



The Philosophy of Fichte

Alfred Weber

English sensationalism and the philosophy of relativity were founded by a student of medicine and a layman. German idealism and the philosophy of the absolute come from theology. Johann Gottlieb Fichte¹ (1765-1814), its founder, like Schelling and Hegel, first studied for the ministry. His *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (1792) won for him a professorship in Jena (1793). In 1794 he published his chief work: *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, which was afterwards revised and republished under different titles; and in 1796 his *Grundlage des Naturrechts*. Accused of atheism, he resigned his chair (1799), and for ten years he and his young family suffered the trials attendant upon a more or less nomadic life. He died as a professor of the University of Berlin, founded in 1809. Besides the works which established his fame, we mention the following: *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*² (1800); *Ueber das Wesen des Gelehrten und seine Erscheinungen im Gebiete der Freiheit*³ (1805); *Die Anweisungen zum seligen Leben oder auch die Religionslehre*⁴ (1806); *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808); etc. The German uprising against Napoleon was largely due to his influence.

Though his thought, like that of so many contemporary Germans of the Republic and the Empire, showed two distinct phases: one, rationalistic, humanitarian, and in sympathy with the Revolution, the other, mystical, pantheistic, and patriotic; the central notion of his system remained the same. This conception, or, let us rather say, this truth, the most exalted and at the same time the most paradoxical ever formulated by philosophy, is the *monism of the moral will*.⁵

Fichte is to Kant what Euclid-Plato is to Socrates, and to Spinoza what Euclid-Plato is to Parmenides. With Kant he affirms the moral ideal, and with Spinoza, the unity of the "two worlds." Hence his philosophy is a synthesis, unique in its kind for modern times, of what seemed forever irreconcilable: monism and liberty. Identity of the ethical principle and the metaphysical principle: that is the fundamental dogma of his system. The *real* reality is, according to Fichte, the Good, active Reason, pure Will, the moral Ego. What the common mind regards as real is nothing but a phenomenon, a manifestation, a faithful or imperfect translation, a portrait or a caricature. The ultimate and highest principle from which we come and towards which we strive is not *being* but *duty*; it is an ideal which is not, but which ought to be. Being as such has no value, and does not, strictly speaking, exist. The stability or immobility of what we call substance, substratum, or matter, is a mere appearance (Heraclitus and Plato). It is all movement, tendency, and *will*. The universe is the manifestation of pure Will, the symbol of the moral Idea, which is the real *thing-in-itself*, the real absolute.⁶ To philosophize is to convince one's self that *being is nothing*, that *duty is everything*; it is to recognize the inanity of the phenomenal world apart from its intelligible essence; it is to regard the objective world, not as the effect of causes foreign to our practical reason, but as the product of the ego, as the objectified ego. There is no science except the science of the ego or *consciousness*. Knowledge is neither in whole (Hume, Condillac) nor in part (Kant) the product of sensation; it is the exclusive work, the *creation*, of the ego. There is no philosophy but idealism, no method but the *a priori* method. Philosophy does not discover ready-made truths, or establish facts that already exist. To philosophize, or to know, is to *produce* such facts, to *create* such truths.⁷

Speculative thought does not begin with a *fact*, with something received or suffered by the

ego, but with a spontaneous *act* of its creative energy (*nicht Thatsache, sondern Thathandlung*⁸). Its theses result from a regular succession of intellectual acts, which follow the law of opposition and reconciliation, foreshadowed by Kant in his threefold division of the categories (affirmation, negation, and limitation). The original act of the understanding, and every intellectual act in general, is threefold: (1) The ego posits itself; this is the act by which the ego takes possession of itself, or rather, the act by which it *creates itself* (for to take possession would presuppose an ego existing prior to the ego, or a *given* fact); (2) A non-ego is opposed to the ego, or the ego is negated; (3) The ego and the non-ego reciprocally limit each other.

As the essential elements of one and the same concrete reality, these three original acts (*thesis* of the ego, *antithesis* of the non-ego, and *synthesis* of the ego and non-ego) form but a single act. By affirming itself as a subject, the ego distinguishes itself from an object which is not the ego; in producing itself, it at the same time produces its opposite, its limitation: the objective world. The latter is not, as “common sense” and empiricism claim, an obstacle which the ego *encounters*; it is a limitation which it *gives* to itself. The sensible world has the appearance of something existing outside of the perceiving and thinking subject. It is an illusion which Kant himself could not wholly destroy. The limitation of the ego, the objective world, exists, but it owes its existence to the activity of the subject. *Suppress the EGO, and you suppress the world.* Creation is reason limiting itself; it is the will or pure thought, limiting, determining, or making a person of itself.⁹

However, Fichte is obliged to confess, the ego limits itself by an inner necessity, which it cannot escape through thought alone: for it cannot think without thinking an object; it cannot perceive without affirming the existence of something which is not itself. Fichte recognizes with Kant, that the *thing-in-itself* cannot actually be reduced to thought, but he nevertheless maintains, in principle, that the *thing-in-itself* is merely the thinking principle itself. The dualism of the thinking subject and the thought object is an inevitable illusion of theoretical reason, from which, considering the infirmity of thought, action can and must free us. Hence, practical activity is the real triumph of reason, the affirmation of its omnipotence. True, in reality, the will is no more successful than the understanding in completely conquering the resistance of matter; in the phenomenal world, in which thought holds us captive, we cannot entirely escape the determinism of facts, or fatalism. The absolute autonomy of reason is an ideal which the ego pursues, but never attains. But this very conflict between the empirical and ideal reality proves that we are destined for an immortal lot: it is the source of our progress, the moving principle in history.¹⁰

Fichte thus confirms the “Primacy of practical reason,” proclaimed by Kant. Moreover, he endeavors to insert this essential doctrine, which had been mechanically added to the Kantian system, into the very body of his philosophy.

