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HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE
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JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE

*Attempt at a Critique of
All Revelation*

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Introduction

Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation was the first published work by a philosopher of still greatly underappreciated originality and power. It is no understatement to say that the thought of Fichte, more than any other thinker (even Kant or Hegel) holds the key to understanding the entire tradition of philosophy on the European continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And although this initial work in Fichte's career is recognizably Kantian in inspiration – to such an extent, in fact, that it was even taken by some of its earliest readers for Kant's own work – it also displays some of the aspirations and characteristics that mark Fichte's unique originality and influence.

Early life

The story of the publication of Fichte's first work, and of Fichte's life up to the point of its publication, is intriguing, perhaps even inspiring. Johann Gottlieb Fichte was born May 19, 1762, in Rammenau, Saxony. He was the son of a poor ribbon-weaver, an only recently emancipated serf. Such a child might normally have grown up illiterate, to say nothing of the prospects for a university education or an academic career.

One Sunday in 1771, however, the Baron Ernest Haubold von Miltitz was prevented by illness from attending a sermon he especially wished to hear. Upon expressing his regret at this state of affairs to a servant, the Baron was informed that there was a little boy in the village who was in the habit of attending that preacher's sermons and who had displayed the

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ability to repeat verbatim, and with comprehension, almost any sermon he had just heard. So the nine-year-old Fichte was summoned before the Baron and performed the feat that had been promised. Baron Miltitz was so impressed that he undertook to provide the talented lad with an education enabling him to become a clergyman himself, even including this commitment as a bequest in his will.

Fichte was sent to the *Internat* (or boarding school) at Pforta (the same school at which, some seventy years later, the young Friedrich Nietzsche was also educated), and then to the universities of Jena and Leipzig. His endless postponement of completing his clerical training (occasioned by his decision to pursue instead a university academic career in philosophy) tested the patience of the Baron's heirs, and in 1784 Fichte finally left the university to become a private tutor first in Saxony and then in Zürich, Switzerland. In this last post he became acquainted with both the influential intellectual and religious figure Johann Kaspar Lavater and the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. This led in 1790 to Fichte's engagement to Klopstock's niece, Johanna Maria Rahn.

With the help of Lavater and his prospective father-in-law, Fichte then obtained a new and more desirable tutoring post in Leipzig. On the way to Leipzig, Fichte stopped in Weimar, where with letters of introduction from Lavater he made the acquaintance of both Goethe and Schiller. He had also just become introduced to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose writings he had read in order to tutor a student at Leipzig who wanted to study them. Fichte became an immediate and passionate convert to the critical philosophy.

The teaching post in Leipzig, however, did not work out as planned (coming to grief over a quarrel between Fichte and his employer – an all too common occurrence in Fichte's career). He soon accepted another post, however, in Warsaw, to which he traveled (mostly on foot) in spring 1791. This position too came to nothing after a quarrel between Fichte and his prospective employer upon their first meeting. But Warsaw was not far from East Prussia, so Fichte decided to go to Königsberg, with the aim of meeting the great Kant. The first meeting with Fichte apparently left Kant unimpressed, but during the summer Fichte remained in Königsberg and composed *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, presenting it to Kant in August. By this time Fichte was in such desperate financial straits that he soon approached Kant again, asking for a loan of the funds necessary to travel back to Saxony. Kant instead proposed

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that Fichte should sell his manuscript to Kant's publisher, Hartung. And together with his colleague Court Chaplain Schultz, Kant then also obtained a tutoring position for Fichte in Krakow, near Danzig, where he remained until June of 1793, when he returned to Zürich for his wedding. During this time, Fichte composed two radical political tracts: *Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, who Have Suppressed It*, and *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution*.

The publication of Fichte's little book on revelation had in the meantime gone rather slowly, because the censorship of religious publications newly instituted by King Friedrich Wilhelm II (with which Kant himself was soon to come into conflict) required Fichte to submit his writing to the theological faculty at Halle, where in January, 1792, the dean declined to accept it unless Fichte changed its contents (to affirm that revelation could rationally be based on miracles). Such a change Fichte absolutely refused to make. Although a new dean soon reversed the censorship ruling, Hartung had already made plans to publish Fichte's book anonymously, and without Fichte's Preface, explaining the circumstances of the book's composition. (It is impossible to confirm the speculation that Hartung may have published it in this form in order to invite the thought that Kant was its author, thereby boosting sales.) *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* therefore appeared in this form in the spring of 1792.

The reception of the book by its earliest readers was a turning point in Fichte's career. Many of them knew that Kant himself was planning a work on religion, and the contents of the book (especially in this first edition, and without the changes Fichte made in 1793 for the second edition) – together with the fact that Kant was known to have problems with the censorship, possibly resulting in the anonymous publication of such a work – led many of Kant's followers to think that the author was Kant himself. A lengthy and favorable review in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* in Jena claimed that Kant was obviously its author. This led Kant to write a letter to the journal, published in the next month's edition, identifying Fichte as the author of the book on revelation and declaring that the honor of having written it belonged entirely to him. This made the hitherto unknown Fichte immediately a significant figure in the philosophical world, and soon after his return to Zürich, and his wedding, it led to his appointment in 1794 to the chair in philosophy at Jena that had just been vacated by Kant's chief advocate at the time, K. L. Reinhold.

