,” Johann Gottlieb Fichte explained to the several hundred students who had packed into his lecture hall one evening in 1794, is that our “particular calling” entails precisely what “one’s general calling as a human being” requires.<sup>1</sup> His own life bore witness to his conviction that the most human of callings, and the one to which Reason itself had assigned him, was philosophy. In his path to philosophy and in his practice of it, we find more than the usual share of startling turns and disillusioning struggles, all intimately connected with the cultural transformations and the political traumas of Germany and Europe in the age of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1762, the year of Fichte’s birth, the European Great Powers were limping to the end of the Seven Years War. In the same year Rousseau’s *Émile* was burned by the public hangman in Paris, its author having fled the city to avoid arrest. Immanuel Kant was leading the quiet life of a bachelor and unsalaried university instructor in Königsberg, his native city, on the far eastern edge of German-speaking Europe. Philosophically he was still in what he would later call his “dogmatic slumbers.” In 1781, when Fichte was nineteen, Kant published the first of the three *Critiques* that would leave western philosophy utterly transformed.

Like Kant and Rousseau, Fichte was of humble origins. If his ascent from plebeian obscurity to intellectual prominence was not unique, however, there was still something so stunning about it that one is tempted to share his belief that Reason had singled him out. In 1770, in the first of the seemingly miraculous turns in his destiny, he was plucked out of his family’s village world of farming and weaving and set on the path to a clerical career. By 1792, when he made his debut in print, he was a fledgling philosopher with decidedly unorthodox and anticlerical views. His first major publication was originally taken to be a long-awaited work by Kant, with the result that he became, virtually overnight, the most celebrated of Kant’s young disciples.

Fichte’s next publications stigmatized him in many quarters as a German “Jacobin,” one of that frightening new breed of intellectuals who threatened to inflict on German Europe the horrors that had befallen

<sup>1</sup> Fichte. *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca and London, 1988), p. 176.

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revolutionary France. He would have to endure the stigma for the rest of his life. In 1794 he began a career in teaching and scholarship at the university of Jena, which was basking in the glory of Goethe's Weimar and earning more than a little glory on its own as the leading center for the study of Kant's Critical Philosophy. Fichte devoted the next five years to building, brick by brick, the philosophical "system" that he called Transcendental Idealism. To his philosophical opponents, including orthodox Kantians, his theory of the "self-positing I" seemed hopelessly solipsistic, if not megalomaniacal, and that impression was powerfully reinforced by the arrogant brutality of his public persona. In 1799 Kant himself finally issued a snarling public repudiation of Fichte's claim to have understood the "spirit" of the Critical Philosophy better than its progenitor had understood it.

Nonetheless, thanks in large part to Fichte's panache as an academic rebel and his commanding presence at the lectern, Jena remained the mecca of the German philosophical revolution through the 1790s. But the Jena moment proved to be a brief one, and for that, too, Fichte bears some responsibility. In 1798 he published the article that triggered the Atheism Conflict, one of the culminating moments in the controversies about faith and reason, religion and philosophy that had generated so much passion and had taken on such a heavy freight of political implications over the course of the eighteenth century. He tried but failed to use the Conflict to win recognition for a principle of academic freedom that we now take for granted, and his maneuverings cost him his university position.

The chief setting for the remainder of his career, not covered in this volume, was Berlin, where he moved in 1799 and where, under French occupation, he delivered the famous *Addresses to the German Nation* in 1807–08. Even his death from cholera in 1814 was bound up with the great public events of the day. He had contracted the disease from his wife, who was nursing soldiers wounded in the War of Liberation against Napoleon.

