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Introduction

The purpose of the fourteen essays gathered in the present volume is to introduce the English-speaking reader to the philosophical thought of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Together with Schelling and Hegel, Fichte forms the core of the philosophical movement known as ‘German idealism’, which grew out of Kant’s critical philosophy in a rapid succession of ambitiously projected and variously executed systems of thought. As the founding figure of the movement, Fichte forms the crucial link between eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought and philosophical as well as literary Romanticism, while also foreshadowing later nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in philosophical thought, from existentialism and liberalism to nationalism and socialism.

The outward stations of Fichte’s life are easily summarized: impoverished beginnings in a ribbon weaver family in the Eastern part of Germany, excellent secondary schooling in Schulpforta (the boys’ school later also attended by Nietzsche), university studies of theology and philosophy at Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg (without taking a degree), private tutor in various households in Saxony, Zurich and Eastern Prussia, professorships in Jena (1794–99), Erlangen (1805) and Berlin (1809–1814), along with private lecturing activity between those academic appointments.

Fichte’s past and recent reputation mainly rests on the works he produced during his tenure as professor of philosophy at the University of Jena and on a series of popular works published during his later years in Berlin. The full extent of Fichte’s philosophical work became apparent only posthumously: first through the select publication of his literary remains (*Nachlaß*) in the middle of the nineteenth century and more recently through the complete edition of

Fichte's published and unpublished works, along with his correspondence and transcripts of his lecture courses, undertaken by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (1962–2012). To a large degree, then, Fichte's is a philosophy yet to be discovered, especially in the English-speaking world, where his reception and reputation have been confined mostly to his influential early work.

The Fichte that emerges from the comprehensive body of his work, stretching over more than two decades (1792–1814), is not so much a forerunner and inaugurator of the later accomplishments of his successor-critics but a coequal participant in a joint and roughly contemporaneous movement beyond Kant that found specifically different manifestations in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. In such a coeval perspective on German idealism's tremendous trio, the three protagonists offer alternative and complementary contributions to their shared project of grasping reality – nature as well as culture – at the level of fundamental philosophical principles and in a comprehensive manner.

In particular, Schelling's philosophical focus lies primarily on an encompassing conception of nature (*Naturphilosophie*) that even includes nature's irrational, 'dark' underground. In contrast, Hegel's core concern lies with the form and function of spirit (*Geist*), as governing reality through the dynamics of its self-alienating as much as self-reaffirming stadial development. Differently yet, Fichte's thinking is centred around a comprehensive conception of freedom as the common and comprehensive principle of self and world, of knowing and doing and of theory and practice ('the first system of freedom').

Fichte's system, while conceived in its entire outline early on, was slow to materialize and never attained a final shape or form. After a meteoric rise to fame, owing to a first publication mistaken for a work of Kant's (*Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, 1792) and his influential lecturing and publishing activity while teaching at Jena, Fichte's academic career and publication record came to an abrupt end over charges of atheism ('atheism dispute', 1798–99) that led to the termination of his academic appointment and made him desist from the further publication of his continuing basic work in philosophy, effectively limiting his public activity over the next decade to lecturing and to popular print publications in the philosophy of history (*The Characteristics of the Present Age*, 1806),

political philosophy (*Addresses to the German Nation*, 1808) and the philosophy of religion (*The Way towards the Blessed Life*, 1806).

In addition to responding to recent philosophical developments and decisively shaping their future course, Fichte's philosophical thinking is deeply informed by and directed towards contemporary political events – from the French Revolution, to which he devoted an early work (*Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution*, 1793–94), through Napoleon's rule over Europe, to which he responded with a call for German cultural re-education and political unification (*Addresses to the German Nation*), to politico-philosophical interventions in the context of the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon.

Fichte's philosophical system, as it first took shape in his Jena lectures and associated publications, comprises a foundational philosophical discipline, inspired by Kant's critical philosophy and termed '*Wissenschaftslehre*' or 'Science of Knowledge' (*Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794–95), a philosophy of right (*Foundation of Natural Right*, 1796–97) and an ethics (*The System of Ethics*, 1798), the latter two built on the premises of his foundational philosophy. Additional publications from that phase lie in the philosophy of education (*Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*, 1794) and the philosophy of religion ('On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World', 1798). In the wake of the atheism dispute and as part of his defence against the charges of denying God as well as any genuine material and spiritual reality ('nihilism'), Fichte wrote his most widely known work, a set of meditations tracing the passage from doubt through knowledge to faith (*The Vocation of Man*, 1800).

On the basis of his conviction that philosophy did not reside in some fixed product but instead consisted in a continuing and evolving activity requiring ever-changing modes of presentation, Fichte reworked the *Wissenschaftslehre* again and again over the entire course of his life, developing and publicly presenting some seventeen versions altogether, but never publishing any of them other than the very first one. The earlier presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are centred around a basic non-empirical ('transcendental') account of human subjectivity ('I') in its dual but unitary manifestation as the subject of knowing and the subject of willing ('theoretical I', 'practical I'), along with the associated worlds to be known and to be

acted upon ('world of sense', 'world of the understanding'). Fichte's focus here is on the role of immediate self-consciousness as the enabling condition of all other consciousness and its objects.