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Thus far, the history of Fichte's career makes for a gratifying, perhaps even an inspiring, little narrative. The remainder of his life and career, however, is filled with tumult. The rest of the 1790s were for Fichte (and for modern philosophy) a brief era of astonishing philosophical achievement. But the tale as a whole is far darker and more troubling, even tragic.

Fichte's years in Jena were his most productive ones, and philosophy in Jena during Fichte's relatively brief tenure constituted the birth of post-Kantian German idealism, which was a decisive influence on all Western philosophy for the past two hundred years. Among those decisively influenced by Fichte during this time – many of them by personal acquaintance – were Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, Novalis, Tieck, and Friedrich Schlegel. But Fichte also came into constant conflict with others at the university and in the surrounding society, eventually even with his most ardent political supporters, such as Goethe.

After receiving the offer of the professorship at Jena, Fichte asked that his arrival be put off a year so that he might first “complete” his philosophical “system.” Permission for this postponement was denied, resulting in the fact that Fichte's first attempt to articulate his system was in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), a work literally composed week by week and distributed serially to his students, which helps to explain the work's notorious obscurity and difficulty. His first series of popular lectures, however, on the vocation of the scholar, were sensationally successful, well attended and well received. Fichte was viewed with deep suspicion from the start, however, on account of his reputation as a political Jacobin, based on his 1793 essay defending the French Revolution against the attacks of August Wilhelm Rehberg. Fichte also made enemies because of his denunciations of the student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*), which were often more like a cross between our academic fraternities and our street gangs – whose members, however, were not the poor and underprivileged, but the sons of the highborn, the wealthy, and the well-connected. Fichte's own house was vandalized, and his aged and ailing father-in-law injured by rocks thrown through his bedroom window.

What exacerbated all these conflicts, however, was Fichte's own character and temperament, which were doctrinaire, uncompromising,

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defensive, and pompously moralistic. Kant and Fichte both rose to academic prominence based on a family background of low birth and poverty. Kant, however, took upward social mobility with grace, whereas in an academic world that served above all the nobility and the well-to-do bourgeoisie, Fichte regarded everyone around him with hostility. We can see this even in his wildly popular lectures on the scholar's vocation, where Fichte seems convinced that the future development of humanity turns on the enlightenment and moral fervor of those to whom he is lecturing, yet he also betrays his deep distrust, sometimes bordering on paranoia, for the social classes that constitute his audience. We get a vivid portrait from Rudolf Steiner:

There was something violent about Fichte's manner of behavior. Again and again a peculiar pathos of ideas – which accompanied his scientific ideas just as much as his political ones – led him to seek the straightest and shortest route to his goals. And when anything stood in his way, then his inflexibility turned into rudeness, and his energy into recklessness. He was never able to understand that old habits are stronger than new ideas; thus he was continually coming into conflict with the persons with whom he had to deal. The reason for most of these conflicts was that Fichte alienated people through his personality before he could make his ideas accessible to them. Fichte lacked the ability to put up with everyday life.¹

We can see these attitudes for ourselves in one of his letters to Reinhold:

You say that my tone offends and wounds persons whom it does not concern. I sincerely regret this; nevertheless, it does concern them to the extent that they do not wish to let someone tell them honestly what terrible errors they usually embrace, and to the extent that they do not want to accept a bit of shame as the price for some very important instruction. Certainly the Wissenschaftslehre can have nothing to do with anyone who does not value truth above everything else – including his petty individual self. The *internal* reason for assuming the tone in question is this: whenever I have to witness the prevailing loss of any sense of truth and the current deep obscurantism and wrongheadedness, I am filled with a contempt

¹ Rudolf Steiner (ed.), "Sieben Briefe von Fichte an Goethe – zwei Briefe von Fichte an Schiller," *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 15 (1894), 49; translated by Daniel Breazeale in the Editor's Introduction to *Fichte's Early Writings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 22.

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I cannot describe. The *external* reason for my tone is the way these people have treated me and continue to treat me. There is nothing I desired less than to engage in polemics.²

The situation came to a head after Fichte wrote an essay defending a colleague who claimed, recognizably in the spirit of a Kantian moral theology based on hope for the highest good, that we can form no concept of God except that of the “living moral world order.” This essay was seen as tantamount to a declaration of atheism by people unsympathetic to Fichte, and the accusation of atheism was a potent one in a time when charges of religious unorthodoxy were often used as a vehicle for attacking those regarded as political subversives. The “atheism controversy” that embroiled Fichte became a sensation, occasioning Jacobi’s famous attack on Fichte and even Kant’s open letter (perhaps ghost-written by Schultz) denouncing Fichte.³ Fichte’s reaction to all the accusations was predictably intransigent, unyielding, self-righteous – and also self-destructive. He was dismissed from the professorship and left Jena in 1799. (He was, ironically enough, replaced there by Schelling, whose theological views at the time were if anything less orthodox – closer to “atheism” – than Fichte’s.)

Fichte then moved to Berlin, where he was treated by many intellectuals as a *cause célèbre*, a victim of religious intolerance and persecution. His travels in later life took him to Copenhagen and to short-lived professorships at Erlangen and Königsberg before returning to Berlin in 1808. But his greatest philosophical thinking and writing was done in Jena. Goethe’s wistful remarks in a letter of 1799 were prophetic:

I will always be sorry that we had to lose Fichte and that his foolish presumption expelled him from a life which (as extravagant as this hyperbole may sound) he will never find again anywhere on this entire planet. The older one becomes, the more highly one values natural talent, for it cannot be acquired. Fichte certainly has a most outstanding mind, but I fear that it is now lost, both to him and the world. His present circumstances can only add more bitterness to his distorted features.⁴

² See Breazeale (ed.), *Fichte’s Early Writings*, 417.

