# *Introduction*

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (*Reden an die deutsche Nation*), which consists of a series of public lectures delivered in the winter of 1807–08, is one of his best-known works. This text's fame – though notoriety perhaps better describes its reputation – can be explained in terms of its nationalist elements and their influence, whether real or imagined, on the development of German nationalism and its disastrous outcome in twentieth-century Fascism. Indeed, discussions of this text in English tend to focus almost exclusively on its nationalist elements and their relation to modern nationalism, and even when it is recognized that Fichte is motivated by wider concerns about human culture and progress, nationalism remains the main theme.[1] The treatment of the *Addresses to the German Nation* as primarily a nationalist text appears justified given its appeals to the idea of the nation and to such patriotic ideas as love of fatherland (*Vaterlandsliebe*). Then there is Fichte's attempt to establish the superiority of the German nation on the basis of the essential nature of the language that its members speak and the cultural and moral characteristics that are held to follow from the shared possession of such a language. On this type of reading of the *Addresses to the German Nation*, moreover, it becomes natural to locate this text within an account of the move towards the establishment of a German nation-state. I shall show, however, that there are some significant problems with such accounts of the *Addresses to the German Nation*, because the nationalist elements undoubtedly found in this text can ultimately be explained in terms of some of the

[1] See, for example, Abizadeh, 'Was Fichte an Ethnic Nationalist?', Engelbrecht, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 112ff., Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 58ff. and Kohn, 'The Paradox of Fichte's Nationalism'. For a helpful recent attempt to understand Fichte's nationalism in its own terms as opposed to viewing it in terms of later developments in nationalist thinking, see Reiß, *Fichtes ›Reden an die deutsche Nation‹ oder: Vom Ich zum Wir*. I shall argue that this approach nevertheless also has its limitations, in that it ignores Fichte's more fundamental concerns by one-sidedly viewing the *Addresses to the German Nation* in terms of political history.

central aims associated with the philosophical idealism which Fichte had started to develop long before he delivered these addresses.

Fichte sought to situate this idealism within a narrative concerning the cultural and moral progress of the human race. Thus the focus on the nationalist aspects of the *Addresses to the Germans Nation* risks treating what is secondary as if it were fundamental. The nationalist aspects of this text instead form elements of a much broader philosophical project which from its very beginning had a strong practical dimension. By showing that this is the case, I undermine the idea that the *Addresses to the German Nation* marks a radical break with the writings of Fichte's Jena period, which roughly covers the years 1794–1799. This is not to say that there are no significant changes or that the nationalist elements found in the *Addresses to the German Nation* are unproblematic. My point is rather that at a deeper level there is a degree of continuity, which means that one cannot simply detach Fichte's idealism from his nationalism. Even if there is not a necessary connection between Fichte's idealism and his nationalism, a story can nevertheless be told about why Fichte was led by some of the fundamental aims associated with his idealism to introduce such nationalist elements given the historical situation in which he found himself and his aim of establishing a German Republic, if only, in the first instance, in people's hearts and minds.

A connection between Fichte's idealism and the idea of a future republic, if not at this stage a specifically German one, is already hinted at during his Jena period in a letter from 1795. In this letter Fichte describes how his conception of philosophical science as *Wissenschaftslehre* and the content of this science relate to the French Revolution. Fichte associates his philosophical system, which he describes as 'the first system of freedom' (*das erste System der Freiheit*), with the French Revolution by comparing the way in which this system removes the fetters imposed on human beings by the idea of things in themselves and external influences to the way in which the French nation frees human beings from the external chains binding them (GA III/2: 298; EPW: 385). Here a connection is drawn between one external form of determination, the determination of human cognition by an unknowable thing in itself, and another form of external determination, the determination of the human will by an alien authority based on force. Fichte goes on to compare the French nation's struggle for political freedom with his own struggles both with himself and with prejudice in the years during which he was developing his philosophical system, and he claims that the valour (*valeur*) demonstrated by this nation provided him with the encouragement and the energy he needed to

comprehend (*faßen*) this system (GA III/2: 298; EPW: 385f.). A commitment to republicanism can, then, already be detected in Fichte's positive attitude towards the French Revolution and in the way in which his own philosophical science's emphasis on freedom manifests the revolutionary spirit exhibited by the French nation, so that inner, individual freedom is held to find both its initial impulse and corresponding external expression in political freedom.[2]

The relationship between Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and the French Revolution suggested by his analogy between the development of his own philosophical system and the struggles of the French nation invites, rather than speaks against, an early commitment to the idea that the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the nation are not only compatible but also bound up with each other, inasmuch as national liberation constitutes a condition of individual freedom because the latter is threatened whenever a nation finds itself subject to the arbitrary will of an external power. Thus the possibility is already opened up of viewing the *Addresses to the German Nation* as *not* marking a radical break with Fichte's earlier system of freedom, even if in these lectures, which were delivered at the Berlin Academy of Sciences at a time when the city of Berlin was under French occupation, national liberation assumes primacy in relation to individual freedom.

