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Manfred Kuehn, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Ein deutscher Philosoph 1762–1814. Biographie*.

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Fichte is one of the three most significant transcendental philosophers (the others being Kant and Husserl). Quite an achievement, given that he was largely self-taught as a philosopher, having done very little philosophy at either of the two universities he attended: Jena and Leipzig. But when he had discontinued his studies and was working as a house tutor he discovered Kant and, convinced that he understood Kant better than Kant understood himself, went on to produce the most radical form of idealism in the history of philosophy. In his *Wissenschaftslehre* (doctrine of science) Kant's transcendental unity of apperception is replaced by an absolute ego responsible not just for the form of experience but also for its content. Fichte's absolute ego or *sich selbst setzendes Ich* is not just a necessary condition of knowledge but a necessary and sufficient condition and as such is not just an epistemological principle but also an ontological or metaphysical principle. Assuming an absolute ego, Fichte's transcendentalism might have some plausibility. But it has no plausibility at all if the ego is an individual ego. If the *Tathandlung* which produces the world (the *Nicht-Ich* in its totality)

is performed by an individual ego then the ridicule heaped on Fichte by many of his contemporaries (and in more recent times by Bertrand Russell) is justified. Goethe was doubtless alluding to this crude interpretation of Fichte when, walking with a friend in 1810, he pointed to Fichte on the other side of the street and said 'there goes the man to whom we owe everything'.

In his splendid biography of Fichte Manfred Kühn (when writing in English Kühn drops his *Umlaut* and becomes Kuehn) seeks to present Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* as sympathetically as possible, avoiding caricature (though in presenting Fichte the man it is difficult to avoid caricature). In tracing the various twists and turns in Fichte's monomaniacal pursuit of the definitive presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* Kuehn devotes most space to the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), the *Wissenschaftslehre* nova methodo (lectures delivered between 1796 and 1799) and the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804. Fichte thought he had got there in the last-mentioned of these (which with characteristic modesty he described as 'the complete solution of the riddle of the world and of consciousness, with mathematical evidence'). It is quite difficult to see how they are just different versions of one and the same thing. The *Grundlage* is an elaborate chain of reasoning conducted at a breathtaking level of abstraction. The *Wissenschaftslehre* nova methodo takes a more phenomenological approach (in which the phenomenological 'seeing' of the various *Handlungen* of the ego is interpreted, in very un-Kantian fashion, as intellectual intuition). The problem with the later *Wissenschaftslehre* (of which the 1804 version is representative) is that Fichte appears to be standing the *Wissenschaftslehre* on its head. In a move reminiscent of that from Husserl to Heidegger, the place of the ego is taken by what Fichte calls Being (*Sein*). The ego and its acts are the expression (*Ausdruck*) of Being.

All versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* have at least the appearance of rigour. But Kuehn thinks that Fichte is essentially an 'associative' thinker. One may not go so far as Schopenhauer in saying that Fichte's system should be called *Wissenschaftsleere*, but no one is likely to read him today in the hope of finding 'a solution to the riddle of the world and of consciousness'. His value, Kuehn maintains, lies not so much in the production of a rigorous, soundly based system, but in his contribution to particular problems. He is, however, somewhat reticent when it comes to specifying what precisely these problems are. It seems to me that the not inconsiderable pain involved in trying to understand the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its various forms is only acceptable if it results in something more than light being shed on particular problems. We are entitled to demand at least the outlines of a potentially valid form of transcendental philosophy.

But of course this is not just an examination of Fichte's philosophical ideas and their development. It is a biography, so this development is seen in

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the context of Fichte's life and times and in the light of his character and personality. Those familiar with Kuehn's magnificent biography of Kant will appreciate his ability to make a life which is outwardly dull appear full of interest. The case of Fichte is rather different. Though not as great a philosopher as Kant (certainly not the Messiah to Kant's John the Baptist) he is without doubt an interesting philosopher. But his life does not even have the appearance of dullness. As the son of a humble weaver in Rammenau, a village in Saxony, his prospects of a decent education were remote. Yet as a mere 9 year old, he was able to demonstrate his phenomenal memory, and also his intelligence, by reciting verbatim a sermon which a local nobleman, Freiherr von Miltitz, had come to Rammenau to hear, but for which he had arrived too late. In somewhat killjoy fashion, Kuehn suggests that this may be just a family legend. Whatever the truth of the matter, von Miltitz saw to it that the young Fichte was properly educated. At the age of 12 he was able to sit and pass the entrance exam for Schulpforta, one of the best schools in Germany (later attended by Nietzsche). And at the age of 30 he succeeded in being mistaken for the greatest philosopher in Europe, Immanuel Kant. Fichte's *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* was published but, for reasons which are not entirely clear, his name was left off the book. It was assumed to be by Kant and was very well reviewed (it was even spoken of as Kant's Fourth Critique). So when it emerged that Fichte was the author he achieved instant fame. Two years later he secured a chair at Jena. Though extremely successful there (he had the enthusiastic support of Goethe) he got into a rough and tumble with the student orders, and, in 1789, as a result of his pigheadedness and inability to compromise, managed to get himself dismissed for his alleged atheism (in many ways he was in fact a God-obsessed philosopher, certainly not the Richard Dawkins of his day). In 1813, despite having been partially disabled by illness, he became an enthusiastic *Landsturmmann* (member of the militia or home guard) to fight the French. And if he had had his way he would have rallied the Prussian troops by delivering field sermons. Even his death (in 1814) was not without drama. His wife Johanne caught typhus while nursing wounded soldiers. Returning from a day's work at the university Fichte found that she had recovered. He embraced her and promptly caught typhus himself, which in his case proved fatal. So not a dull life.