³ See Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1994), 497–536; Kant, *Schriften*: Akademie Ausgabe (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–), 12: 370–1; *Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 559–61.

⁴ See Breazeale (ed.), *Fichte’s Early Writings*, 45.

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Fichte's claim in 1793 that he needed only one more year to "complete his system" echoes strangely, in light of the fact that he never truly did this. He produced several versions – and even more drafts, sketches, and outlines – of the philosophy he called the *Wissenschaftslehre* (Doctrine of Science), but these were always only beginnings, never a completed philosophical project. Fichte's greatness must be located in the flashes of insight – many of them startlingly original and fatefully influential for later modern philosophy – that prompted him, again and again, to initiate an ambitious philosophical enterprise that he was never able to complete.

Fichte's later philosophy has had its enthusiasts, but it is increasingly characterized by metaphysics and obscure religiosity – as if Fichte were still rebutting the charge of atheism. During the Napoleonic wars, and the occupation of Prussia by the French, Fichte also became an ardent advocate of German nationalism. Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808) were, regarded in historical context, an act of resistance against a foreign occupier; but later, under very different circumstances, they were notoriously appealed to by the Nazis.

With the founding of the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1810, Fichte was appointed as the first holder of its chair in philosophy (the next holder of the chair, between 1818 and 1831, was Hegel). But Fichte became seriously ill in 1808, and never fully recovered, so that his academic activities in Berlin were sharply limited. He died in 1814.

Kant and Fichte on religion and revelation

Fichte is usually thought of as a follower of Kant, and certainly thought of himself this way too – especially in the area of practical philosophy: ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. But it is also true that Fichte's chief works on right (or political philosophy) and ethics were written independently of, and earlier than, the corresponding works by Kant on the same subjects. Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796) was published a year earlier than Kant's *Doctrine of Right* (1797) and his *System of Ethics* (1798) appeared the same year as (and surely with no knowledge of) the first complete version of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, containing the *Doctrine of Virtue*.

A similar case can be made that Fichte's philosophy of religion pre-dates the corresponding work by Kant, since *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792, second edition 1794) pre-dated even the first part of

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Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793) as well as the first complete edition of the *Religion* in 1794. Fichte did write about religion later on – for instance, in the final part of *The Vocation of Man* (1800) as well as *Direction to the Blessed Life* (1806). But on certain topics, such as the basis for regarding God as moral legislator and the role in the moral life of religious revelation, what is said in the *Attempt at a Critique* most closely parallels Kant's treatment of the same topics in the *Religion*, and it is those two works that offer both the closest comparisons with and the most interesting contrasts between the two philosophers.

The opening of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* certainly follows earlier Kantian treatments of the relation of morality to religion (in the first and second Critiques, for instance) by focusing on the idea that faith in God is needed to guarantee the proportionality of happiness to morality (or worthiness to be happy). The account follows Kant especially closely in the first edition of the *Attempt*, which was without doubt largely responsible for the attribution to Kant himself by the earliest readers. Fichte also follows Kantian formalism by regularly expounding concepts in accordance with the four headings of the categories (quantity, quality, relation, and modality).

The second edition, however, interpolates a long and elaborate new §2, where the relation of happiness and morality is derived from a development of the concept of *volition* or practical self-activity. From the standpoint of Fichte's philosophy as a whole, this is the most interesting part of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, and we will examine it further in the next section.

Most of the work, however, is occupied with the deductions of religion (§3), the distinction between natural and revealed religion (§4), and the concept of revelation itself (§§5–7), as well as his treatment of the criteria for a true revelation (§§8–14). Here Fichte accepts some version of the following basic Kantian picture: Religion in general is grounded not on theoretical knowledge of any kind, or on any kind of nonrational feelings or intuitions, but solely on practical reason and morality, and its claims can be justified only insofar as they are required by morality and serve its ends. Revealed religion, in particular, insofar as its claims can be justified, serves certain moral needs characteristic of our humanity. It cannot be grounded on any theoretical knowledge – for example, empirical knowledge of miraculous occurrences. (This, we should recall, was the issue between Fichte and the censor, on which Fichte refused to compromise

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as a matter of principle.) Moreover, the acceptance of any revelation, or of any claims purportedly based on it, is always something optional for any given individual: it cannot be demanded on theoretical grounds, or regarded as a moral duty, much less made an object of coercion by political authorities.

Consequently, the most we can ever claim about any putative revelation, in fact, is that its content is such that for all we can know it *might have been* given to us by a wise and good Deity; no claim to revelation can ever be assertorically certified as coming from God or any other supernatural source. Finally, there are certain criteria, of an entirely moral nature, which may be used in deciding whether even this limited and conditional claim is acceptable for a given revelation.

Within this general Kantian picture, however, Fichte's presentation of its elements differs significantly from the presentation Kant was soon to give them in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. For Kant, the idea of religion – the recognition of our moral duties as divine commands – is tied to our need to join with others in a voluntary ethical community or commonwealth if we are to combat the propensity to evil in ourselves, which arises from our social condition. The empirical and historical forms taken by such a community are the various churches and ecclesiastical faiths, which, by a peculiar weakness of human nature, can arise only out of the acceptance of an ecclesiastical tradition grounded on a holy book or sacred scripture of some kind. Kant sees revealed religion as associated with the claims of such a scripture.

