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

Anthony J. La Vopa

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Fichte

A thematic biography of the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte from birth to his resignation from his university position at Jena in 1799 due to the Atheism Conflict, this work explains how Fichte contributed to modern conceptions of selfhood; how he sought to make the moral agency of the self efficacious in a modern public culture; and the critical role he assigned philosophy in the construal and assertion of selfhood and in the creation of a new public sphere. Using the writings and private papers now available in the *Gesamtausgabe*, the study historicizes these themes by tracing their development within several contexts, including the German Lutheran tradition, the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, the late Enlightenment, the Kantian philosophical revolution, the politics of the revolutionary era, and the emergence of modern German universities. It includes a reinterpretation of Fichte's political theory and philosophy of law, his antisemitism, and his controversial views on gender and marriage.

Anthony J. La Vopa is a professor of history at North Carolina State University.

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ANTHONY J. LA VOPA

North Carolina State University



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[More information](#)

For Gail

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction	I
Part 1 <i>The Wanderjahre</i>	21
1 Alienation	23
2 The Road to Kant	45
3 The German Machine	80
4 Revolution: The Popular Tribune	100
5 Jews, Christians, and Freethinkers	131
6 Love and Marriage	150
Part 2 <i>The Jena Years</i>	181
7 The Self and the Mission of Philosophy	183
8 The Politics of Celebrity	231
9 Philosophy and the Graces	269
10 Law, Freedom, and Authority	298
11 Men and Women	345
12 The Atheism Conflict: Reason and the Absolute	368
13 The Atheism Conflict: Selfhood, Character, and the Public	402
Conclusion	425
<i>Index</i>	443

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

I conceived this volume as a biography, the history of a man in his youth and the first two decades of his adulthood. A biography, I would insist, is what it has become. But since Johann Gottlieb Fichte was first and foremost a philosopher, and since I have taken pains to grasp and convey the meaning of his philosophy, the organization is as much thematic as it is chronological. And so the reader may find it useful to have a brief narrative map at the outset.

The volume covers the first thirty-seven years of Fichte's life, from his birth in 1762 to his resignation from his university position at Jena in 1799. By 1799 Fichte had spent five prodigiously productive years at Jena, lecturing to packed halls of students, and publishing the texts in which he constructed the philosophical system he called Transcendental Idealism. In lifestyle he was an eminently respectable bourgeois scholar; but there had been little of the ordinary about his route to an academic career, and, though he seemed to plunge philosophy into a new era of self-absorption, his thought also had alarmingly radical implications for the social and political order.

In 1770, at age eight or nine, Fichte had been suddenly removed from a village world of weaving and farming by a visiting nobleman who undertook to sponsor his education for the clergy. The nobleman had died by the time Fichte ended his university studies in the mid-1780s. For the next six years or so the young scholar had to earn his bread as a live-in tutor while seeking the new patron who might secure him a clerical appointment. It was a tutoring position that brought him to Zürich in 1788. There he became informally betrothed to Marie Johanne Rahn, known as Johanna, the daughter of a local patrician. Having failed to find a career opening in Leipzig in 1790, he returned to tutoring. His last tutoring stint was on a Baltic estate near Danzig. He did not return to Zürich to marry Johanna until the early summer of 1793. On July 18, 1796, Johanna gave birth to their only child, a son named Immanuel Hartmann.

The son's first name was a gesture of homage to Immanuel Kant. In the late summer and early fall of 1790, as he engaged Kant's *Critiques* for the first time, Fichte had found his calling as a philosopher. In the summer of 1791, in a hiatus between tutoring employments, he traveled to Königsberg to make Kant's acquaintance and, in an effort

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

to impress him, wrote a Kantian critique of the concept of revelation. Published anonymously, the book was greeted with lavish praise as Kant's long-awaited contribution to the era's controversies about faith and reason. Once Kant revealed the real author, Fichte was virtually assured an academic career.