If Fichte's life was eventful and controversial, it was also, by any number of standards, of considerable intellectual significance. He does not, to be sure, enjoy the same stature as Kant or Hegel or Hume. If contemporary philosophers were asked to vote their choices for a Pantheon of Great Western Philosophers, and if they could reach anything like a consensus (a very dubious proposition), Fichte would almost certainly not be among the chosen few. And yet even scholars who find his philosophy thoroughly wrongheaded acknowledge its historical importance as the foundation stone of that immense edifice known as German Idealism and as a prime example of the "foundationalism" and "essentialism" that marked the western philosophical project until at least the late nineteenth century. Outside philosophy proper, Fichte's thought figures prominently in a wide

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variety of etiologies. His theory of the transcendental ego inspired the first generation of German Romantics.<sup>2</sup> A number of nineteenth-century socialists, including Ferdinand Lassalle and Jean Jaurès, looked to him as one of the first thinkers to question radically the concept of property underpinning modern capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Recent years have witnessed a new appreciation of his importance as a political theorist and of his pivotal role in reorienting the philosophy of law. That he was one of the founders of modern nationalism is obvious, though the nature of his contribution remains elusive. More than one scholar has seen lurking behind his “philosophy of freedom” a proto-vision of the modern totalitarian state.<sup>4</sup> His youthful antisemitism, undeniably virulent, has received renewed attention as the first expression of a “new kind of revolutionary Jew-hatred” that replaced Christian prejudice. In feminist historiography he figures as the “chief ideologue of bourgeois patriarchy,” the articulator par excellence of the “founding opinions” that still allow “liberal” civil societies, under cover of the usual rhetoric about rights and equality, to enforce gender inequalities.<sup>5</sup>

And so the biographer of Fichte is hardly lacking in themes, and he need not belabor the fact that his subject is worth a biography. And yet the only full-scale biography of Fichte in this century is Xavier Léon’s *Fichte et son temps*, which was ready for printing in July of 1914 when the crisis that triggered the Great War intervened; it finally appeared in two volumes in 1922 and 1924. Léon had begun the project at the turn of the century. The very physical qualities of his volumes – their sheer thickness and weight, their leather bindings with gilt lettering, their covers of marbled paper – place them in the monumental tradition of nineteenth-century scholarship. A democratic “patriot” in the Jacobin tradition, fighting the good fight against the forces of authoritarian politics and religious obscurantism, he had been drawn to Fichte as a kindred spirit across the Rhine. By 1922, in a political atmosphere still echoing with the hate propaganda that the war had generated on both the German and the French sides, Léon’s attitude toward his hero had necessarily

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin has called Fichte “the true father of romanticism”; “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will. The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World,” in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, 1991), p. 225. For reinterpretations of Fichte’s influence on early Romanticism, see Gerald N. Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality. Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), esp. pp. 101–12; Mark Kippermann, *Beyond Enchantment: German Idealism and English Romantic Poetry* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Jaurès, *Les Origines du Socialisme Allemand* (Paris, 1892?), pp. 55–68.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Bernard Willms, *Die totale Freiheit. Fichtes politische Philosophie* (Munich, 1969); Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism, 1. The Founders* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 50–6.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Lawrence Rose, *German Question/Jewish Question: Revolutionary Antisemitism from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), pp. 117–32; Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca and London, 1996), pp. 314–23.

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become more conflicted. He acknowledged that Fichte, in his German messianic voice, had helped make possible the “satanic” machinery of German aggression. But the philosopher had done so unwittingly. In the end, Fichte was still the great philosophical missionary of the Revolution. Unlike his contemporaries, he had envisioned for his nation “a democratic and liberating mission, a humanitarian mission.”<sup>6</sup>

Today *Fichte et son temps* is of interest less as a study of Fichte than as a French scholar’s profession of faith and as a glimpse into the pathos of Franco–German academic relations in the early part of this century. The reader is likely to be struck by the immense distance that divides the Fichte who fascinated Léon and his contemporaries, both French and German, from the Fichte we now engage. It is not simply that Fichte’s relationship to the French Revolution and its Jacobin movement has proved far more problematic than Léon wanted it to be. Whether we admire Fichte or condemn him, we come at him with a whole new agenda, reflecting the questions about knowledge, ethics, politics, and a host of other subjects that now preoccupy us.