It is difficult to resist the impression that Kant hopes the reliance on such scriptures, and the supposed revelations they contain, will gradually dissipate or even disappear as religion becomes more enlightened, rational, and universal. This is certainly what he thinks about the ecclesiastical hierarchy of most religions (“the degrading distinction between clergy and laity”), and also the limited extent of existing ecclesiastical faiths, which at present divide ethical communities from one another, where they should unite all rational beings into a single cosmopolitan whole. For Fichte, however, the need for religion is intimately connected to moral motivation and the authority of the moral law, which requires that we be able to think of morality as legislated both by our own will and by the will of God which is external to us. For Fichte, revealed religion represents “the supernatural outside us,” in contrast to “the supernatural within us”; and moral motivation, especially our experience of the

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authority of the moral law over us, and the capacity to despise ourselves when we fail to live up to it, are bound up with the thought of being addressed by an external being, God.

Looking at religion in the context of the historical development of humanity, Fichte's conception of revelation follows Lessing's idea that revealed religion constitutes a kind of indispensable "education of the human race" towards reason, civilization, and morality. Fichte's conception of a divine revelation as the "making known" of something by one rational being to another, and the experience of something exhibiting the concept of an *end*, as the mark of a subjectivity outside our own, anticipates the idea in Fichte's later moral philosophy that self-consciousness itself, and especially our conception of ourselves as particular acting beings, rests transcendently on the concept of being "summoned" by an I that is outside us (III, 33–8, IV, 220–3).⁵

For Fichte, revealed religion is therefore much more intimately and indispensably connected with morality than it ever is in Kant. Here one cannot possibly get the impression that religious revelation is held to be only a regrettable historical necessity, hopefully destined to be purified away by the moral progress of the human mind. In this way, Fichte – the miscreant dismissed from his position on the grounds of his "atheism" – was always a theistic religious thinker in a far deeper sense than Kant. And in Fichte's later thought this led to many new ideas about the nature of religious consciousness and the experience of the divine which led away from the traditional orthodox metaphysical concept of God and in the direction of "modernist" religious thinking that still influences theology down to the present day.

The development of the concept of volition

When, in the second edition, Fichte arrived at the Kantian idea that we should rationally believe in God because human happiness must be proportioned to worthiness, he did so by way of a fundamental and highly original development of the concept of *volition*, which already anticipates his philosophical method in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), and even the deduction of the will found later in the *System of*

⁵ Fichte's writings will be cited in this Introduction by volume and page number in *Fichtes Sammtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970).

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Ethics (1798). Many of the conclusions are recognizably Kantian, but the method of arriving at them is highly original, and some of the content itself diverges from the Kantian models on which it is ostensibly based.

Fichte makes clear that this is a development of the *concept* of the will, not a demonstration that the properties contained in this concept (especially the kinds of spontaneity and freedom that belong conceptually to volition) pertain to human beings, or are found anywhere at all. Fichte thus realizes that the freedom he takes to be inseparable from volition, properly conceived, is going to be controversial, and the arguments for it must be distinct from the conceptual development he is presently undertaking. To *will*, Fichte asserts, is “to determine oneself to produce a representation with the consciousness of one’s own activity” (v, 16). The representation in question, it soon appears, is that of a possible state of affairs in the external world which the volition in question would strive to bring about. A volitional agent, therefore, is one whose strivings or desires themselves are never simply given to it passively, but always involve the self-activity of the agent. *Theoretical* representations may be given to us in this way, but not the representations through which we are to act on the world.

Fichte begins with a general analysis of the representation in question. It must, he says, have both a content, provided by sensation (hence affection, or passively) and a form (given through spontaneity). This much, for a Kantian, is true equally of theoretical and practical representations, since the representations involved in cognizing the world involve the material of sensation and the forms given through pure intuition and the understanding. But all representations involved in volition, by means of which we determine ourselves to activity, must be composed of a form, produced by pure spontaneity, and also a matter, given in sensation. The latter, he says, provides a *medium* determinable on one side by spontaneity, but on the other by the representation through which we determine ourselves in volition, to which we relate passively. This medium he calls the *impulse* (*Antrieb*) (v, 17). Every impulse, in turn, has a “form” given by the mind through self-activity, which Fichte identifies with the “fine” or “beautiful” (*schön*) (v, 17n), and also a matter, which he calls the “pleasant” or “agreeable” (*angenehm*) (v, 18). It is noteworthy here that for Fichte this sensuous side of the impulse is not merely something subjective (a feeling in the mind, present only, as in Kant, in inner sense), but it always relates us (at least indirectly) to the world in space – “all pleasant sensations of inner sense may finally be traced to pleasant outer

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sensations" (v, 18). In other words, every impulse through which we determine ourselves volitionally, in its content stands in some relation to external states of affairs in the world outside us.

The account so far is supposed to hold equally for volition that is, in Kantian terms, motivated by inclination and volition motivated by the moral law. Fichte understands this distinction in terms of the *way* the volition mediated by the representation is determined through our spontaneity (since in both cases, volition is self-determining through our own spontaneity.) In the first way, this determination takes place through *judgment* – namely, the judgment that the representation in question, regarding its matter (given in sensation) involves agreeableness or enjoyment. In the second way, the will determines itself directly and solely through its own spontaneity, or what Fichte calls the pure form of the will (v, 18, 23). But it is necessary even for grasping Fichte's conception of the second (or pure moral) form of volition that we understand the development of the first (or empirical) form.

