

Fichte and Schelling

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I

Intellectual historians have often remarked that German thought from its earliest beginnings is marked by two major features that distinguish it from the greater part of the remainder of Western European thought. These are, first, the tendency to seek some kind of participatory relationship with nature and the universe conceived in quasi-animistic terms, which represents a kind of reversion to a much older, much more primitive way of conceiving the world and man's place in it, and has led to all kinds of mysticism. It is a strain in the history of German thought which has been brought out very clearly by Lévy-Bruhl¹ and others. In all its forms the essential core of this view consists in the thinker's desire to place himself in the position of the creator, to become in some sense privy to his master-plan and, by engaging the productive part of his own nature, thereby himself to enter into the great act of creation by a species of co-creation. The second defining characteristic is that of antinomianism, that is to say, a hatred of laws and rules as such. This usually went hand in hand with a distrust of traditional forms of logic and reasoning and, in the more extreme cases, of all conceptual thought. Above all, emphasis was laid upon the first hand experience of the inner life of one's own subjective moral and spiritual world with all its agony and struggle; and there was a corresponding aversion to all forms of generalising and bloodless abstract schemas. The language of these mystics was therefore often dark, turbid, and rhapsodic, dealing in vast imaginative images, in deeply suggestive symbols and obscure allegories, which were intended to capture or in some sense mimic or gesture towards the living creative energy which was the pulsating source of all things. The line of these great German mystics runs from Meister Eckhart through Seuse and Tauler to Paracelsus, Weigel and Böhme, down to the brothers Helmont, and on to Angelus Silesius in the Age of Leibniz. It is also, perhaps, worth noting in addition a certain depth and earnestness which characterises much German speculation: 'The German People', Moritz Heimann once remarked, 'treats things ideal not as a banner, like other peoples, but takes them several degrees more literally than

¹ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *L'Allemagne depuis Leibniz*. 1890.

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they do, with a corresponding frivolity where things real are concerned.²

These successive waves of mystical antinomianism represent a kind of running battle against the universal cosmopolitan rationalist thought of the West – first against Aquinas and the scholastics, then against the secular rational humanism of the Renaissance, and then again, against the thinkers of the early German Enlightenment. What we have, in effect, is a series of irrationalist eruptions through the smooth and polished surface of Western European thought. One after another these successive waves battered the backbone of Western scientific and enlightened thought until, in a sense, it is finally cracked by the two thinkers I propose to consider here. For Fichte and Schelling exemplify this pattern in the most dramatic and revolutionary manner. Indeed, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that it was they, above all, who between them opened the greatest chasm between the old rationalist universalist tradition stretching from Plato to Aquinas right down to Kant and the new unpredictable world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet the reputation of both, and especially that of Fichte, has suffered a curious fate. Neither has as yet received his full due in the history of ideas, even in Germany itself, but this goes quite particularly for the English-speaking world. Admittedly, both thinkers – and again this is particularly true of Fichte – are at times quite especially dark, contorted, and impenetrable; but this alone is not enough to account for their comparative neglect. Their real misfortune has been to be largely eclipsed by their successors, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Hegel, many features of whose thought, and especially the dialectic, are directly derived from Fichte, went out of his way to diminish him. And again, Schopenhauer, in the entirety of whose writings there is arguably not a single substantial idea that is not derived, directly or indirectly, from Fichte or Schelling, treated his philosophical benefactors with withering scorn. The standard histories of philosophy, in Germany and elsewhere, to the present day are built around a tacit acceptance of the view of their predecessors perpetrated by Hegel and Schopenhauer. If only as an act of historical justice, therefore, claims to precedence in generating some of the most powerful and fatefully formative ideas of the past two hundred years must be established in the case of Fichte and Schelling. They loosened the old landmarks once and for all. Indeed, they belong to, and very largely shape, a phase of thought in Germany stretching roughly from the 1770's to 1830 and beyond

² Moritz Heimann, quoted by Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, vol. I, p. 264.

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which was prodigiously rich and revolutionary. To find historical parallels for the creative ferment in the Germany of this period, we must go to the fourth century BC in Greece, or to Renaissance Italy, or to the 18th century France of the great Enlightenment. It literally transformed everything, and gave birth to the modern world. Fichte and Schelling are major actors in this great drama.