Freedom is the highest principle, the essence of things.¹¹ It is even superior to truth, considered from the purely theoretical standpoint, or rather, it is the highest Truth. For that very reason it is not an abstraction, but the supreme reality. But this reality, the source of all other realities, precisely because it is freedom, cannot be an empirical *datum*, an immediate, brutal, and fatal *fact*. If freedom were given, or made, or produced, as the facts of the physical order are produced, it would not be freedom. True freedom is the freedom which *creates itself*, or *realizes itself*. Self-realization means self-development in a series of stages, or entrance into the conditions of duration and time. Now time, like space, is an *a priori* intuition of theoretical reason, a form of the understanding; time is the intuitive faculty itself, or the understanding exercising its elementary and original function. And since it is, as we have just seen, the necessary instrument of freedom, we conclude that the understanding, the theoretical reason, the faculty which divides the ego into subject and object, is the auxiliary of practical reason, the organ of the will, the servant of freedom.

Again: Freedom realizes itself in time; time is its means, its indispensable auxiliary. But time is the intuitive faculty itself, the theoretical reason perceiving things *successively*. Theoretical reason, or the understanding, is therefore the means, the organ, which practical reason employs to realize itself. Instead of being, as Kant seemed to conceive it, a power foreign and therefore

hostile to practical reason, theoretical reason thus naturally and necessarily becomes subject to the will; it humbly enters the service of the moral ideal. The dualism of the “two reasons” disappears; *the understanding simply becomes a phase in the development of Freedom*;¹² knowledge is a means, a secondary thing; action is the principle and final goal of being. The non-ego is, in the language of Aristotle, the matter which the form needs in order to realize itself as supreme energy; it is the limit which the ego sets itself in order to overcome it, and thus to realize its essence, freedom. Self-assertion or self-realization means struggle; struggle presupposes an obstacle; this obstacle is the phenomenal world, the world of sense and its temptations.¹³

Liberty, we said, realizes itself in time and by means of thought, i.e., by distinguishing between a subject which perceives and thinks, and an object which is perceived and thought. But this object, which the magician Reason shows to the ego, the external world, the non-ego, is in turn composed of a multitude of egos, of personalities apart from mine. Hence, freedom does not realize itself in the separate individual (the empirical ego), but in human society. In order to become a reality, the ideal ego divides itself into a plurality of historical subjects, and realizes itself in the moral relations established between them, and these relations are the source of natural, penal, and political rights.

Considered apart from the individuals which realize it, the absolute or ideal ego is a mere abstraction.¹⁴ The real God is a living God, or the God-man. “I abhor all religious conceptions,” says Fichte, “which personify God, and regard them as unworthy of a reasonable being.” And why? Because a personal being, or a subject, does not exist without an object that limits it. True, this limitation is the work of the subject itself; but whether limited by itself or by something else, the subject is a limited being, and God cannot be conceived as such. God is the moral order of the world, the freedom which gradually realizes itself in it: he is nothing but that.

Fichte’s opposition to the idea of a personal God is the criticism of his own system, or, at least, of the subjectivistic form which it assumed under the influence of Kant, and of which it gradually divested itself under the influence of Spinoza. By denying the personality of God, he condemns both the notion of an absolute ego, as the creator of the non-ego, and the method of *a priori* construction.

Schelling, Fichte’s most brilliant disciple, turns his attention to this contradiction.

NOTES

1. [Posthumous works, edited by J. H. Fichte, 3 vols., Bonn, 1834; complete works, ed. By J. H. Fichte, 8 vols., 1845-46. *Fichte’s Popular Works*, tr. By W. Smith, 4th ed., London, 1889. A. F. Kroeger, *The Science of Knowledge* (translations of the *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre; Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre; etc. etc.*), London, 1889; *The Science of Rights* (tr. of *Naturrecht*), *id.*, 1889. See also the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. On Fichte see: J. H. Löwe, *Die Philosophie Fichte’s*, Stuttgart, 1862; Adamson, *Fichte (Blackwood’s Philosophical Classics)*, London, 1881; C. C. Everett, *Fichte’s Science of Knowledge (Griggs’ Philosophical Classics)*, Chicago, 1884; F. Zimmer, *J. G. Fichte’s Religionsphilosophie*, Berline, 1878; and especially the fifth volume of K. Fischer’s *History of Philosophy*. - TR.]

2. [*The Vocation of Man*, translated by Smith, *supra*. - TR.]

3. [The Nature of the Scholar, tr. By Smith, *supra*. - TR.]

4. [Tr. By Smith (o.c.) under the title, *The Doctrine of Religion*. - TR.]

5. Although we recognize the truth of the central thought of Fichte’s philosophy, we cannot accept his theory of the *absolute ego*, which Schelling refuted, nor, particularly, his method of *a priori* construction, which rests on a confusion of the will and the understanding, common to most of the thinkers prior to Schopenhauer.

6. *Complete Works*, II., p 657.

7. *Id.*, V., pp. 381 ff.

8. *Id.*, I., 91 ff.
9. *Complete Works*, I., pp. 83 ff.; V., 210.
10. *Die Grundlage des Naturrechts (Complete Works, III.)*.
11. *Works*, I., 489.
12. Read *will*, and you have, word for word, the teaching of Schopenhauer minus his pessimism.
13. *Works*, V., 210.
14. *Kritik aller Offenbarung*, (*Works*, V.).

Alfred Weber. *History of Philosophy*. Trans. Frank Thilly. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.

© SophiaOmni, 2012. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.