To be motivated empirically by an impulse involves for Fichte a *judgment* (a spontaneous act) that the representation of an external state of affairs is pleasant or agreeable (and apparently too that the represented state of affairs would involve *enjoyment* for us). This judgment yields the concept of happiness (*Glück*). The judgment of happiness is, however, merely empirical, and applies only to the single volitional agent (an impulse involves no knowledge or judgment about whether the same representation might be pleasant or agreeable to any other subject). It is also restricted in referring only to what is pleasant or agreeable *for me now*, and does not even anticipate what will be agreeable "in the next hour" (v, 21). Through reason, however, we also make judgments about happiness that extend these judgments unconditionally and without limitation – and this results in judgments about our own Happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) (v, 21).⁶ Neither of these judgments, however, entails a determination of the will by the impulse in question. Even the possibility of making them – of determining through spontaneity that this representation is agreeable, or that it forms part of our total Happiness as a whole – involves the capacity to *delay* the determination of the will so that these judgments may be made. Even the concept of empirically motivated volition, therefore, already presupposes

⁶ Here I follow the present translation, which translates *Glück* as "happiness" and *Glückseligkeit* as "Happiness." The latter term, seldom used in present-day German, was used by Kant in his formulation of the idea of the highest good.

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an absolute spontaneity, and the capacity to be motivated solely by the pure form of the will. This is the second form of volition – in Kantian terms, volition motivated by reason or the moral law.

Fichte identifies the pure form of volition with “the idea of the absolutely right” (*des schlechthin rechten*) (v:24). As in Kant, to determine oneself in accordance with such an idea also involves an affection of one’s own sensibility, or a feeling – namely, the feeling of *respect*. But Fichte’s account of this feeling, and of its relation to empirical desire, differs from Kant’s in significant ways. The basis of all of them is that Fichte insists on understanding all volition as absolute spontaneity and self-determination grounded on the unity of the agent – which for Fichte is always a unity to be produced, a normative requirement to unify, constituting the form of spontaneous volition itself, rather than a unity simply given (such as a “personal identity” conceived simply as a “metaphysical fact”). And the human self is constituted as the object of this required unity.

This entails, first, that morality for Fichte should encompass and give form to everything that we do. Sometimes it may seem that Fichte’s position here is a ferocious form of rigorism, in which everything in life must be sacrificed for morality, leaving us with no life apart from our moral calling. But another way to look at it is that Fichte is not asking us to sacrifice anything meaningful in our lives, but rather only to relate everything in our lives to a fundamental project of selfhood (which Fichte frames in moral or ethical terms). It is not that a set of external moral constraints takes over our lives, leaving no room for other projects, but rather that in a morality based on the principle of a unified selfhood, morality expands to encompass all our projects, all our desires, even our pleasures and sensuous impulses, which are not so much to be denied as to be taken over freely for the sake of the autonomy of the will. (Or – to put it in terminology that has become well known through its use by Bernard Williams – Fichte does not demand the sacrifice of our “ground-project” to morality, but rather the expansion of each person’s conception of morality to encompass his “ground-project” – which, of course, must in general be compatible with the demands of morality.)⁷

A second consequence of the fact that the form of volition is self-unification is that the feeling of respect, for Fichte, is always fundamentally

⁷ See Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

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directed to oneself: all respect is grounded on *self-respect* (v, 27). Even the most selfless of moral actions, therefore, “must relate itself to the self (*das Selbst*) in order to effect an actual volition” (v, 28). The difference between selfish volition and unselfish is whether this relation is one of self-love or self-respect.

A third important consequence of the unity of the self and the self-relatedness of volition is that Fichte regards even the most selfless moral action as involving a kind of self-interest or action “for my own sake”: even if, for morality’s sake, I sacrifice my life “under a thousand torments,” I do so “for my own sake, because [such a death] is far more bearable than a life to be lived in the feeling of unworthiness, under shame and self-disdain” (v, 31).

Another corollary of the rational demand for the unity of the human being is that the moral motive of self-respect counts for volition as an *impulse* (in the sense already described) which stands in relation to other (empirical) impulses, including those for agreeableness and Happiness. The difference, as Fichte explains, is that with nonmoral impulses, the determination of the volition is produced by self-activity, but the representation by means of which volition is determined is not; but in the case of moral volition, the representation (of the absolutely right, and the consequent impulse of self-respect) is produced by absolute spontaneity, but the determination of the will by means of this representation is not. That is, this determination is experienced not as an arbitrary choice to self-determination, but as the determination to action required by the idea of the absolutely right and the feeling of respect (v, 33).

Despite this contrast, however, Fichte insists that the feeling of respect, because it is an impulse, also positively affects the impulse to Happiness, “in order to bring unity to the whole human being, both purely and empirically determinable” (v, 34). This means that even the most selfless moral action is also self-related in the sense that it has consequences for the way in which we conceive of our good as a whole, and this relates it to our Happiness. Hence although self-sacrificing moral action bears originally a negative relation to Happiness (the more we sacrifice Happiness for morality, the more we may respect ourselves), the moral impulse also involves in some way our impulse to Happiness.