II

They had two immediate harbingers of very unequal quality and character, who to no small degree may be said to have formed them, namely the *Sturm und Drang* movement in literature; and, above all, Kant in the sphere of philosophy proper.

In the 1770's a movement sprang up in Germany which had not seen its like before. It was essentially driven by youth and frustration. A whole generation of young men emerged in Germany especially at the universities whose social origins made any kind of advancement virtually impossible for them but whose creative energies were bursting to express themselves. Fired partly by the critical writings of Lessing and other disciples of the Enlightenment they called in question the social fabric of their era. But there were no natural channels for their pent up and balked energies. They therefore rapidly moved from social criticism to ever more extreme forms of exhibitionistic behaviour. Eventually their rejection of things became virtually universal so that it was not just social institutions that they sought to batter down but even nature herself. This was not least due to the fact that the relentless progress of the positive sciences, and particularly the current of ideas that flowed across from the French Enlightenment, was revealing a world indifferent and even hostile to man and human concerns. Nature was being steadily robbed of her ancient enchantments; animism, anthropomorphism, religious accounts of the universe and human existence, were being remorselessly swept aside by the levelling bulldozers of natural causality. The universe was coming to be seen as a vast monolithic slab, cold, funereal and grey, in which living men were trapped like veins in marble. This prison house of the spirit is memorably epitomised by the words of the young Goethe – one of the principal figures in the *Sturm und Drang* movement – when he spoke of Holbach's *Système de la Nature* as, I quote, 'frigid, Cimmerian, corpse-like, and grey'.³ There was no longer a breath of life, colour or movement in the world.

³ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, book II.

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It was against this terrifying vision of men walled up in a closed universe that the young rebels of the *Sturm und Drang*, Lenz, Klingner, Gerstenberg and Leisewitz, hurled some of their wildest cries of anguish and despair. It is perhaps worth noting in passing the remarkable similarity between the tortured, unstructured and violently rebellious screams of unbridled self-expression of these *Stürmer und Dränger* and later manifestations of what is essentially the same mood of suffocating terror and despair before the iron laws of nature so typical of German Expressionism in the twenties of our century. Indeed, I should like to observe in passing that it seems to me that altogether too little attention is paid to the *Sturm und Drang* movement by English Germanists, both for its own intrinsic interest, and for the premonitory relationship in which it stands to later literary and intellectual currents. For the young dramatists and poets of the *Sturm und Drang*, however irritatingly adolescent and immature they may often be, were after all, among the very first writers and – though one hesitates to call them this – thinkers in the Western tradition to rebel absolutely and quite consciously against all rules and laws as such. In so doing they helped to inaugurate an era which has still not closed. Rejection of unjust or irrational rules, laws, ethical codes, and rebellion against the norms of oppressive social and political institutions, or against the ordinances and decrees of tyrants, kings, conquerors and priests, is as old as humanity itself. But the idea that all rules, as they are rules – that is, address themselves to the abstract and general properties of things with no regard to what makes them living, concrete and unique – are bad as such, is utterly novel and upsetting.

But even this revolutionary step was not enough to appease the at once so destructive and so liberating passions of these turbulent young rebels. In their most uncompromising moods their literally world-shattering ambitions were even more sweeping, for they sought at times to batter down not only the rules and customs created by men, but to burst open the iron frame of causality governing nature itself. This attempt to prise the universe apart at its very hinges – to treat the granite building-blocks of the world as so much airy insubstantial stuff to be freely moulded by the infinite operations of their titanic creative wills – marks a hitherto unparalleled development in the history of European thought. Without warning an entire set of novel attitudes is frenziedly struck out on the anvil of cosmic despair. Against the inexorable machine of human convention and nature-ordained law, and ultimately reducing these to nought, the *Stürmer und Dränger* set up the poor, fragile, trapped, yet in the end utterly free and infinitely creative human self. Hence their worship of the lonely creative personality pitting his powers

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against the most fearful odds, the heroic outsider whose reckless failure is vastly more noble than cautious philistine success; hence their cult of pure, unbridled self-expression, utterly unadulterated by any admixture of tame convention or respectable norms; hence, too, their faith in the capacity of genius (and, at times and to a degree, of all men) to project into the world their own wholly original, self-created forms – to generate values which are not copies of anything outside themselves, but which bear intrinsically some self-authenticating mark which men intuit and embrace by some species of direct recognition – as they recognise a face or a work of art – and not by measuring them against some publicly accredited objective yardstick. As we shall see in a moment, Fichte especially caught something of this wild, exuberant, rebellious *stürmisch* mood. Their ideas hung like great storm clouds in the air of Germany when Fichte embarked on his philosophical career.