The analogy between the way in which Fichte's system of freedom removes the fetters imposed on human beings by the idea of things in themselves and external influences and the way in which the French nation frees human beings from the external chains binding them is significant in relation to Fichte's republicanism in another respect. As we shall see in Chapter 1, Fichte employs the term 'republic' during his Jena period in a figurative sense when he speaks of the republic of scholars (*die gelehrte Republik*). This figurative use of the term 'republic' should make one cautious about identifying his idea of a German Republic with an essentially political form of community. Rather, as in the case of the republic of scholars, Fichte may have in mind a form of community whose members are bound together by norms which they freely obey but which do not assume a legal or political form. This idea of a republic would be compatible with the notion of a purely ethical or intellectual form of community.

[2] This connection between Fichte's idealism and the French Revolution is emphasized in Guéroult, 'Fichte et la Révolution Française' and in Buhr, 'Die Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und die Französische Revolution', 62ff.

This brings me to the spiritual and intellectual revolution wrought in Fichte himself by his reading of Kant's philosophy.

Fichte states in a letter from 1790 that his encounter with Kant's philosophy enabled him to 'believe wholeheartedly in human freedom and realize full well that duty, virtue, and morality are all possible only if freedom is presupposed' and led him to oppose this belief in human freedom and morality to a determinism which is 'largely the source of the tremendous ethical corruption of the so-called better classes' (GA III/1: 193f.; EPW: 360f.). This belief in freedom together with its connection with morality and virtue will be shown to be bound up in Fichte's mind with the idea of a republic and the need to exclude certain people from the republic given their commitment to a determinism which has its ultimate basis in belief in a thing in itself. Fichte's republicanism turns out in this way to be essentially connected with his idealism and to be of a primarily ethical kind. The model of the kind of ethical community that Fichte's republic is meant to be is provided by the moral community which Kant terms 'a kingdom of ends' (*ein Reich der Zwecke*).

Kant's conception of a kingdom of ends derives from his account of the only possible source of genuine moral duty. This source is a practical law which in relation to the human will finds expression in the categorical imperative '*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*' (AA 4: 421; PP: 73). This imperative expresses an 'unconditional command' that 'leaves the will no discretion with respect to the opposite' and thereby 'alone brings with it that necessity which we require of a law' (AA 4: 420; PP: 72). This objective law, that is to say, a law that is universally and unconditionally valid, must, Kant claims, be sought in pure reason, for only here can we hope to encounter an *a priori* law which does not depend on any features of human nature or on any other empirical considerations, and is thereby valid in relation to all rational beings and does not allow any exceptions with regard to obedience to its commands. Thus we are left simply with 'the relation of a will to itself insofar as it determines itself only by reason; for then everything that has reference to the empirical falls away of itself, since if reason entirely determines conduct . . . it must necessarily do so a priori' (AA: 4: 427; PP: 78). Given that pure practical reason is the source of the moral law and the duties that derive from this law, human beings would be fully united by the bonds of pure practical reason if only each and every one of them willed in accordance with this law. The possibility of such 'a world of rational beings (*mundus intelligibilis*)' is acknowledged by Kant himself when he states that 'a kingdom of ends would actually

come into existence through maxims whose rule the categorical imperative prescribes to all rational beings *if they were universally followed*' (AA 4: 438; PP: 87). This is only part of the story, however, for we also need to understand why Kant speaks of a kingdom of *ends*.