The title of the book includes a description of Fichte as a *German* philosopher. What is the significance of this? Kuehn does not call his biography of Kant 'Kant: A German Philosopher'. Nor do I imagine he would include Germanness in the title of a biography of Leibniz. It all has to do with Fichte's nationalism. In what Kuehn calls his 'famous-infamous' *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807–9) Fichte makes it clear he thinks

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the Germans are a unique and special people (*Volk*). Above all it is their language which makes the Germans special and indeed superior. Their language is primordial (*ursprünglich*) and alive. Unlike French, German has not only *Geist* but also *Gemüt*. With their dead language the French cannot progress in their *Geistesbildung*. They cannot even produce poetry. This view of the language-based superiority of the Germans would be a harmless eccentricity were it not also combined with the belief that their superiority entitles the Germans to acquire territory through wars of conquest and subjugation. As Kuehn comments, it is difficult to avoid seeing the affinity of such ideas with the national-socialist conception of *Lebensraum*. Indeed it sounds like a precursor of *Generalplan Ost* (the secret Nazi plan for the colonization of central and eastern Europe, involving genocide and ethnic cleansing). If Kuehn is right in his depiction of Fichte as a proto-Nazi, then Leni Riefenstahl was perhaps showing good judgement in her choice of a birthday present for Hitler: the collected works of Fichte. Of course none of this has the slightest tendency to invalidate his *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte may have been an extreme nationalist but what sets him apart from the Nazis, who had no interest in morality, is the foundational role he gives to morality and freedom in his *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be Kant's view of Fichte. Mention has already been made of the fundamental difference between Kant's transcendental ego (the 'I' of the 'I think' which must be able to accompany all my representations) and Fichte's absolute ego. Mention might also be made of the view expressed by Heidegger (and later by Gerold Prauss) that German idealism in general is based on a misinterpretation of the Kantian thing-in-itself. But what did Kant think of Fichte? Initially he was impressed by him and was instrumental in securing a publisher for his book on revelation. But it was not long before he began to find him tiresome. After the appearance of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Fichte had become all the rage Kant remained silent. But in 1799 he issued a statement in which he dismissed the *Wissenschaftslehre* as 'mere logic' and Fichte's philosophy as 'a completely untenable system'. To be fair to Fichte, there is little evidence in the statement of that 'German thoroughness' so famously prized by Kant. Fichte's response was typical. In a letter to Schelling he states that, if the Kantian philosophy is not understood as he (Fichte) understands it, then it is 'total nonsense'. Also in a letter to Schelling, which Schelling published, Fichte refers to a private letter to him from Kant in which Kant says that on account of his *Altersschwäche* (this I think is best translated by 'infirmity' – I cannot imagine Kant would have spoken of himself as senile) he will leave the subtlety of theoretical speculation to others. Fichte concludes that Kant's condemnation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is therefore not to be taken seriously. Kant, he told

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Reinhold, was only 'ein DreiViertelskopf', in other words that he only had three-quarters of a brain.

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In the summer of 1763, Kant wrote the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, a text in which he considers the 'finer' kinds of feeling with respect to human qualities and temperaments, gender and national character. The *Observations* provides no substantive theory of beauty and sublimity; Kant's expressed intention is to approach this topic 'more with the eye of an observer than of the philosopher' (Kant 2011: 13; 2: 207). As such, this text should be grouped with Kant's anthropological writings, in which the method is descriptive and the aim pragmatic, rather than the philosophical discussion of aesthetic theory found in the *Critique of Judgement*.

When the *Observations* was published in 1764, Kant had a personal copy produced that included blank interleaved pages. The fragmentary notes written therein have come to be published separately as the *Remarks in the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Kant does much more here than reflect on the *Observations*. In the *Remarks* we find his next thoughts, his developing views on practical philosophy and anthropology, his deepening engagement with Rousseau and other philosophers, and even intensely personal reflections on his own life as a scholar.

While the *Remarks* provide valuable insight into the development of Kant's views at a pivotal moment of his intellectual life, the *Observations*, by contrast, can seem inconsequential, a playful work of belles-lettres written to appeal to the refined society of Kant's day. Manfred Kuehn, in his biography of Kant, writes:

> Much of the *Observations* must strike us as dated, as the expression of sentiments long since become passé. … Some of his observations seem silly today, others are annoying, and still others touching. … What we get is not so much heartfelt sentiments as the prejudices of an era. … They must