The second great presence in the background of these two thinkers is of course that of Immanuel Kant. He stood at the absolute opposite pole from that of the *Kraftgenies* and *Kraftkerls* and turbulent and disordered young students of whom I have just spoken. He was in almost every way a product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. He was totally averse to enthusiasm and exuberance of any kind and his criticisms of the excesses of self-expression indulged in by false genius, which we find in his *Critique of Judgement* and elsewhere in his writings, testify to the deep horror he felt for all forms of irrationalism and unbridled exhibitionism. He was a champion of calm methodical, rational method, and believed that orderliness in thought and action were prerequisites for any form of civilized life. Above all, he was greatly influenced and impressed by the empirical sciences of his time and believed in the search for universal principles and laws wherever these could be found. Yet for all this he is a kind of Janus figure in the history of modern thought: one face – cool, classical, marmoreal – calmly contemplates a two thousand year old tradition of rational thought; the other – mysterious, perplexed, and anguished – is turned towards a stormy and ambiguous future. Or, to vary the image, Kant stands with one foot firmly planted on eighteenth century soil; with the other, he has entered a quagmire, or, more aptly perhaps, is probing a bottomless abyss. Kant's work is much more than just a highly significant historical episode in a specialised area of human speculation, namely the evolution of German idealism. Rather, his thought marks a major revolutionary turning-point in the history of the human mind itself and its interpretation of its place in, and relationship to, the scheme of things. It has a universal sweep and application unparalleled in modern times. The radically creative,

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formative powers of the human mind itself were established with scientific precision for the first time. It is a familiar story and I shall do no more than to sketch its outlines here tonight. As we all know, Kant was a trained mathematical physicist deeply versed in the theories of Newton. He was scandalised by the Babel of conflicting voices that he encountered in the sphere of philosophy and metaphysics. If universally accepted order is possible in Newtonian physics, he argued, then the same should also be possible for the humanly even more important realm of metaphysics. He therefore set out painstakingly and systematically to trace the bounds of all possible human thought. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he investigated the prerequisites for our knowledge of the external world, that is to say of theoretical knowledge in general, he came to certain revolutionary conclusions. The forms of space, time, and the categories – substance, relation, causality, etc – are all deduced from the general universal structure of the knowing subject itself. These modes of perception and understanding therefore, do not inhere in the objective world itself but are in some sense imposed upon it by ourselves. In this way the formative, creative capacities of the mind are extended in an unprecedented, almost Promethean fashion. But at this point Kant now found himself in serious difficulties. For in so far as I, as a finite empirical being, possess a body which exists in nature and is subject to nature and nature's laws, as these have been most accurately described by Newtonian physics, I do not possess freedom. As a denizen of the world of Kantian phenomena, I am wholly and exhaustively predictable in principle. Clearly, there is some kind of profound conflict here with the claims of freedom and morality. Kant attempts to address this problem in his second great critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In this work he seeks to reinstate freedom, morality, God, and an immortal soul as postulates of the moral life. I cannot discover or prove these theoretically: I can only assert them by a free act of will. And to this end the fateful distinction between the empirical self and the noumenal self is made. As contrasted with my normal everyday finite self, my noumenal or higher self is raised clear of the causal treadmill. This has certain very far-reaching consequences for Kant's moral theory, and, as we shall see, for Fichte and what has come to be called the German concept of freedom.

But Kant's three critiques bring together a set of philosophical positions which, though they proved revolutionary in the history of thought, represent a highly unstable mixture of incompatible notions. Apart from the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tension between the empirical and the noumenal self, at least two further features of Kant's philosophy show serious signs of defect.