Acting in conformity with the representation of laws of pure practical reason requires, like all forms of agency, the willing of an end. The end in question must, however, be of a specific type, namely, an end that is itself objectively valid and thus holds for all rational beings. This end cannot, therefore, be one that an agent is free to renounce at will or one that possesses value only in so far as an agent wills it, in which case the end would be made contingent upon and relative to an agent's beliefs, desires and inclinations. Kant finds such an objective end in the idea of rational nature as such. The existence of this end imposes limits on how we may treat other rational beings, because the unconditional value of rational nature means that such beings cannot be treated merely as means to an end. Rather, we are unconditionally obliged to respect their moral autonomy or personality, that is to say, their capacity to subject themselves to laws of pure practical reason. Trying to make others pursue ends with which they cannot identify themselves as rational and moral beings would, therefore, amount to a violation of their moral autonomy given Kant's own description of this autonomy as obtaining when 'the will is not merely subject to the law but subject to it in such a way that it must be viewed as also giving the law to itself and just because of this as first subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)' (AA 4: 431; PP: 81). In other words, a necessary condition of the law's authority in relation to an agent's will is that the agent somehow freely imposes this law upon itself.

In the kingdom of ends agents will consequently subject themselves to laws or principles of pure practical reason that are valid for all the members of this moral community at the same time as each and every member of this same community enjoys the status of not only a means (as an agent which realizes pure practical reason through its own acts of willing) but also an end (as a being that enjoys an unconditional value which imposes moral limits on how others may treat it). A crucial feature of this moral community will therefore be that each member makes the ends of the other members into one of his or her own fundamental ends in line with the following demand: 'the ends of a subject who is an end in itself must as far as possible be also *my* ends, if that representation is to have its *full* effect in me' (AA 4: 430; PP: 81). In other words, the representation of others as ends in themselves must be accompanied by a practical identification of oneself with their ends in all appropriate cases. In this way, the transition

is made from merely individual ends to common ends. Kant here appears to assume that in so far as individuals determine their wills in accordance with norms of pure practical reason all their ends will in fact harmonize. Indeed, he claims that 'if we abstract from the personal differences of rational beings as well as from all the content of their private ends we shall be able to think of a whole of all ends in systematic connection (a whole both of rational beings as ends in themselves and of the ends of his own that each may set himself)' (AA 4: 433; PP: 83). Kant concedes, however, that this kingdom understood as 'a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws' is 'only an ideal' (AA 4: 433; PP: 83).

The ideal character of this moral community invites the question as to what it would mean to conceive of this ideal as being realized, for such an ideal would arguably be worthless if its realization cannot be conceived at all or only in a very abstract way, even if some potentially insurmountable practical obstacles to its full realization are acknowledged to exist. As we shall see, Fichte not only adopts Kant's ideal of an ethical community of morally autonomous individuals united by bonds of pure practical reason and motivated by common ends, but also attempts to present people who are capable of forming such a community with a clearer image of what the realization of this ideal of a systematically united community of free moral beings would amount to in practice and how its realization is possible. Moreover, Fichte seeks by means of his own scholarly activity to help bring about the realization of such a community. Yet his attempt to do so is beset by two fundamental problems which become fully manifest in the *Addresses to the German Nation*, although the second one already surfaces in some of his earlier writings.

First of all, the image of an ethical community whose members are united by bonds of pure practical reason with which Fichte finally presents us suggests that the realization of this ideal community is not something that we could possibly wish for, at least not in so far as we conceive of ourselves as free and value our freedom to choose. This is because its realization would, in fact, amount to the loss of freedom in any meaningful sense of the term. Secondly, it becomes difficult to see how the act of bringing about such a community by influencing others in which Fichte engages avoids violating the norms that are to govern and are constitutive of this same community. In this respect, pure practical rationality turns out to undermine itself in the sense that the means that it employs to realize its ultimate end turn out to be incompatible with this same end. Although both of these problems become fully explicit in the *Addresses to the German Nation*, their roots can be traced back to Fichte's appropriation of Kant's

transcendental idealism and, in particular, his moral philosophy with its ideal of a kingdom of ends. The suspicion that there is some kind of connection between Kant's ideal of a kingdom of ends and Fichte's nationalism has been expressed before, albeit in very vague terms, by Isaiah Berlin, when he claims that

> Nevertheless it is odd to reflect that there is a direct line, and a very curious one, between the extreme liberalism of Kant, with his respect for human nature and its sacred rights, and Fichte's identification of freedom with self-assertion, with the imposition of your will upon others, with the removal of obstacles to your desires, and finally with a victorious nation marching to fulfil its destiny in answer to the internal demands given to it by transcendental reason, before which all material things must crumble.[3]

Berlin's tendency to make such dubious claims as that Fichte identifies freedom with self-assertion in the form of the imposition of one's will upon others and the removal of obstacles to one's desires does not, however, help explain the connection between the moral claims of transcendental idealism and Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* to which he alludes. Moreover, although Berlin recognizes the importance of the notion of autonomy as much as he distorts its meaning, he describes the move from the individual self to that of a collective self as representing 'a quantum leap in Fichte's thought'.[4] I intend to provide a far more perspicuous account of the connection at which Berlin rightly hints without being able himself to offer a satisfactory account of it.