Kant draws a sharp distinction between the good of our *state or condition* (*Zustand*) and the goodness of our *person*. Contentment with oneself, grounded on the latter, he insists, must not count as a part of our

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happiness and bears no relation to it. This Kantian doctrine has the odd consequence that moral value appears not to have any influence on the morally good person's conception of their own happiness. Surely this is counter-intuitive: we think of a selfish or cruel person, in virtue of his selfishness or cruelty, as placing his happiness in depriving others of what they want and inflicting harm on them, whereas if you are a morally good and generous person, you get no happiness from harming others, but instead you find at least part of your own happiness in benefiting them. You do so, apparently, because concern with the moral self-worth of your own person *is* a part of your happiness: you cannot be happy being a cruel and selfish person, but only being a benevolent and generous one. Fichte's concern with the "unity of the whole human being" takes him, on this issue, in a direction different from Kant's, and in the direction of the common-sense views to which I have just been appealing.

In his *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation* (1794), these considerations were about to lead Fichte in the direction of saying that pleasurable feelings are not the same as happiness and that there is no true happiness apart from morality (vi, 299). Here in §2 of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, they lead to a more conventional Kantian conclusion: that moral motivation itself is involved in our desire for Happiness, which Fichte conceptualizes under moral principles as a "right to enjoyment" (v, 35–6).

Fichte's "synthetic method"

In the works of Fichte's Jena period, he develops a highly creative method of doing transcendental philosophy, which in effect combines the Kantian tasks of a metaphysical deduction, a transcendental deduction, and a resolution to antinomies of reason. Fichte begins with a principle regarded as immediate and undeniable – such as our original awareness of our I as intuited and also conceptualized, or the thought of our I under a specific condition, for example as the activity of volition. His objective is then to derive a series of further concepts, which are seen as necessary if this first principle is to be thought adequately and without contradiction. By deriving these other concepts in this way, Fichte intends to provide an original exhibition of their content (thus performing the function that Kant attempted in the Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories). By displaying the employment of each concept in turn

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as necessary for the resolution of a threatened contradiction or *aporia*, he also intends to show that its instantiation in our experience and our repertoire of concepts is indispensable (thus providing for the concept the certification that Kant means to provide for the categories in the Transcendental Deduction).

For example, in *the Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), Fichte derives the concept of the not-I as necessary for thinking (through contrast) the concept of the I, and then he attempts to show that the concept of division or limitation of the respective activities of the I and the not-I on one another is necessary for thinking them together without contradiction. (In that work, Fichte also sees this development as deducing and justifying the respective logical principles of identity, difference, and ground.) The same method is used throughout that work to deduce in a similar way such concepts as substance, cause, representation, and practical striving. In *the Foundations of Natural Right* (1796), Fichte employs the same method to deduce from the practical I the necessity of the representation of a “summons” by another I, the relation of right obtaining between any two distinct I’s, and many further concepts involved in the theory of right and political philosophy. *The System of Ethics* (1798) begins also with the concept of the I as volition, and uses the same method to derive the basic concepts of moral psychology and ethics, such as that of a drive, the distinction between the pure (moral) and empirical drives, and so on.

The idea behind this method is that as transcendental inquirers, we are threatened with antinomies or contradictions not only (as in Kant) when we attempt to apply concepts of the unconditioned to the supersensible, but whenever our thought is limited by a conceptual impoverishment. We rise above these contradictions (or show them to be only apparent) by introducing a new concept, which “synthesizes” the apparently contradictory concepts and is thereby shown to be necessary for consistently thinking through our original starting point. Fichte never was able to employ this method in the construction of a complete philosophical system, though he does use it extensively in the construction of two parts of his practical philosophy – right and ethics. The “synthetic method” is recognizably the model for the dialectical method employed by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, his speculative logic, and throughout his philosophical system (which in this way may be regarded

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as completing – albeit with many modifications, differences, and points of philosophical disagreement – the systematic project Fichte was never able to finish).

It is therefore notable that in the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, the synthetic method is already employed at several crucial junctures to derive concepts crucial to Fichte's account of religion and revelation as the completion of a process that began with his concept of volition in §2. We have already seen one employment of this idea. Recall that nonmoral volition involves the determination by pure spontaneity (or self-activity), but not its production, of the representation through which volition is determined, whereas moral volition involves the *production* by self-activity of this representation (of self-respect), but not its determination (v, 33). Yet in this last account there seems a paradox: for (as Fichte says) “the determination is always to be produced by self-activity”; and he then concludes that “this case is conceivable only under the condition that the *determination as action* happens by spontaneity, but *determinative impulse* is nevertheless an affection ... the impulse of self-respect as moral interest” (v, 33). The threat of contradiction – that all determination of the will is to be produced by self-activity or spontaneity, but determination of the moral will is not – is resolved by introducing a distinction between “determination as action” and “the determinative impulse” (as self-respect or moral interest).

The next threat of a “formal contradiction of the law with itself” is between the “negative determination of impulse by the [moral] law” and the justification of enjoyment in accordance with the same law (§2; v, 35–6). The threat of contradiction is resolved by introducing the idea of worthiness to be happy (v, 36–8). The contradiction between moral and physical law (if physical laws do not provide for the happiness of which rational beings have made themselves worthy) is similarly resolved by the Kantian postulate of God's existence (v, 40–2).

