Johann Gottlieb Fichte

Great Philosophers

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Johann Gottlieb Fichte

(1762-1814)

Why Fichte Now?

1. Why Fichte?
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1. Why Fichte???

• “From the little (very little!) I know about Fichte I would have guessed if there was one guy you would not talk about it would be Fichte, and if there was one person who would never talk about Fichte it would be you!” (Tom Farrell)
German Idealism
BERTRAND RUSSELL
HISTORY OF
WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

1945
Russell on Fichte

• ‘Modern philosophy begins with Descartes, whose fundamental certainty is the existence of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred. This was only the first stage in a development, through Berkeley and Kant, to Fichte, for whom everything is only an emanation of the ego. This was insanity, and, from this extreme, philosophy has been attempting, ever since, to escape into the world of everyday common sense’
German Nationalism

- *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808)
Continental vs. Analytic
Why Fichte?

• Perhaps historically the first continental philosopher to fall out of the analytic canon.
  • Active and practical philosophy
  • Ambitious philosophy
  • Systematic and broad
  • Reconciliationist
Background

• Born 1762 in Rammenau, a small rural village in lower Saxony. The area was still feudal.
• His father was the first in his family to be liberated from serfdom, and worked as a linen weaver, earning barely enough to support his family of wife and 8 children.
Background

• The 8-year-old gooseherd Fichte so impresses the local Baron, that the Baron (and his later descendants) financed his studies at school and university.

• Fichte studies law and theology at Jena, Wittenberg and Leipzig 1780-4 (although without completing a degree)

• Works as a private tutor 1784-1793 in Saxony, Prussia and Switzerland—often holding posts only a short period.
Background

• 1790, Fichte begins to study Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Incredibly impressed—it’s a way out of Spinozist determinism. Travels to Königsberg to meet Kant.

• Writes *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* (for his second meeting with Kant). With Kant’s assistance, the work is published (1792) with Kant’s publisher.
Background

- *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* is an extension of Kant’s ideas about God and Morality to revelation—religion as revealed through the senses.
- Concludes that no legitimate revelation can contradict the laws of nature or morality.
- The work is initially published anonymously.
- Fichte is catapulted to fame.
2. Fichte at Jena

- 1794, Fichte takes up prestigious position at the University of Jena. (Succeeding Reinhold.)
- He has only been one year at work on his new philosophical system which will now need to be taught...
The *Wissenschaftslehre*

- ‘*Wissenschaftslehre*’—Theory of Scientific Knowledge
- An attempt to provide a unified foundation to all branches of inquiry (science, ethics, politics, religion, aesthetics)
- An inquiry into the deep rational structure of thought
- Continually revised throughout Fichte’s lifetime
The Wissenschaftslehre

• Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre (1794)
• Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre (1794-5)
• Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre (1797-98)
• (Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo 1796/99)
The *Wissenschaftslehre*

- Fichte presented his work as merely elaborating Kantian doctrines.
- But the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes radical departures.
The *Wissenschaftslehre*

**Kant:**
- Our perceptions and cognitions of the world are always conditioned by the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding.
- We can never *know* things as they are in themselves.
- But we can still distinguish between the *phenomenal* and the *noumenal*.

**Fichte:**
- Agreed, our perceptions are so conditioned.
- But not only can we not *know* things as they are in themselves. The very concept of things in themselves makes no sense.
- Nor is there a distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal—everything real is conditioned.
The Wissenschaftslehre

- The *Wissenschaftslehre* begins with the ‘self-positing’ I—not any particular I but the form of subjectivity.
- The I is a rational activity, not a thing or substance.
- The I is an activity that can know itself and *freely* make itself its own object.
- When the I knows itself, it is not as it knows objects—the I doesn’t distinguish itself from what it knows.
The Wissenschaftslehre

- The I is meant to posit itself freely—it is a *free* activity.
- But, it turns out that to posit itself, the I will have to posit things to which it is opposed (the not-self).
- (I have to posit a world which is not me, and which resists my will, if I am to know myself.)
- Transcendental Argument
- Dialectical
The Wissenschaftslehre

• The I is a striving activity, that seeks to be self-determining.