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Hegel once described Kants things-in-themselves as 'ghosts hovering at the portals of the Kantian philosophy'.⁴ This is very apt because not only can we know nothing of these things-in-themselves, since they lie outside the sphere of phenomena, but also in some mysterious fashion Kant claims they are capable of some kind of causal influence upon us. But this is a contradiction of what Kant says about causality. Causality operates solely within the sphere of natural phenomena. To extend the category of causality, therefore, into the realm of things-in-themselves, is quite illicit.

And again, it has often been pointed out that Kant produced not one, but three systems, which lie uneasily side by side. They are not all deduced from one single originating principle, and they are not all perfectly compatible with each other in some neat logical fashion. The essential point we wish to stress here, however, is that with Kant a profound shift occurs in the conception of ethics: morality ceases to be grounded on knowledge or objective truth, as had been customary in western philosophy from its earliest beginnings, and now for the first time the force and quality of the will and of willing as having value in their own right is thrust to the fore. Since Kant had shown that knowledge can illuminate but a tiny portion of the world and is incapable of penetrating to the innermost essence of reality, so knowledge, theoretical reason, rational investigation was bound to be driven from the position of pre-eminence it traditionally enjoyed. Practical reason usurped its place. Not knowledge and intellect are the supreme human values but self-assertion and will.

III

Kant's immediate contemporaries were not slow to point to some of these inconsistencies and weaknesses. Among the most penetrating, logically effective, and constructively creative of these was Johann Gottlieb Fichte. But first let me say something briefly about him as a man and as a character. He has quite rightly been described as the Napoleon of German philosophy. He was renowned in his time and after for his indomitable, inflexible will, his utter contempt for anyone who dissented from his views and his tyrannical, overmastering personality generally in his dealings with others. In his life and in his works he displayed an ethical rigour second not even to that of Luther. He is, indeed, the German *Willensphilosoph* par excellence. The great Goethe once wrote of him: 'He was one of the most formidable personalities I have ever encountered, and in some higher

⁴ Hegel, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. Lasson, p. 73.

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sense his views were beyond criticism; but how could he ever have kept in step with the world, which he viewed as his own free creation?⁵ He came of very humble origins, was frequently baulked in the course of his development and saw life as consisting in the battering down, one after another, of an endless series of obstacles. He was born in 1764, the son of humble weavers and was soon picked out by the local baron for his quite extraordinary powers of memory and intelligence. He was very early on oppressed by the determinism of Spinoza. And for quite a lengthy period of his early manhood he languished hopelessly, as he thought, in the chains of an unbreakable fatalism. From this he was awoken abruptly by reading Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. He was asked by a student to teach him the philosophy of Kant and it was from this moment onwards that Fichte dated the transforming revelation that caused the scales to fall from his eyes. Suddenly his sense of despair lifted, for here he found in hand the means whereby he could cure the terrible conflict between heart and head which to him, as to the *Stürmer und Dränger* had seemed utterly intractable. And it was after a deep and thorough reading of the works of Kant that he proceeded to produce, in 1794, the first version of his *Wissenschaftslehre* which subsequently went through ten or more versions, but which at its core propounded one and the same vision.

Of Kant's problems with things-in-themselves Fichte made short work. He simply declared that there was no justification for postulating their existence at all, and proceeded to deduce the whole scheme of reality from the subjective self, the ego, *das reine Ich*. He thereby also found a solution to Kant's second major difficulty, that produced by the three largely independent or self-subsistent systems that he produced – the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgement*. For now, unlike Kant, Fichte believed that he had been able to penetrate to the original root of all forms of experience and to deduce them from that root. How exactly does he do this? He does it by demonstrating that what is absolutely primal and original is not thing-in-themselves but the self, the ego. This is the fundamental presupposition and prerequisite for each and every kind of experience. It alone makes experience as such possible. Since the entirety of human experience and human thought, everything that makes up the empirical realm of phenomena, is postulated in the ego and in the ego alone, it follows that the ego cannot be posited by anything other than itself. That is to say, the existence of the ego is in some sense its own product or deed and therefore not a fact – *eine Tatsache* – but an act – *eine*

⁵ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, book 10.