The later presentations focus on knowledge as such ('absolute knowledge') along with its inscrutable ground ('being', 'the absolute', 'God') as the ultimate condition of all things known. On Fichte's understanding, the various and varying presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* all reflect his basic insight into the self-sufficiency of knowledge as such and into the independence of knowledge in general as well as any particular kind of knowledge from the contingent mental and physical conditions of its actual occurrence. For Fichte, who here follows Kant, knowledge has its own laws, independent of nature and actually founding nature's lawful order through the basic functions of cognitive and conative subjectivity (transcendental idealism).

A further defining feature of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* across its multiple instantiations is the constitutive role of willing and acting for all forms of knowledge ('primacy of the practical'). For Fichte thinking is a form of doing (inner activity), just as willing is a form of thinking (practical thinking). Fichte's pervasive recourse to the I notwithstanding, the activity of thinking and willing in Fichte is not solitary and monological. In a pioneering move, Fichte introduces the You and the We (intersubjectivity, interpersonality) and the material presence of each individual I ('body') as essential conditions of a functionally complete consciousness. Fichte the notorious philosopher of the I is also the philosopher of the other I and the joint I.

Next to the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper, the chief output of Fichte's philosophical work lies in the areas of law (or right) and ethics. Fichte's early philosophy of law defends a conception of the state as a state of right based on the freedom and equality of its citizens. According to Fichte, the legal relations between citizens are to be marked by their reciprocal regard of each other as equally free ('recognition'). In his early ethics Fichte combines the derivation of the principle of morality ('moral law') as condition of practical self-consciousness with a sustained consideration of the functional conditions for the empirical efficacy of moral willing. In particular, he introduces a natural basis for moral action under the guise of a propulsion ('drive') that orients and motivates moral willing, thus preparing it for reason's freely given assent to the action.

During his final phase, as a professor of philosophy at Berlin's newly founded university, Fichte returned to his earlier practice of having the lecture presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* prepared by propaedeutic lecture courses (*The Facts of Consciousness*, 1810–11, 1813; *Transcendental Logic*, 1812) and followed by specific applications to the domains of law and ethics (*Doctrine of Right*, *Doctrine of Ethics*, both 1812). The late Fichte also returned to his long-standing interest in political philosophy with a lecture series on the relationship of stadial approximation between the state in history and the state in the idea (*The Doctrine of the State*, 1813; published posthumously in 1820). Further material of a philosophical and political nature is contained in a set of extensive noetic diaries from Fichte's final years, only recently published for the time, which offer a fascinating glimpse into the exceedingly open and explicitly self-critical form under which Fichte's thinking took place (*Diarium I, II and III*, 1813–14).

The fourteen essays to follow address the emergence, the unfolding and the reception of Fichte's philosophy. Wayne Martin traces the path that leads from Kant to Fichte, with a focus on the further philosophical figures mediating the transition between Kant and Fichte. Frederick Beiser presents Fichte's engagement with the French Revolution as an international political event.

Turning to the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper, Christian Klotz's contribution features the first and only published version of 1794–95, focusing on the structure of consciousness and self-consciousness in the influential text. Daniel Breazeale examines the *New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*) from 1796–99, especially regarding questions of method. Günter Zöllner's contribution includes the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in a comprehensive perspective on Fichte's overall philosophical project.

The next group of essays pursues the systematic application of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to specific object domains. Allen Wood deals with Fichte's philosophy of right and his ethics, including both their early (Jena) and their later (Berlin) versions. Jean-Christophe Merle presents Fichte's philosophy of economics, with a special focus on

his theory of property. Ives Radrizzani's contribution presents Fichte's philosophy of history, with special regard to the active shaping of history. Hansjürgen Verweyen deals with Fichte's philosophy of religion in its development over time and in tandem with the overall trajectory of his thinking. Alexander Aichele reads Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* with an eye to the submergence of individuality in nationality.

The final group of essays is devoted to the reception of Fichte's philosophy. Elizabeth Millán portrays Fichte's role in the development of early German Romantic philosophy, with a particular focus on the poet-philosophers Hardenberg (Novalis) and Friedrich Schlegel. Sebastian Gardner investigates the philosophical relationship between Fichte and Schelling, focusing on their increasing disagreement with each other's philosophical projects. David James looks at Hegel's critique of Fichte, with special consideration given to Hegel's retake on Fichte's account of mutual recognition between human beings. Finally, Paul Franks surveys the recent reception of Fichte's philosophy, chiefly in the context of current work in the philosophy of mind.

The volume also includes a chronology of Fichte's life and works and a bibliography listing the main editions of Fichte's complete works, English translations of his writings, bibliographies of primary and secondary literature on Fichte along with journals and book series specifically devoted to Fichte's philosophy, and a selection of international scholarly work on Fichte's philosophy, focusing on classical studies and recent international work.