• But the I can only know itself by having this striving activity ‘checked’ by obstacles that prevent its being self-determining.

• In seeking to overcome these obstacles, it comes to know itself.
The *Wissenschaftslehre*

- Fichte didn’t like Spinoza’s system (and unlikely he knew of Diotima).
- The I seeks to be fully self-determining.
- But it can never reach this state. (If it were to be achieved, the I would cease to be.)
- It’s own ‘essence’ consists in striving towards this unreachable state.
The *Wissenschaftslehre*

- It turns out that the I will have to undertake a whole series of acts, including positing things in space and time, causation, substances, etc. in order to explain how rationality is able to freely know itself as free.
The Wissenschaftslehre

• But it is not just ‘theoretical’ acts that will be required.
• The only way reason can come to know itself is by positing an ultimate *ought*.
• When the I feels the force of this ought, it becomes determined in a particular way. But it does not thereby become determined by something outside itself. It is the I, as an expression of reason, that determines itself. So the I *can* know itself as an I.
Other Writings from Jena

- The *Wissenschaftslehre* we’ve seen so far is just the foundation. The full system requires examining other conditions required for the I to have full self-knowledge.

- Two further major treaties in ethics (*The System of Ethics*, 1797) and politics (*The Foundation of Natural Right*, 1798).
Other Writings from Jena

- *The Foundation of Natural Right*: In order to know myself, I have to posit other people who will recognise me as a subject.
- (cf. Hegel’s master slave dialectic and the philosophy of recognition)
Fichte at Jena

• By this point Fichte has married (Hohanna Rahm, daughter of a customs official in Zürich) and has a son (Immanuel H. Fichte) who later edits his father’s works.

• Fichte also publishes popular political writings on freedom and in defence of the French Revolution (1793), which secures his reputation as a radical.
3. Leaving Jena

- Fichte was always a very engaging philosopher, dedicated to his students and often outspoken.
Leaving Jena

• Fichte was continuously engaged in disputes.
• ‘...when anything stood in his way, then his inflexibility turned into rudeness, and his energy into recklessness...Fichte lacked the ability to put up with everyday life’

(Rudolf Steiner, quoted in Breazeale)

• This situation didn’t work out so well for Fichte...
Leaving Jena

• 1798 Fichte publishes ‘On the Foundation of Our Belief in a Divine Government of the Universe’

• The essay is an attempt to clarify that Fichte is not a religious skeptic. While he accepts limits on what we can know (theoretically) about the nature of God, we are justified in believing in God’s existence.

• The essay also identifies God as the moral world order.
Leaving Jena

- The essay sparks the ‘Atheism Controversy’ and a nationwide pamphlet war.
Leaving Jena

- The Weimar administration is willing to be lenient, and to give Fichte mild censure with no practical upshots.

- Fichte writes a number of letters in which he threatens to leave and begin a new university if any kind of censure is given.

- The administration publish their mild censure, with a postscript accepting his offer of resignation.
Leaving Jena

- 1800, Fichte moves to Berlin.
- He continues to revise the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but in a somewhat new direction—more mystical, less rational.
Leaving Jena

- 1806, Napoleon’s troops defeat Prussia at Jena and occupy Berlin.
- 1807-8, Fichte delivers lectures in Berlin that become *Addresses to the German Nation*. 
Leaving Jena

• 1810, Fichte becomes professor and Dean at newly founded Humboldt University in Berlin.

• 1814, he dies of a fever caught from his wife, who herself contracted it while nursing Prussian soldiers.
4. Fichte’s Legacy

- Schelling and Hegel—recognition, and dialectical method
- Beauvoir and existentialists—who we are for ourselves matters, ‘existence precedes essence’
- American Pragmatism (Peirce, via Hegel)—practical interests lead to us reasoning theoretically, ‘checks’.
- Heidegger—Dasein
Fichte’s Legacy

• Fichte is probably more optimistic about the capacities for reason than these followers, and less concerned with our contingency.

• He is also refreshingly extreme in his thinking.

• He makes a problem of things that look simple (self-knowledge)

• An antidote to a too ready acceptance of a mind-independent world and its role in philosophy.
Further Reading