The nearly eight decades since the appearance of Léon’s volumes have not been lacking in brief biographies, intended largely to introduce Fichte’s thought, but no one has attempted a successor biography on or even remotely near the scale of magnitude of Léon’s.<sup>7</sup> The absence of such a work points to one of the widest chasms in our modern landscape of disciplinary knowledge. In an age when interdisciplinary exchange has become a matter of course in the humanities and the social sciences, intellectual history and the history of philosophy – and by the latter I mean the study of past philosophy by philosophers – have remained largely oblivious to each other, despite the considerable overlap in their subject matters. To the intellectual historian a philosophical text may pose unique challenges, but the underlying assumption is likely to be that this text, like any other, has an intended meaning that can be recovered contextually, as the product of a particular time and place. In the history of philosophy, on the other hand, the guiding question is whether the text contributes something to philosophy as it is now practiced, perhaps as an anticipation of a current way of philosophizing or at least as a useful foil, a reminder of earlier misguided preoccupations or wrong turns in the discipline. These agendas are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but there has been remarkably little effort to bridge them.

<sup>6</sup> Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, 2 vols. (1922–24), 1:ix–xiii. The two German biographies from the same period – Heinz Heimsoeth, *Fichte* (Munich, 1923), and Fritz Medicus, *Fichtes Leben* (2d ed.: Munich, 1922) – were much less ambitious projects.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Pierre-Philippe Druet, *Fichte* (Paris, 1977); Peter Rohs, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Munich, 1991); Helmut Seidel, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 1997).

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In the case of Fichte, disciplinary segregation is heightened by the very nature of his thought. Since he claimed to have discovered universal truths, Fichte would have dismissed as perverse any effort to explain his transcendental idealism as the contingent product of a specific historical context. There are Fichte scholars who surely agree; to submit his thought to contextual interpretation is, in their view, to fail to take it seriously as philosophy. The historian may very well respond, of course, that a contextual approach *can* take Fichte's philosophy seriously and indeed that it must do so if it is to be credible. But that is easier said than done. Like Nietzsche, though for somewhat different reasons, Fichte is a "hard case."<sup>8</sup> He himself urged his readers not to take the "letter" of his philosophical texts too seriously. Their purpose was merely to prompt – to move the reader to undertake, in his own way, the journey into philosophical reflexivity that Fichte himself had taken and thus to grasp the vital "spirit" of transcendental idealism by his own effort. In a sense, then, the historian provokes the philosopher's defiant stare just by trying to find a stable set of meanings in the words on the page. When we add that some of Fichte's texts are forbiddingly opaque, it becomes understandable that, with rare exceptions, historians have been content to leave Fichte to the philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

In a particularly pointed way, then, Fichte challenges us to bridge the disciplines, even as he defies our efforts to do so. It will be obvious that in constructing my own bridge, I have kept both feet planted firmly on the historian's side. And yet it was two developments in the philosophical scholarship on Fichte that convinced me that a thorough biographical study had become possible. In 1959, in an office in the Bavarian Academy of Sciences in Munich, work began on a complete edition (*Gesamtausgabe*) of Fichte's writings, and three years later the first volume appeared. If the story of the origins and the progress of this mammoth project were told in full, it would take us deep into at least three generations of German historical experience, from the interwar years through the Cold War. Hans Jacob (b. 1898) began a Fichte edition in the 1930s, only to see the second of his edited volumes, already at the printer's shop, destroyed in an allied bombing attack. After the war Reinhard Lauth (b. 1919), a young academic philosopher at Munich, searched out Jacob and together they went about gaining access to material and winning financial support. In 1959, in an unusual agreement with the Prussian

<sup>8</sup> Allan Megill, "Historicizing Nietzsche? Paradoxes and Lessons of a Hard Case," *The Journal of Modern History* 68:1 (March, 1996): 114–52.