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Tathandlung. But why should the ego engage in this original act of creation? This is explained by Fichte through the fact that the ego or self, by its innermost nature, has an urge to be active, to produce; it is a nucleus of energy which naturally seeks expression through its own works. It follows, therefore, that the theoretical ego is based upon, and derived from, the practical ego, and not the other way about. The innermost essence of this practical ego is drive, will, striving. The existence of the ego then is not an assertion, but a demand, indeed an ethical demand; not an axiom, but a postulate; not a conclusion or an inference, but a decision, an act of will. Hence the first, not further reducible principle of Fichte's philosophy is: posit thyself! Without the self there is no objective world, no nature, no non-ego. So the second principle is: the ego posits a non-ego over against itself; and we have the situation then where the ego posits itself and its opposite. The theoretical ego posits an object – *einen Gegenstand* – in order that the practical ego should experience opposition – *einen Widerstand*. Thus arises a field for the exercise of free ethical action.

In short, the world is a product of the ego. The ego performs a series of acts, and thus arises what we call the external world. But these acts of the ego occur unconsciously. We – finite empirical human beings – know nothing of this creative activity. Our situation is rather like that of a man in a dream: just like dreams the objects of our ordinary experience occur to us as having an independent existence, yet nevertheless they are the product of our own minds and imaginations. This unconscious world-creating activity on the part of the ego Fichte calls 'unconscious production' (*bewußtlose Produktion*). The faculty whereby we carry this out is the imagination. Because such production is unconscious, the world appears to us as existing outside ourselves, as a non-ego, or object: that is, as something independent of ourselves as knowing subjects. But what we take for an object is really through and through the product of our own subjective creation. Here Fichte draws the arresting parallel with the activity of the creative artist which was to have such an influence on Schelling: 'Art', he says, 'makes the transcendental viewpoint the common one'.

The task Fichte sets himself in the *Wissenschaftslehre* – one which the transcendental philosopher alone can perform – is to raise the process which has hitherto been unconscious and instinctive into the clear light of day and render it conscious and rational. Thus by a long and highly complex series of constructive dialectical acts, which are often exceedingly intricate and obscure, he causes the world – myself and others, nature and the entire scheme of natural objects – to come into being before our very eyes. Let me quote *in*

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extenso a characteristic passage from his *The Vocation of Man*: 'Man does not consist of two independent and separate elements; he is absolutely one. All our thought is founded on our impulses; as a man's affections are, so is his knowledge ... I shall stand absolutely independent, thoroughly equipped and perfected through my own act and deed. The primitive source of all my other thought and of my life itself, that from which everything proceeds which can have and existence in me, for me, or through me, the innermost spirit of my spirit, – is no longer a foreign power, but it is, in the strictest possible sense, the product of my own will.' And again, 'I am wholly my own creation ... I accept that which nature announces; – but I do not accept it [i.e. the natural scientist's conception of the world] because I must; I accept it because I will.'⁶

Schleiermacher once asserted that Fichte's idealism had superseded and absorbed naive realism; our common everyday view of the world reveals itself on inspection to be incomplete and defective in ways that can be explained and rectified only by a deeper, more rigorous, more comprehensive account. The completed system of idealism – the *Wissenschaftslehre* – contains within itself, and can account fully for, the system of realism or empiricism; but not vice versa. This is the nub of Fichte's claim to priority for his system of philosophy over all others. This deep insight into what he believed to be the true relation between the human mind and the world it inhabits proved revolutionary.

I mentioned just now the German concept of freedom. It is when we come to look at how Fichte sought to resolve the tension we found in Kant between the finite empirical self and the transcendental noumenal self that this emerges most clearly. Scholars generally divide Fichte's thought into two main phases. When we look at his epistemology and metaphysics it is true that it begins with an individualistic and almost anarchistic ego, the isolated self, and this is the Fichte who is the proto-existentialist, who had a great impact on the Romantics such as Novalis, Tieck, and the Schlegels, and who is the source of what later came to be called romantic Titanism. This first phase then increasingly gives way to a collective and mystical, ontological approach to the nature of the self. Now it is no longer the isolated individual but it becomes God, the absolute, or history itself, or at times mankind, and finally, and most fatefully of all, the German nation or *Volk*. But in both phases the ceaselessly active subject – however defined – is the creator of the world. All this comes out most clearly in the development of Fichte's political thought. In this we are able to trace the strange story of the career

⁶ Fichte, *Werke*, vol. II, p. 256.