Although Fichte's appropriation of Kant's philosophy is not the only possible one, it remains faithful to some of the central features of Kant's ideal of a kingdom of ends at the same time as it indicates, unwittingly perhaps, certain fundamental problems with this ideal in so far as the notion of its full realization is concerned. It is surely legitimate to ask how the type of ideal ethical community designated by the term 'kingdom of ends' can be realized under specific historical conditions. Moreover, Fichte has been criticized for failing to offer an account of such a community by not developing the implications of his theory of recognition set out in the first section of his *Foundations of Natural Right according to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* (*Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*) from 1796–97. He instead replaces intersubjective recognition with a form of recognition that is only achieved within the state conceived as a purely legal form of community and coercive

[3] Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, 73. [4] Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, 66.

institution.[5] This criticism assumes that the ideal of a kingdom of ends as a community whose members recognize each other as free and equal beings can become a reality not only in a legal and political form but also in a purely ethical one. In the *Addresses to the German Nation* and some other texts from roughly the same period Fichte has something to say about the issues mentioned above. Yet what he says about them raises problems concerning the idea of the realization of an ethical community modelled on the idea of a kingdom of ends under determinate historical conditions and when the establishment of such a community will require influencing others to adopt the standpoint of a member of this community. This brings me back to the two problems identified earlier.

Despite his description of his philosophy as a system of freedom and the central role that he accordingly gives the concept of freedom both in his theoretical philosophy and in his practical philosophy, Fichte has been characterized as an enemy of freedom.[6] I show that although there are indeed some grounds for thinking that Fichte ultimately negates freedom in his attempt to realize the kind of ethical community associated with Kant's ideal of a kingdom of ends, this negation of freedom has its roots not only in this ideal but also in Fichte's view of freedom as autonomy understood in terms of Kant's notion of a pure practical reason governed by unconditionally valid principles of action, which makes moral agency into something that is essentially law-governed. Fichte radicalizes Kant's notion of moral autonomy and in so doing turns freedom into a matter of moral necessity. In Kant's moral philosophy itself the notion of moral necessity is already at work, for he claims that moral obligations must be grounded in a law that commands with 'absolute necessity' (AA 4: 389; PP: 44). Yet moral obligations ultimately remain only subjectively necessary in the sense that even when moral agents recognize their validity, they may still choose to act contrary to them for the sake of an inclination that determines them to act in ways that are incompatible with such obligations. This freedom of choice (*Willkür*), in so far as it enables agents to will the morally bad instead of the moral good of which they are conscious,

[5] Cf. Williams, *Recognition*. The relation of right is here said to be 'a morally necessary one, i.e., the idea of a rational-moral community, not unlike Kant's kingdom of ends. In his concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*), Fichte reflects the concept of a universal law made by freedom that places restrictions upon the freedom of all, a freely imposed self-restraint' (54f.).

[6] As when it is claimed that Fichte's approach to the question of freedom has totalitarian consequences, which are to be explained in terms of his adoption of the revolutionary conception of freedom associated with the French Revolution and his idealism in so far as it holds freedom to be connected with a radically alienated subjectivity's attempt to assert itself and to become certain of itself in its opposition to all reality. Cf. Willms, *Die totale Freiheit*, 13.

means that moral obligations must take the form of a command in relation to a will that does not necessarily will in accordance with them (AA 4: 413; PP: 66). In his *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*), Kant goes so far as to claim that human beings are disposed not to be obedient to the laws of pure practical reason. Rather, they are radically or 'by nature' evil in the sense that they have a propensity to seek to exempt themselves from universal law when it suits them to do so. This radical evil expresses itself in the failure to make the higher-order principle (or maxim as he calls it) of respect (*Achtung*) for the moral law into the incentive of one's actions, a failure which must be explained in terms of an act of choice if it itself is to be regarded as a *moral* failure. Consequently, for Kant, 'the statement, "The human being is *evil*," cannot mean anything else than that he is conscious of the moral law and yet has incorporated into his maxim the (occasional) deviation from it' (AA 6: 32; RRT: 79).