<sup>9</sup> The major exception, worth consulting on all aspects of Fichte's thought, is George Armstrong Kelly, *Idealism, Politics, and History. Sources of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 182–285. It is a measure of the disciplinary divide that Kelly's book has been largely ignored in recent Fichte scholarship.

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State Library in East Berlin, they secured access to the main body of Fichte's papers (which had found their way, somehow, to Moscow). We can only imagine the "difficult negotiations" they had to weather, as the Cold War intensified and the German Democratic Republic moved toward the building of the Berlin Wall. Meanwhile, sometime in the mid-1950s, Manfred Zahn, then a student of Lauth, had discovered another substantial collection of Fichte's papers hidden in a chicken shed in a village in Upper Bavaria, where their owner Hans von Fichte, the last direct male descendent of the philosopher, had settled in the confusion of the postwar years. The Fichte family was persuaded to sell the collection to the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in West Berlin, despite "a more lucrative offer from America." With these two library deposits as the core of their project, the editors and their students scoured both Germanies for additional material.<sup>10</sup>

Originally conceived as a roughly fifteen-volume project, the *Complete Edition* has reached twenty-nine volumes, with about eight more still to appear. It is an extraordinary example of what a well-conceived, thorough, and persistent enterprise in scholarly teamwork can accomplish, and for my purposes the editorial procedures make it all the more valuable. The editors have all, in the words of one of them, "felt bound to the ethos of transcendental philosophy, naturally to different degrees." This "existential interest" might have produced an apology for Fichte under cover of a scholarly edition. Instead it grounded a commitment to the greatest possible historical accuracy and thoroughness in presenting his writings, both published and unpublished, and surrounding them with relevant editorial information. To realize the latter goal the project proceeded chronologically, the editorial comment in each volume building on its predecessors. And, as if determined to spoil the historian-biographer by catering to his every need, the editors have supplemented the four series in the edition itself with a seven-volume collection of comments on Fichte by his contemporaries, gathered from a wide variety of published materials, correspondence, unpublished papers, and archival documents, and a four-volume series of reviews of Fichte's writings from the periodicals of the era.

No one scholar could have collected all this material and gathered all this editorial information in several lifetimes. It is, I think, appropriate that this volume appears as a nearly half-century project, conducted with all deliberate speed, nears completion. I have tried to do the project justice.

<sup>10</sup> The information on the history of the *Gesamtausgabe* has been generously supplied by Dr. Erich Fuchs, a long-time collaborator in the project and one of its editors since 1996. See also Wolfhart Henckmann, "Fichte-Schelling-Hegel," in *Buchstabe und Geist. Zur Überlieferung und Edition philosophischer Texte*, ed. Walter Jaeschke, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, Hermann Krings, and Heinrich Schepers (Hamburg, 1987), pp. 84–93.

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The other development that convinced me of the feasibility of this project is the “mini-renaissance” in philosophical scholarship on Fichte since World War II.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the work of Lauth, his colleagues, and their students, there has been an impressive series of French contributions, building on, but also redirecting, a long-standing interest among French scholars in Fichte’s political theory, his social and economic thought, and his philosophy of law. More recently, Anglophone scholars, especially in the United States, have weighed in heavily, particularly in the study of the epistemological foundations and ethical implications of Fichte’s transcendentalism. The net effect of this multinational enterprise has been to rescue Fichte from two kinds of historical condescension. To Kantians, Fichte merited attention as the disciple who took a wrong turn, as Kant himself had so fiercely announced. In the Hegelian school, which set the agenda for a great deal of the work in the history of philosophy until quite recently, Fichte represented a pause in philosophy’s Great March Forward. If the pause was fruitful in some ways, it served primarily to spotlight, by its shortcomings, the immensity of Hegel’s achievement. What we have now is a substantial body of work demonstrating that Fichte was an important philosopher in his own right – that, as one American scholar has put it, he was “a major philosophical planet whose thought moves in its own orbit.”<sup>12</sup>

No less condescending is the tendency in contemporary western philosophy to dismiss the pre-Nietzschean “canon” as a massive, centuries-long “metaphysical” delusion. New generations of Fichte scholars have not denied that his thought is a striking example, perhaps the example without rival, of the pre-Nietzschean search for an irreducible, or “foundationalist,” truth on which all philosophy and indeed all knowledge could be built, and of the concomitant search for the “essential,” or intrinsic, nature of the human being as a rational moral agent, discernible behind the vast array of historical, cultural, and even psychological differences in human experience. If Fichte’s thought is foundationalist and essentialist, however, it turns out to be much less naïve, and certainly far more interesting, than the postmodernist critique would have it.