Fichte next sees a threatened contradiction between the law as proceeding from our own will and as having authority over that will, and resolves it through the concept of God as external legislator of the moral law of our reason (v, 52–6). This use of the synthetic method also introduces the idea that we first arrive at the idea of God as moral lawgiver through what Fichte calls “an alienation (*Entäusserung*) of what is ours, translating something subjective into a being outside us; and this alienation is the

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principle of religion” (v, 55). (Here Fichte succinctly states the basic idea behind the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, though he does not intend it as a critique of religion, as Feuerbach did.)

A further contradiction looms between two concepts of ourselves: as sensuous beings and yet as beings capable of morality; this is resolved by representing moral incentives as sensuous incentives in the form of an empirical divine revelation (v, 79–80). And a later instance of the synthetic method is the resolution of the “formal contradiction” between the necessarily a priori ground of divine revelation and its representation to us as something empirically given (v, 100). This is accomplished by introducing the concept of a moral feeling awakened through the influence of revealed religion (v, 101).

Thus at a number of crucial junctures in his critique of revelation, Fichte already sees himself as advancing his transcendental claims through use of the synthetic method, as he does in his later writings of the Jena period.

Fichte’s influence

No doubt Fichte’s conception of God and religion developed much further, and in quite creative ways, in his later writings. And the period immediately after his composition of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, in which Fichte engaged with Reinhold’s attempt to reconstruct a Kantian system of transcendental philosophy, and the criticism of this attempt by Schulze, played a decisive role in the formation of his conception of a *Wissenschaftslehre* and even of the synthetic method as it is used in his Jena-period systems. Yet we would be quite mistaken to regard his first published work as a mere obsequious imitation of Kantian philosophy, or a piece of juvenilia that might justifiably be left aside in understanding the basic conceptions of Fichte’s philosophy.

From the very start Fichte was a philosopher of great originality and intellectual vigor. Fichte was the true philosophical revolutionary who, more than any other single figure, made possible the philosophy of the nineteenth century and even the entire tradition of continental philosophy down to the present day. I would argue that for virtually every significant figure in the European continental tradition of later modern philosophy, there is an absolutely central idea in that philosopher’s thought which can be traced directly back to Fichte as its originator. Many of these gems,

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that were later polished and set by other philosophers, may be unrecognizable in Fichte because they are encased in the unprepossessing geode of his forbidding jargon and his (always unsuccessful) attempts to erect a complete transcendental system. But once we become familiar with Fichte's ways of thinking, they are easy enough to see. I have already identified two such ideas earlier in this introduction: first, the Hegelian dialectic, which is a creative transformation of the Fichtean "synthetic method" already anticipated at crucial points in the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*; and second, Feuerbach's idea that "the principle of religion" is "an alienation (*Entäusserung*) of what is ours, translating something subjective into a being outside us." But there are many more such ideas, and I will conclude this Introduction by describing a few of the more prominent and influential ones.

Fichte's transcendental exposition of the conditions of the self-consciousness of the I arrives very early at the conclusion that the I is in an original practical relation to the not-I, in which the I's embodied, material existence plays an indispensable role. The I's original project is to subdue the not-I, to make it conform to the I's own practical concepts. Fichte's conception of this practical relation leads him directly to the thought that our original consciousness of our volition takes the form of a becoming conscious of an unconscious striving always already present in our body, as a kind of objectless longing (*Sehnen*) which takes the form of particular volitions but is fundamentally infinite and without end, in its original biological form. This Fichtean thought is easily recognizable as the intellectual source of Schopenhauer's (and later Nietzsche's) basic idea that our original self-awareness is that of willing, and that willing is originally a kind of insatiable vital will to exercise power over the external world. So Fichte's affinity with Nietzsche (and everything downwind from him) is even more intimate than the fact that they were, with a seventy-five-year hiatus, *Kommilitonen* at the *Schulpforta Internat*.

Another crucial Fichtean idea is that the foundation both of transcendental philosophy and of human dignity as the foundation of morality is our original awareness of free activity, which is to be contrasted with the world of material objects, viewed as not only the original source of resistance to activity, but also as the result and receptacle of activity. The fundamental threat to human dignity, on the other hand, is our tendency to inertia and self-deceptive complacency, which takes the form of giving philosophical primacy to the world of things (the philosophical tendency

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Fichte called ‘dogmatism’). Fichte understands the deception here as one of permitting what is in fact only the product of our own activity to be treated as its determinant, and in this way to let ourselves be dominated by our own creations. It is not difficult to see this as the original form of the Marxian idea of reification, and when applied to the categories of political economy, of Marx’s view that the fundamental form of human unfreedom is the tendency to permit exchange value to rule the activity of labor that produces use-values, hence to let living labor be ruled by dead labor.