In May 1794 Fichte began his career at Jena, a university thriving under the enlightened rule of the ducal government at nearby Weimar. If he was a promising young celebrity, he was also a figure of some notoriety. His intemperate defense of the principles of the French Revolution, published in 1793, had made him suspect as an atheistic "Jacobin" in conservative circles. His first year at Jena was marked by bitter squabbles with the local clergy and indignant senior professors. To make matters worse, his efforts to mediate between the ducal government and secret student societies earned him the latter's wrath.

Fichte's next few years at Jena were fairly quiet, though his brutal polemicism caused concern even among philosophers sympathetic to his cause. He extended his system outward from its metaphysical core to the philosophy of law, ethics, and political economy. But his publication of an article on "the concept of religion" in November 1798 provoked the Atheism Conflict, which soon engaged the German intelligentsia in a controversy about the meaning of, and the appropriate limits to, academic freedom. Outmaneuvered by the ducal government and disillusioned by his failure to rally the "enlightened" public to his cause, he resigned his position and, in the opening months of the new century, moved his family to Berlin.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Though writing itself is a solitary act, this book – like the life of its subject – took shape in contexts rich in conversations, discussions, and unexpected encounters. Most of these occurred in institutions, both public and private, that make the study of the humanities a practical possibility in our era and that provide the settings for the collegial relationships and the friendships on which scholarship thrives.

In the spring of 1987, as I was committing myself, in very gingerly steps, to writing a biography with emphatically German themes, I was also commuting week after week to Washington, D.C., to attend J. G. A. Pocock's seminar at the Folger Library on eighteenth-century Anglo-Scottish and American political thought. My thanks to the Folger staff, and especially to John Pocock, who gave me, in his uniquely Anglophone way, precisely the set of comparative questions I needed.

I spent the academic year 1989–90 as a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, now housed in the Reagan Building but then (fortunately) still making do with a wing of the Smithsonian's Castle Building on the Mall. Charles Blitzer, the Center's director at the time, was a rare combination of scholarly cultivation, political savvy, and personal integrity. I take this occasion to mourn his passing. I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude his remarkable contribution to the survival of serious humanistic scholarship in the United States – a contribution that has been sadly disparaged in recent outbreaks of partisan savagery inside the Beltway.

Further progress on the book was made possible by a research grant from the American Philosophical Society in 1990; by a research fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1994; and by a summer research stipend from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at North Carolina State University/Raleigh in 1998.

Critical to the researching of the book were two visits to the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen, a unique and irreplaceable center for the study of eighteenth-century Germany. Thanks, once more, to my friends there – Hans Erich Bödeker, Inge Bödeker, Alf Lüdtke, Helga Lüdtke, Hans Medick, and Jürgen Schlumbohm – for their hospitality and their good company.

Chapters of the book were presented and critiqued at the Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Acknowledgments

California, Los Angeles; the Modern European History Colloquium at Louisiana State University; and the seminar of the Committee on the Conceptual Foundations of Science at the University of Chicago. Thanks especially to Peter Reill, director of the Center, and to Patrick Coleman, Jill Kowalik, Jayne Lewis, and Ellen Wilson (the exacting but tactful editor every scholar wishes for) in Los Angeles; to Suzanne Marchand, David Lindenfeld, and Jerri Becnel in Baton Rouge; and to Jan Goldstein and Constantin Fasolt in Chicago.

In ways I can hardly begin to fathom at this point, the book – and my professional life – have profited from my participation in the Triangle Intellectual History Seminar and Graduate Program. I am grateful to the group, which helped me revise three chapters in draft, and especially to the five other coordinators of the program, Charles Capper, Malachi Hacohen, Lloyd Kramer, Martin Miller, and K. Steven Vincent. Visitors will agree, I think, that we have created a badly needed national center for the study of intellectual history. I can confirm from the sessions on my own work that the Seminar combines, to an unusual degree, rigorous critique and reassuring collegiality.