I began to engage the new Fichte scholarship with more than a little impatience. I was after Fichte the historical figure, and what I seemed to be getting was a purely philosophical mind. It was a mind connected only tangentially to the personality that had fascinated and troubled so many of Fichte’s contemporaries. The historical context in which the mind operated appeared in this literature as a kind of backdrop canvas, a flattened allusion to the multifaceted and densely contoured world that had

<sup>11</sup> On the “mini-renaissance,” see Tom Rockmore’s introduction to Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore, eds., *Fichte. Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1994), pp. 1–6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

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formed and engaged Fichte. It will become apparent in these pages, however, that my debt to the philosophical scholarship on Fichte has been immense. At several junctures that scholarship has served as my indispensable guide through Fichte's texts, explicating their contributions to philosophy with a conceptual lucidity and logical rigor rarely found in intellectual history. Thanks to this literature, I have built into my own story of Fichte's intellectual development a diachronic tracking, sometimes footprint by footprint, of his perceptions of the critical issues in philosophy, his decisions to abandon what he concluded were wrong paths, and his breakthroughs in creating his own philosophical system. I do not, I should stress, see my use of the philosophical literature on Fichte as a matter of occasionally deviating from historical analysis or of providing historical analysis with a philosophical patina. We simply cannot historicize Fichte without recognizing that the field of philosophical argument in which he positioned himself – the field that the recent literature has remapped – is one of the salient historical contexts, and sometimes the crucial one.

What emerges from this literature is a new understanding of Fichte's distinctive contribution to modern conceptions of selfhood, and particularly to the construction of the self as an autonomous moral agent. Fichte's thought is a striking instance of what Charles Taylor has called the "radical reflexivity" of western philosophy since the late seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup> Like Kant, Fichte found the irreducible ground of moral agency in the transcendental realm of pure Reason, anterior to sense experience. But he also struck out into new territory by collapsing the distinction between cognition and will that Kant had striven to maintain; by developing his own theory of how the self, as a moral person, asserted itself in a relentless struggle against the resistance of things; and by making the very existence of the empirical self a function of its intersubjective relations with other selves. By 1799 his system, raying out in several directions from its reflexive premise, demonstrated how the self might be repositioned in a new world of public culture, of disciplinary knowledge, of social relations, of property and labor, of legal rights and constraints, of political power and authority.

The construal of selfhood, in these various sites and modalities, is the theme around which I have built this biography. To the extent, and it is a large extent, that I find that the new readings of Fichte's texts have clarified their meaning as contributions to philosophy (and to political theory), I take them as my point of departure. I also believe, however, that, if we are to achieve a historical understanding of the philosophical orbit Fichte created for himself, we need to position him in a dense cluster of contexts. "Internalist" revisionism is necessary but does not suffice; it

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).



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must be brought into interaction with a close study of extraphilosophical contexts.