Fichte’s I, however, is also seen as faced with an essentially problematic condition, endlessly striving to bring the external world into conformity with its concepts, but also limited by the results of its own striving and therefore at a fundamental level doomed never to attain complete unity or self-harmony within itself. The fate of the Fichtean I could therefore be very aptly described as that of a self that actively relates itself to itself by willing to be itself, but is also beset with a misrelation in the relation that relates itself to itself. In other words, the Fichtean I is the Kierkegaardian self of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Further, in a few terse paragraphs of Fichte’s *System of Ethics*, he conceptualizes the ground of evil in the human will as *despair*, the corrupt refusal of a self to affirm its own activity and will itself to be itself (see IV, 266–7, 318–22, 352). Further, Michelle Kosch has convincingly argued that Fichte’s *System of Ethics* provided Kierkegaard with the most natural model for the conception of the ethical portrayed in the second volume of *Either/Or*.⁸

The world of the I for Fichte is an essentially practical world, whose contours are determined by the I’s projects. In this way, Fichte anticipates the Heideggerian conception of “being-in-the-world” constituted by existential care and concern. Fichte’s I is also constituted by an original freely active and conscious relation to its own activity. This is how Fichte understands the “consciousness of consciousness” that belongs essentially to every awareness, and that Sartre later named “the pre-reflective cogito.” More generally, Fichte is the direct ancestor of the Sartrean conception of a radical yet problematic freedom as the ground of our existence. In many ways (too many to list them all here), there is probably no figure in the history of philosophy whose thought has a deeper affinity to Fichte than Jean-Paul Sartre.

⁸ Michelle Kosch, “Kierkegaard’s Ethicist: Fichte’s Role in Kierkegaard’s Construction of the Ethical,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 88 (2006), pp. 262–95.

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Fichte's I is often compared to Descartes' *cogito*, and Fichte is thought of as renewing some sort of Cartesianism. But such comparisons are incredibly shortsighted, and blind us to Fichte's real philosophical contribution. Fichte is actually the originator of the dominant tradition in the past two centuries which has fundamentally *criticized* the Cartesian view of mentality, selfhood, and self awareness. Fichte is the first modern philosopher to develop a fundamentally *anti*-Cartesian conception of the human self.

The Fichtean I is an essentially embodied agent, whose self-awareness is inseparable from its awareness of, and communicative interaction with, other selves. If Fichte is the original source of every concern with the embodiedness of human existence – in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, in Husserl and Scheler, in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – he is at the same time the source of the modern preoccupation with the intersubjectivity of experience. For Kant, the use of reason involved thinking for one-self, yet from the standpoint of others, and this, Kant thought, requires free communication between people as an indispensable empirical condition. What was merely an empirical condition for Kant became for Fichte a transcendental condition of self-awareness: the possibility of self-consciousness itself depends for Fichte on the instantiation in one's experience of the concept of a "summons" (*Aufforderung*) from another (III:17–56; IV, 218–30).

Reason too is for Fichte essentially constituted by human communication, by an endless process that aims at actual sharing of principles and ends by rational beings. The principles of morality themselves arise only from a process of communication (IV: 230–53; VI: 301–11). Fichte is therefore the original author of the Habermasian idea of "domination-free communication" and of the idea of a "communicative ethics" based on rational agreement or *Verständigung* (though of course that is Habermas's term for it, not Fichte's). As we have already noticed, it is in the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* that the theme of intersubjectivity first makes its appearance, in the form of Fichte's conception of the experience of moral obligation as being addressed by God in a revelatory "making known."

In more ways than I have time to list here, Fichte is the key to the entire tradition of modern continental philosophy. Moreover, as we have seen in several ways, this originality begins to show itself even in his very first piece of published writing – the treatise on religious revelation he

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hastily dashed off in a desperate (though in the event, incredibly successful) attempt to ingratiate himself with Kant, and thereby make a name for himself as a philosopher. Even in its fits and starts, in the endlessly renewed but always frustratingly incomplete system he called the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte's philosophy is prophetic of modern philosophy, and even of modern culture, which itself remains a problematic, troubling, incomplete – perhaps incompletable – attempt to comprehend and actualize our freedom and our humanity.

Allen Wood

Chronology

Titles in italics, unless otherwise attributed, indicate works published by Fichte.

- 1762 Born May 19 in Rammenau, in the Lower Lusatia area of Saxony in today’s Eastern Germany, the first child of the ribbon-weaver Christian Fichte and his wife, Johanna Maria Dorothea, née Schurich
- 1774–80 Scholarship pupil in the Princely Secondary School at Pforta, near Naumburg (Schulpforta)
- 1780–84 Student at the universities of Jena, Wittenberg, and Leipzig, no degree earned
- 1785–93 Private tutor in households in Leipzig, Zürich and Eastern Prussia
- 1790 Reads Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
- 1792 Visits Kant in Königsberg; *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*
- 1793 Returns to Zürich; *Contribution to the Correction of the Public’s Judgment of the French Revolution*; marries Johanna Rahn of Zürich
- 1794 Professor at the University of Jena; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Parts I and II)
- 1795 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Part III)
- 1796 *Foundations of Natural Right* (Part I)
- 1797 *Foundation of Natural Right* (Part II)

Chronology

1798	<i>The System of Ethics and On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World</i>
1798	November: beginning of the atheism dispute
1799	Loses his professorship at Jena
1800	Moves to Berlin; <i>The Vocation of Man</i>
1804	Delivers three private lecture cycles on the <i>Wissenschaftslehre</i>
1805	Professor in Erlangen
1806	<i>Main Characteristics of the Present Age; Direction to the Blessed Life</i>
1807	October: flees to Königsberg, then to Copenhagen after Prussia's defeat by Napoleon's forces; returns to Berlin
1808	<i>Addresses to the German Nation</i>
1810	Professor at the University of Berlin, Dean of the Philosophical Faculty
1811	First elected Rector of the University of Berlin (resigns in April 1812)
1813	Prussian uprising against Napoleon
1814	Dies January 29 in Berlin