In effect, Kant avoids turning moral agency into a matter of moral necessity not only by making obedience to the moral law into a matter of free choice, but also by introducing forms of what might be called moral distortion that make automatic obedience to the moral law inconceivable in the case of human beings, who even when they are conscious of the moral law's authority and validity are also subject to inclinations that may lead them to choose not to will what it commands. What is more, they exhibit a disposition not to do what they are morally obliged to do when it conflicts with self-interest. Thus, on the one hand, an individual's capacity to subject himself to universal law as a free and rational being 'makes him fit to be a member of a possible kingdom of ends, which he was already destined [*bestimmt*] to be by his own nature as an end in itself' (AA 4: 435; PP: 85). On the other hand, there is no guarantee that individuals will fulfil their moral destiny to become members of a kingdom of ends. Indeed, the kind of moral distortion mentioned above prevents them from making the morally appropriate choice in each and every case. This implies that if such moral distortion could somehow be removed, individuals would always make the morally appropriate choice under the right conditions, which will include such factors as possessing relevant knowledge of what the moral law commands in any particular case.[7] In other words, instead

[7] Kant provides another reason that individuals may fail to act fully in accordance with the demands of morality. This reason is that the application of the laws of pure practical reason requires the use of judgement, the art of which may be lacking in some people. Yet even here Kant appears to treat a certain form of moral distortion as fundamental in the sense that it partly explains *why* judgement is

of freedom of choice, which entails the possibility of choosing what is morally bad over what is morally good, there would be automatic obedience to the moral law and thus the impossibility of choosing to act in the morally wrong way. This would mean, in effect, only being able to choose the morally good. I shall argue that Fichte eventually draws this conclusion at the same time as he seeks to explain how any moral distortion can be removed with the result that moral necessity comes to replace freedom of choice. Fichte can therefore be seen faithfully to adopt some central elements of Kant's moral philosophy, but in such a way as to show, however unintentionally, that the creation of an ethical community along the lines of Kant's kingdom of ends would threaten to reduce moral agency to a matter of necessity rather than freedom.

If such an outcome suggests that the creation of an ethical community of this kind is not something that we could possibly will in so far as we value the idea of ourselves as free agents, it may be asked whether the ideal of a community whose complete realization must be rendered inconceivable in order to avoid such a conclusion can be endorsed at all.[8] The problem that

needed, for he says that the laws in question 'no doubt still require a judgment sharpened by experience, partly to distinguish in what cases they are applicable and partly to provide them with access to the will of the human being and efficacy for his fulfilment of them; for the human being is affected by so many inclinations that, though capable of the idea of a practical pure reason, he is not so easily able to make it effective *in concreto* in the conduct of his life' (AA 4: 389; PP: 45). Presumably, then, judgement is in part needed to distinguish between what it means to be acting simply according to given inclinations that one has, and thus in a potentially immoral fashion, and what it means to be determined by the demands of a form of practical reason that is pure in the sense of not depending on anything empirical. It is the human tendency to confuse these two things, therefore, that explains the need for judgement, and this tendency may itself be viewed as a form of moral distortion, in that in some cases it is convenient to confuse them, as when acting from motives of self-interest alone is rationalized in such a way as to make what one does appear morally good either to oneself or to others.

[8] This is not to say that alternative explanations of how a kingdom of ends can be created are not possible. Yet such attempts are themselves instructive. Christine Korsgaard explains the creation of such a community in terms of a reciprocal personal relation to others that involves holding each other to be responsible in various ways and is akin to friendship. Cf. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, 188ff. Although this reciprocal relation is said to be based on reasons, there is no indication that the reasons in question are the unconditionally valid principles of pure practical reason that Kant characterizes in terms of the idea of moral necessity. In this respect, Fichte's account of the creation of a kingdom of ends can be thought to be truer to Kant's own understanding of the form of reason governing a kingdom of ends. The idea of friendship implies the existence of certain emotional ties as opposed to purely rational ones. We shall see that Fichte also introduces certain affective ties, though in a way that, true to Kant's view of the nature of moral agency, seeks to explain this affective dimension in terms of its being a product of pure practical reason instead of something that determines human agency directly. These affective ties end up, however, assuming the form of the kind of patriotic sentiment typically associated with nationalism. This raises the question as to why this type of affective bond is any less compatible with Kant's notion of the affective ties that might unite the members of a kingdom of ends than are the bonds of friendship to which Korsgaard appeals.