The scholarly thoroughness and precision of the *Complete Edition* makes this possible, since the scholars who produced it wisely included all sorts of detail that is of marginal significance for their own work. In much of the documentary and editorial detail we see Fichte as a social being, in a society with its distinctive structures, norms, and tensions. In addition to contextualizing his systematic contributions to social theory, we can retrieve the less obvious social meanings that resonate through his thought even at its most abstract. I do not mean to imply that despite recent skepticism about the social history of ideas in its cruder forms, Fichte's thought should be read as a rationale for a social "interest." Even as he adopted emphatically "bourgeois" values, he remained alienated from the groups who constituted the eighteenth-century *Bürgertum*. The group with which he identified was the new intellectual elite, not yet formed, that I have called a modern clerisy. Despite his egalitarian impulses, his posture toward "the People" – the uneducated and unpropertied masses who formed the broad base of the social pyramid – was likewise profoundly ambivalent. If Fichte defies old-style social reductionism, however, he also beckons us to pursue the social history of ideas in other keys. The salient question is not what group he represented but how he experienced the relational terms of inequality and dependence – the enforced asymmetries of power – in eighteenth-century German society. The surviving record of that experience, particularly for the years when he was a would-be client in search of patrons, is indispensable to understanding why his construal of selfhood was so intimately connected with a vision of a new public culture, where communication would be free of the distorting effects of power.

Contextualizing Fichte's construal of selfhood is also a matter of understanding his thought from a rhetorical standpoint. Within the study of philosophy itself, there is a new recognition that the effort to present philosophical thought as purely demonstrative reasoning, distinguished from the wily arts of the rhetorical tradition, is itself a rhetorical strategy, a use of form to persuade. Likewise, there is a new willingness to include in the study of philosophical meaning those more obviously figurative devices of rhetoric that even the most purist texts – and some of Fichte's are striking cases in point – exhibit.<sup>14</sup> While I share these views, I also wish to use a rhetorical approach to push the historical contextualization of Fichte's thought well beyond what philosophy's awareness of its own rhetorical properties might license. I do not mean to imply that we can gain a historical understanding of Fichte's philosophy by reconstructing

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Berel Lang, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing: Studies in Philosophical and Literary Style* (Lewisburg, Penn., 1983).

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its relationship to a specific rhetorical tradition, as, for example, Quentin Skinner has done to such effect in his study of Hobbes.<sup>15</sup> Instead I have pursued an admittedly eclectic strategy of rhetorical understanding, and at several levels. There is, first, the fact that for Fichte the quintessential outer-directed “activity” of the self, and the one that defined the philosopher’s calling, was communicative action in the public sphere. That is to say that he conceived of selfhood as, in a broad sense, a rhetorical process. Not surprisingly, he aspired to give the presentation of philosophy a certain rhetorical efficacy, even as he spurned the rhetor’s arts of manipulation. That ambivalence marks one of the recurrent tensions in Fichte’s thought and is one of its distinguishing features in the context of German educated culture in the 1790s.

If we are attentive to the rhetoric Fichte actually employed, we see how figural and metaphoric language inflected his philosophical thinking through a variety of discourses – the Lutheran ethic, the language of mechanism in natural science, the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, and so on – and in turn was inflected by it. We remain aware that we are encountering the author in a more or less mediate way, as a rhetorical persona or, perhaps better, as a voice, and we are alert to the significance of shifts in voice.

At still another level, I would contend, a great deal of what we do to understand texts contextually is a matter of placing them in what I will call, for want of a better phrase, their rhetorical circumstances. If a text, whether it be a published philosophical treatise or an intimate letter, is a rhetorical event, it is ipso facto a contextual event. One of its circumstantial features is that it is addressed to at least one specific audience, whether real or imagined (or both). We need to ask how the author envisioned his audience (or audiences) and sought to position himself in relation to it, and what sort of rhetorical community he wished to constitute. We also need to be attentive, of course, to the specific referents to which the text points us – because they tell us something about what occasioned it and perhaps something about what it in turn was meant to occasion. Fichte is a particularly appropriate subject for this kind of hermeneutic. His efforts to define philosophy as a kind of rhetoric were inseparable from his need to profess, and indeed to live, his convictions in several settings: the institution of preaching, which offered the most likely outlet for his youthful aspirations but also threatened to silence him; the expanding print market, to which he reacted first with vaulting optimism and then with growing disillusionment; the university at Jena, which gave him the forum he craved but also put him in a volatile relationship with colleagues and students; and the political establishment of his day, which he

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996).