Thanks in part to another fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I finished writing the book in 1998–99 as a Fellow – or, more precisely, a recidivist – at the National Humanities Center. Just in case there is anyone out there who hasn't heard yet, the Center is a wonderful place to work. The credit goes to Robert Connor, its director, to Kent Mullikin, its associate director, and to its entire dedicated staff. My thanks especially to Karen Carroll, without whose dauntless creativity in cyberspace the manuscript would never have been printed; to Patricia Schreiber, Sarah Woodard, and Lois Whittington, who guided me, very patiently, through my fledgling efforts as an academic administrator and kept me cheerful at harried moments; and to the Center's librarians, Alan Tuttle, Jean Houston, and Eliza Robertson.

My work also benefited immeasurably from the lively and convivial lunch sessions of the Biography Group at the National Humanities Center, which taught me so much about the craft of biographical writing and made my year at the Center all the more special. I extend my thanks and my warm greetings to Janet Beizer, Jon Bush, Ed Friedman, Rochelle Gurstein, R. W. B. Lewis, Elizabeth McHenry, Wilfrid Prest, Marilyn Richtarik, Ashraf Rushdy, Bert Wyatt-Brown, and Anne Wyatt-Brown.

Aside from many of the people mentioned above, the following read and commented on parts of the manuscript and offered needed encouragement: James Banker, Frederick Beiser, Holly Brewer, Erin Conroy, David Gilmartin, Gerald Izenberg, Owen Kalinga, Akram Khater, Mimi Kim, Lawrence Klein, Keith Luria, Nancy Mitchell, Catherine Peyroux, Fritz Ringer, John Röhl, Michael Sauter, Matthew Specter, Edith Sylla, Kenneth Vickery, Mack Walker, and Hugh West.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

Thanks also to Joy Burke Raintree, whose meticulous assistance at the copyediting stage spared me many errors.

During my year at the National Humanities Center it was my great good fortune to have Suzanne Raitt as a colleague. Though busy completing a biography of her own, Suzanne managed to devote more time and thoughtful attention to my work than one can reasonably expect from a colleague, and particularly from one accustomed to engaging material far more rewarding to the literary imagination. She read and critiqued the entire manuscript, shared with me her own interest in philosophy, and strengthened me in my resolve to make the substance of philosophical thought an integral part of biography. She also gave me a model of elegantly seamless writing that I tried, with only limited success, to emulate.

In ways they may not realize, my mother Jane La Vopa and my stepdaughter Kelly O'Brien kept me from taking Fichte too seriously.

The book is dedicated to my spouse and colleague, Gail Williams O'Brien, a historian who worked on her own book, on a very different subject, as I worked on mine. It would be banal and, worse, inadequate to say that she gave me the support I needed to bring this project to completion. This is Gail's book as well as mine, though she has more sense than to devote years to an Idealist philosopher arrogant enough to think he had found the only way to Truth and mindfulness. She endured my obsessions and distractions, my moments (sometimes extended) of exasperation with the work, my writing blocks, my absences on research trips, my seemingly endless health problems, my prolonged crises of spirit. She kept me convinced that I could write the kind of book I wanted to write, even when the task seemed hopelessly beyond my reach. It is no fragile love that survives the long, hard writing of two books. I am profoundly grateful to her.

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[More information](#)

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- FG *J. G. Fichte im Gespräch. Berichte der Zeitgenossen*, ed. Erich Fuchs in collaboration with Reinhard Lauth and Walter Schieche, 6 vols. (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt, 1978–1992)
- FR *J. G. Fichte in zeitgenössischen Rezensionen*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, and Walter Schieche, 4 vols. (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt, 1995)
- F-S *Fichte-Studien*
- GA *Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt, 1962ff) (The roman numerals refer to the series within the edition: I. *Werke*; II. *Nachgelassene Schriften*; III. *Briefe*; IV. *Kollegnachschriften*)
- GH *J. G. Fichte, Der Geschlossene Handelsstaat. Ein philosophischer Entwurf als Anhang zur Rechtslehre zu liefernden Politik* (1800), in *Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Ausgewählte Politische Schriften*, ed. Zwi Batscha and Richard Saage (Frankfurt am Main, 1977)
- NR *Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. and introd. Manfred Zahn (Hamburg, 1967)
- PJ *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten*
- SL *Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre* (1798), ed. and introd. Manfred Zahn (Hamburg, 1969)
- SSPK Staatsbibliothek der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin