

2 Fichte and the French Revolution

THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

It has always been recognized that there is an intimate connection between Fichte's politics and his early philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794. The inspiration for the *Wissenschaftslehre* came from the Revolution in France, and its purpose was, in some sense, to justify the events across the Rhine. The source of this interpretation is impeccable: Fichte himself. In the Spring of 1795, he wrote a famous revealing letter about the origins of his *Wissenschaftslehre*:

I believe that my system belongs to this [the French] nation. It is the first system of freedom. Just as that nation has torn away the external chains of man, my system tears away the chains of the thing-in-itself, or external causes, that still shackle him more or less in other systems, even the Kantian. My first principle establishes man as an independent being. My system arose through an inner struggle with myself and against rooted prejudices in those years that the French struggled with outer force for their political freedom. It was their *valeur* that spurred me to conceive it. When I wrote on the Revolution there came the first hints and inklings of my system. (GA III/2: 298)¹

This letter makes it plain that there is a close link between Fichte's philosophy and his politics.² The problem is, however, how to explain it. All kinds of questions arise. Exactly how was Fichte's philosophy inspired by the Revolution? What were these first hints of his later system? How does his first principle relate to the ideal of liberty of the Revolution? What relevance does the critique of the thing-in-itself have for political freedom? Or, to sum up all these questions in one: how could such an abstract and abstruse

philosophy as the *Wissenschaftslehre* ever serve the political cause in France?

Seeing a wide gap between the sophisticated and technical reasoning of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Fichte's politics, some scholars simply deny that there can be a close connection at all.³ They see Fichte's primary concern as first philosophy, the development of a presuppositionless epistemology in the Cartesian tradition.⁴ Since they distinguish sharply between the philosophical and the political, the theoretical and the practical, they think that any attempt to explain how the *Wissenschaftslehre* arose from the French Revolution must fail. In their view, to try to establish a connection between the abstract reasoning of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Fichte's politics is like trying to derive Newton's differential calculus from his early alchemical studies.

But this view denies the problem rather than resolving it. The sharp distinction between the theoretical and the practical is completely contrary to Fichte's intentions. It was never his aim to develop a first philosophy that is pure speculation, having no direct connection with life and action. In many of his early writings, he emphasized tirelessly that the aim of his philosophy is to guide conduct, and that its very soul is the realm of life and experience.⁵

The most common explanation emphasizes a metaphor, an analogy between metaphysical and political freedom.⁶ What the French do for *political* liberty, the *Wissenschaftslehre* does for *metaphysical* freedom. While the French liberate humanity from feudalism and despotism in practice, the *Wissenschaftslehre* frees it from the spectre of the thing-in-itself in theory. Thus the absolute ego of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, whose self-positing activity constitutes all of reality, represents the ambition of French radicals to recreate the whole of society according to the principles of reason.

This interpretation presupposes, however, that Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* is a kind of metaphysics. It assumes, for example, that Fichte postulates the *existence* of the absolute ego, which somehow creates itself and all reality *ex nihilo*.⁷ But such a reading runs counter to the whole spirit of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*: to provide a purely immanent philosophy entirely within the bounds of experience, a system completely rid of every trace of hypostasis. Furthermore, such a metaphysical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes complete nonsense of Fichte's attempt to

justify the Revolution. For if the absolute ego is the infinite activity of reason, and if *ex hypothesi* it now exists within all of reality, then the present social and political *status quo* receives the sanction of reason. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is then the philosophy of the *ancien régime*!⁸

If, then, we are to explain the connection between Fichte's philosophy and politics, we must get beyond metaphor. My task here will be to explore and examine this connection in more literal terms. I wish to put forward the case for the complete *interdependence* of Fichte's early philosophy and politics: that his political aims could not be achieved without his epistemology, and that his epistemological ends could not be accomplished without his politics.⁹ The fourth section of this essay, 'First Hints and Inklings', will discuss how the first hints of the *Wissenschaftslehre* came from the political writings. The fifth section, 'Knowing and Doing in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*', will try to clarify how Fichte's epistemology required his politics: Fichte believed that the problem of scepticism could be solved only through action directed by political ends. Finally, the sixth section, 'Critique and Liberation', will attempt to show how Fichte's politics required his epistemology: only criticism could remove the fundamental obstacles to the self-awareness of freedom.

An understanding of the unity of philosophy and politics in Fichte demands that we first have some acquaintance with his early political thought. The task of the next two sections will be to provide a brief sketch of Fichte's political views regarding the Revolution in France prior to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794.

THE POLITICS OF REVOLUTION

What precisely, was Fichte's attitude towards the Revolution in France? In what respects did he approve of it, and how did he defend it? These questions are not easy to answer, partly because Fichte did not have a fully explicit and consistent position, and partly because the evidence about it is insufficient and vague. For these reasons, there has been some controversy over the issue of Fichte's Jacobinism.¹⁰

Was Fichte a Jacobin? That was the opinion of many of his contemporaries, both friends and enemies.¹¹ Obviously, much here

depends on the meaning of the term. In the 1790s in Germany to call someone a Jacobin could mean many things.¹² The police used the word for anyone who approved of the ideals of the Revolution, and who therefore seemed a threat to public order. Hence they turned it into a term of abuse, a *Schimpfwort*. But it also had a more precise meaning: it designated those who supported popular sovereignty, defended the right of revolution, and sympathized with Jacobin policies in France. In this more precise sense it *seems* that Fichte was indeed a Jacobin. He affirmed popular sovereignty and the right of revolution, and he certainly sympathized with the ideals, and to some extent even the policies, of the Jacobins. Moreover, he even had contacts with Jacobin agents and the Mainz republic.

Yet Fichte protested vigorously against any imputation of Jacobinism. Given the negative connotations of the term, he could hardly have done otherwise. Against the implication that he was a conspirator ready to incite rebellion, he insisted that his main goal was to lead a quiet life of contemplation,¹³ and that it was one of his chief maxims to always respect the laws of the land.¹⁴ His enemies, however, made some more specific charges. They accused him of having associations with French Jacobins, of trying to inaugurate a religion of reason in Jena, of preaching revolutionary doctrine in his lectures, and of creating a revolutionary club.¹⁵ But Fichte emphatically denied all these claims too.

But should we take Fichte at his word? Although he did not attempt to preach a religion of reason or to impart revolutionary doctrine in his lectures, he did have contacts with Jacobin agents, and he even started something like a republican club. As soon as he arrived in Jena he created a society – *Die Gesellschaft der freien Männer* – devoted to the ideals of the Revolution.¹⁶ One of its most prominent members was the Jacobin spy Johann Franz Brechtel, who reported to Theobald Bacher, Secretary to the French Ambassador in Basel and leader of French espionage in southern Germany.¹⁷ Fichte also had contacts with, and performed services for, Giuseppe Gorani, the secret agent for the French government in Geneva.¹⁸ Finally, in the late 1790s, Fichte corresponded with Franz Wilhelm Jung, who was the Bureauchef of the French government in Mainz.

It is also important to see that, on several occasions, Fichte expressed a desire to join the new republic and to work for its cause. He had long considered France as a possible refuge from his many

political enemies.¹⁹ In early 1795 he told Baggesen about his hopes for a stipend from the French government to complete the *Wissenschaftslehre*.²⁰ In September 1798 he considered leaving Jena to teach in the new school system designed for the French republic in Mainz. He wrote to Jung that he would like nothing more than to devote himself to the education of the republic's future citizens.²¹ The formation of the Second Coalition in the Spring of 1799 made Fichte fear the defeat of France and the loss of all political liberty in Europe. He admitted that atrocities had been committed by both sides, and that sometimes the French were even worse than their enemies; but this was a war of principles and it was now time to choose. He had no hesitation in deciding on whose side he stood: 'I now place everything that I can do in the hands of the republic', he wrote to Jung on 10 May 1799 (GA III/3: 349).

Still, all these facts do not make Fichte a Jacobin agent, or even a member of a Jacobin club or cadre. The aims of the *Gesellschaft der freien Männer* were more moral and literary than political. The contacts with the Jacobins were also of negligible political significance. Fichte's meeting with Gorani was friendly rather than official: he did nothing more than deliver parts of a manuscript to a publisher.²² And all that Brechtel imparted to Bacher was a copy of one of Fichte's books.²³ It is indeed noteworthy that Fichte told Jung that he had no other official contacts with the French republic.²⁴

The question still remains, however, whether Fichte's *political philosophy* was Jacobin, even if he was not personally and officially a Jacobin himself.²⁵ There are indeed some striking similarities between Jacobin ideology and the arguments of Fichte's main revolutionary writing, his 1793 *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution* (*Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution*). First, Fichte defends the right to revolution, and indeed even the duty to defend the revolution with force if it is in danger from counterrevolutionary elements;²⁶ secondly, Fichte speaks for the economic interests of the people at large, and especially for the right to existence and a reward for work.²⁷ It is indeed striking that Fichte advanced these doctrines when the Jacobins were struggling for power in France and advocating the use of force against the enemies of the Revolution.²⁸

It has been argued, however, that the *Contribution* has no close connection with the doctrines, policies and events in France. The main evidence for this point is that Fichte's defence of the right of the revolution was very different from that of the Jacobins in France.²⁹ While Fichte gave this right to every individual, the Jacobins granted it only to the people as a whole, demanding that the individual subordinate himself to the nation. But it is noteworthy that Fichte's later revision of his teaching regarding the right of revolution in his 1796 *Foundation of Natural Right (Grundlage des Naturrechts)* was more along Jacobin lines.³⁰ Here Fichte denied that the individual alone had a right to rebel against the government and attributed such a right only to the people as a whole.³¹

For all these similarities, there are still some very important differences. First, unlike most of the Jacobins, Fichte advocates reform from above rather than revolution from below.³² Although he defended the right of revolution, he seems to have regarded this as a right to be claimed only *in extremis*, when the prince refused all reform and continued to trample underfoot all the liberties of the people. Secondly, Fichte distanced himself from the radical democracy of the Jacobins by arguing that it leads to the worst form of tyranny, mob rule. While he defended popular sovereignty, he still insisted upon the need for representation, a separation between the people and the executors of their will.³³ Thirdly, Fichte also disapproved of the violent methods of the Jacobins. Thus he declined invitations to join the revolutionary government in Mainz because he could not abide 'the wild excesses of the Jacobins'.³⁴

So was, then, Fichte a Jacobin? After considering all these factors, we have to conclude that neither his political affiliations nor his philosophy make him one. Indeed, Fichte seems to have explicitly distanced himself from Jacobin doctrine and policy later in the 1790s. It is only in the contemporary meaning of the term – anyone who espouses democracy and a right of revolution – that Fichte can be regarded as a Jacobin; but such usage is misleading because it suggests a much closer doctrinal and political affiliation. If we compare Fichte with other German radicals of the 1790s who played a more active role in the Revolution – Georg Forster, Georg Friedrich Rebmann and Johann Benjamin Erhard – then his reputation as a Jacobin seems completely undeserved. Nevertheless, there is no

denying that Fichte had more sympathies with Jacobinism than most of the moderate *Aufklärer*, who never embraced democratic principles. We must place him firmly in the left-wing, if not the radical left-wing, of German politics in the 1790s.

DEFENDING THE REVOLUTION

Fichte's main defence of the principles and actions of the Revolution is his *Contribution*, which was written before the publication of Kant's political writings.³⁵ This work is a polemic against the growing reaction to the Revolution in Germany, and in particular against A. W. Rehberg's *Investigations Concerning the French Revolution* (*Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution*).³⁶ As Fichte presents his case in the introduction, his debate with Rehberg concerns the classical conflict between rationalism and empiricism in politics. Should we judge history and tradition according to principles, which we derive from reason, or should we derive our principles from history and tradition? In this debate Fichte takes a firm stand in favour of rationalism.³⁷ We must judge history according to the standards of morality, he argues, rather than deriving these standards from history. We must not pretend that we cannot do in politics what we ought to do in morality: 'Man can do what he should do; and if he says "I cannot" he really means "I do not want to"' (GA I/1: 230).

Although Fichte sometimes presents his quarrel with Rehberg as if it were simply a dispute between rationalism and empiricism, the issue was more complicated. For Rehberg never asserted a complete empiricism in politics. Like Fichte, he too believed that reason could determine the fundamental principles of morality and natural law, and that these were binding on the statesman.³⁸ The problem is that these principles are *insufficient* for political practice. The real issue between Rehberg and Fichte, then, concerns the limits of our liberty within the sphere left open by moral principle. Rehberg contends that we *must be* guided by historical practice, which alone determines how to apply the moral law to specific circumstances.³⁹ Fichte replies that we are free to enter new contracts, regardless of past institutions and traditions.⁴⁰

Fichte's defence of the Revolution consists in two central contentions: (1) that a nation has the right to change its constitution, and (2)

that it has the right to defend its new constitution through force. The framework for the first contention is the social contract theory of Rousseau. Civil society must be founded upon a contract, Fichte contends, because that alone agrees with the principle of autonomy, which binds us only to those laws to which we give our consent.⁴¹ Fichte explains, however, that we have no *moral* obligation to enter into, or even to keep, the social contract. The moral law permits, but does not oblige, us to enter into it.⁴² My obligation to make and keep a contract is therefore based upon nothing more than my sovereign will, my decision to limit my choice and to enter into a specific agreement with others. Now it follows from this, Fichte argues, that a person can dissolve contracts as easily as he can create them.⁴³ Because it is only our sovereign will that binds us to a contract, its bonds are broken whenever we change our will. The promise never to break a contract is invalid because it violates one of the inalienable rights of man: the right to change his will if it is necessary to achieve greater moral perfection.⁴⁴

Fichte's second contention appears in the course of a long chapter about state–church relations.⁴⁵ The occasion for this discussion was the debate surrounding the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in France. After confiscating church property, the National Convention demanded an oath of allegiance from the clergy, which it feared would be loyal to the Pope rather than the new state. Since less than half of the clergy took the oath, most were regarded as traitors, a suspicion that ultimately led to the September massacres. In this debate Fichte took a clear stand on behalf of the new government. He argued that the state has the right to exclude anyone who does not renounce religious doctrines dangerous to it. Although the state does not have the positive right to determine which religion is true, it does have a negative right to exclude those which undermine public safety. If it finds someone guilty of holding dangerous opinions, then it has no authority to violate their natural rights; but it can bar them from citizenship. Yet the crucial question is this: what should we do if refractory priests declare war against the state, whether openly or secretly? In this case, Fichte explains, the state has a right to defend itself with force.⁴⁶ This right follows not from the social contract but from natural law itself, which maintains that I have a right to protect myself against anyone who does violence against my

rights.⁴⁷ The context of Fichte's argument makes it plain, then, that he was defending the right of the new government to defend itself against counter-revolutionary force.

The *Contribution* proved to be a successful book. It aroused much public interest, received favourable reviews, and went through a second edition. But it also encountered severe criticism. In a perceptive review J. B. Erhard pointed out one serious *non sequitur* in Fichte's argument: that it is one thing to argue that an individual has the right to revolt *on his own behalf*, but quite another to maintain that he has the right to do so *on behalf of everyone else*.⁴⁸ Fichte had at best established the first point; but he had completely ignored the second. But this was not the only question Fichte had failed to answer, according to some other contemporaries. Friedrich Gentz and Jens Baggesen contended that Fichte's rationalism made him overlook such crucial practical issues as *who* is to make the revolution, and *when* or under what circumstances it is justified.⁴⁹ In their view, Fichte had still not overcome the yawning gulf between theory and practice. But the most controversial part of the book by far was Fichte's contention that the individual can one-sidedly break his contract with the state. Both liberal and conservative reviewers pointed out that this seemed to dissolve the very possibility of all contracts, and so to undermine all the bonds of the state.⁵⁰ For why enter into contracts at all if there is the danger that the other party can break them at will? Here Fichte's radical individualism seemed to border upon anarchism. The reviews of the *Contribution* were later to have an important effect on Fichte, who revised his political theory in the *Foundation* to meet them.⁵¹ They helped to ensure that the *Contribution* would remain only an early – and quickly surpassed – stage in the development of Fichte's political thought.

FIRST HINTS AND INKLINGS

What were the first hints of his later system that Fichte got from writing on the Revolution? In what respects did his early writings on the Revolution anticipate the later *Wissenschaftslehre*? Since Fichte does not explain himself, it is difficult to say. We can only speculate, basing our conjectures on several passages from the early political writings.

It has been maintained, however, that all such speculation is a waste of time, because Fichte could not have had any glimmerings of his later doctrine from the early political writings.⁵² That Fichte said this was only due to his retrospective imagination, which exaggerated his connections with France. Fichte discovered the first principle of his system only in November 1793 by reading G. E. Schulze's *Aenesidemus*, several months *after* the composition of the revolutionary writings. Furthermore, the dialectical method of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the 'discovery' of the 'I am', also go back to the Autumn of 1793, again too late for them to have been aroused by the Revolution.

This argument assumes that Fichte *explicitly formulated* and *became certain about* the foundation and method of his system when writing about the Revolution. But no such assumption is suggested by Fichte, who writes only of the first 'inklings' and 'hints' (*die erste Winke und Ahndungen*). To have these it was surely not necessary to be certain of the final form and method of his system. Fichte began writing about the Revolution in the Spring of 1793. It was also then that he became deeply worried about the foundation of his system, and that he first suggested the idea of basing it upon the pure ego.⁵³ So could it not be, just as Fichte implies, that his ideas came to him in the course of writing his political tracts?

Some passages from the early writings give us reason to think that this was indeed the case. It is possible that some hints came from Fichte's early tract *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe* (*Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europas*), which was published in Easter 1793. Although it deals more with Prussian politics than the Revolution, this tract makes unmistakable references to events in France as a warning to the German princes. It is essentially a defence of freedom of thought and of the press, and more specifically a vigorous critique of the Wöllner Edicts of 1788, which strengthened the censorship in Prussia. The basis of Fichte's argument is the Kantian concept of autonomy. The right to think freely, he maintains, is the precondition for our development as autonomous beings. It is only by exercising this right that I become conscious of myself as a rational being, and hence as a moral agent ready to take responsibility for his own actions. In the course of making this argument Fichte hits

upon a striking formulation for his point: 'The expression of freedom of thought, just like the expression of our will ... is a necessary condition under which we can say "I am", I am an independent being' (GA I/I: 175). The 'I am' here is, of course, an anticipation of the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Already, it seems, Fichte had conceived, though not become certain of, the first principle of his philosophy.

Another foreshadowing of the *Wissenschaftslehre* comes towards the close of this tract when Fichte raised the question of whether there could be a social contract where people agree to forfeit their right of freedom of thought.⁵⁴ Fichte argues that such a contract is impossible. To alienate such a right, he contends, violates the moral law, which does not permit us to do anything that could jeopardize our development as rational beings. It is the essential characteristic of a rational being that it constantly goes beyond any limits in the search for truth. We cannot impose any legal barriers upon freedom of thought, then, without placing constraints upon our rationality. Here Fichte adumbrates a *leitmotif* of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*: that rationality is characterized by an infinite striving.

It is more likely, however, that the first hints of the later system came while writing the *Contribution* in the Spring of 1793. In his introduction Fichte raised the question of the source and basis of the first principle of morality, which was his criterion to judge the rights and wrongs of the Revolution. We cannot find its origin in our empirical self, he argued, but only in our inner self, and indeed only in 'the pure and original form of the self' (GA I/I: 219). We come to know this inner self, he went on to explain, only by abstracting from experience and by reflecting upon ourselves. This derivation of the moral law from the inner self anticipates both the first principle and the method of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the pure self, and its method of knowing the pure self is through abstraction and reflection.⁵⁵ It is indeed striking that Fichte came to both of these conclusions in considering the proper criterion to judge the Revolution. This suggests that he wanted the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to serve as a philosophical foundation for the events across the Rhine.

KNOWING AND DOING IN THE 1794
 WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE

How did the aims of Fichte's epistemology depend upon his politics? We can answer this question only if we first have some idea about one central theme of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

If we abstract from all the technicality, nuance and complexity of Fichte's early epistemology, then one central thesis, one guiding theme, demands our attention: that the possibility of all knowledge depends upon 'subject-object identity'. Fichte himself stressed this thesis on several occasions,⁵⁶ though it often disappears in the welter of his argument. Put simply, the principle of subject-object identity states that all knowledge requires nothing less than the *identity* of the knowing subject and the known object. This means that self-knowledge is the paradigm of all knowledge, because it is only in self-knowledge that the subject and object are one and the same. In demanding identity, this principle lays down some very strict and severe conditions for the possibility of knowledge; but Fichte insisted that nothing less would do. Only subject-object identity can provide a foundation for knowledge, he argued, because *any* kind of dualism between the subject and object inevitably leads to scepticism.⁵⁷ If the object is distinct from the subject – whether as a thing-in-itself or as a given empirical manifold – then there is no guarantee that the subject knows it. For the subject cannot jump outside its own knowing activity to see whether its representations correspond to the thing-in-itself or the empirical manifold prior to synthesis. To avoid scepticism, then, all knowledge must involve subject-object identity or self-knowledge.

Such a paradigm of knowledge had, of course, its historical precedents. In emphasizing the necessity of subject-object identity, Fichte was only following in the footsteps of Kant. His starting point was the principle behind Kant's 'new method of thought': 'that we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them' (CPR, Bxviii).⁵⁸ In the prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had stressed that reason knows best those objects that it creates itself, since its own activity is transparent to itself.⁵⁹ Fichte would soon make this idea into the central principle of his system. But it is important to see that Fichte takes it a step further than Kant. He generalizes Kant's principle so that it is the paradigm of *all*

knowledge, not only *a priori* knowledge. All knowledge must conform to the conditions of *a priori* knowledge, so that we know anything only to the extent that we create it or make it conform to the laws of our own intellectual activity. This principle then holds not only for the *form* of experience – the general laws of the understanding – but also for its *matter* – given sensations of sensibility. Fichte argued that it is necessary to generalize Kant's principle because only then is it possible to surmount the troublesome dualisms of his system, which leave open another foothold for scepticism.⁶⁰

However plausible, Fichte's principle of subject–object identity suffers from some serious problems of its own. The main difficulty is that the principle appears simply false by our ordinary experience. We human beings cannot claim that we create the things that we know. The objects of everyday life are simply given to us, and our sensations come and go independently of our will and imagination. It was indeed for just this reason that Kant limited his principle to the divine understanding, the *intellectus archetypus*, which alone had the capacity to create its objects.⁶¹ The principle of subject–object identity therefore comes to grief in the face of the subject–object dualism of experience. This opens the door again for the sceptic, who simply denies the existence of the subject–object identity that is the condition for all knowledge.

Of course, Fichte himself was aware of this problem. He insisted that any satisfactory idealism would have to explain the existence of the external world, and that it would have to account for the subject–object dualism of our ordinary experience.⁶² But this only aggravates the fundamental problem facing transcendental philosophy: how to explain the possibility of knowledge, which requires subject–object identity, when experience shows nothing more than a subject–object dualism? Somehow, transcendental philosophy had to establish *both* subject–object identity and non-identity, *both* the possibility of knowledge and the existence of the external world.

Such was the problem Fichte faced in one of the central sections of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, the third part entitled 'Foundation of the Science of the Practical' (*Grundlage der Wissenschaft des Praktischen*).⁶³ Fichte's solution to this problem was perfectly Faustian: his concept of striving (*Streben*).⁶⁴ It was this concept that was to play the pivotal role of deducing both subject–object identity and

non-identity, both the possibility of knowledge and that of experience. According to this concept, we finite human beings should strive towards the ideal of subject–object identity, the status of the divine understanding. We all have a mission here on earth: to struggle to make more of nature submit to the ends and laws of our reason. The more control we acquire over nature, the more its given content will decrease and its created content will increase, and so the more knowledge we will have. Of course, we cannot ever attain the status of the divine intellect, for as long as we are finite we cannot ever create all of nature. Nevertheless, this is an ideal which we can constantly approach.

Fichte argues that this concept provides the required synthesis of subject–object identity and non-identity.⁶⁵ Both are necessary conditions of the possibility of striving, of acting in the world. There is subject–object identity because the ego acquires control over nature, making it submit to the demands of its own activity. But there is also subject–object non-identity since there cannot be any striving without some obstacle or resistance to it. The concept of striving therefore accomplishes the apparently insurmountable task of transcendental philosophy: by ensuring subject–object identity, it explains the possibility of knowledge; and by deriving subject–object non-identity, it accounts for the finitude of our ordinary experience.

This concept of striving was also Fichte's response to the sceptic. The false premise behind scepticism is that the subject–object dualism of experience is completely insurmountable. We cannot acquire any knowledge, the sceptic thinks, because the subject–object dualism of experience is eternal and unalterable, a *fait accompli*. But in assuming this, the sceptic ignores our power to act upon and to change the world, our capacity to make the object submit to our ends. Of course, we cannot have *complete* knowledge because we cannot attain subject–object identity; but we can have at least *some* knowledge because we can approach this ideal. Indeed, we can acquire *more and more* knowledge the more we gain control over nature. In sum, then, the problem with scepticism is that it has a contemplative model of knowledge: it is as if we know things simply by *thinking* about them. But the truth of the matter is that we know them only by *acting* upon them.

The central role of the concept of striving in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* clearly reveals the primacy of the practical in

Fichte's thinking. We must understand striving not only as the *theoretical* activity of investigating nature, but as the *practical* activity of making it conform to our ends. Fichte's solution to the problem of scepticism is indeed profoundly pragmatic. We know only what we make, and what we make must conform to our ends. We cannot know the object through pure contemplation or speculation because that does not change the object according to our requirements but simply leaves it as it stands, so that the subject-object dualism persists.

We are now in a position to see how Fichte thinks that the solution to the problem of knowledge involves moral and political action. For he insists that the practical activity of striving is both moral and political; in other words, it must be guided by moral and political ends. The attempt to gain control over nature is not an end in itself, but simply a means towards moral independence and the just society. Our knowledge of nature is only the means and the result of achieving these ends.

Striving is a *moral* activity, Fichte maintains, because it is commanded by the moral law. On Fichte's interpretation, the moral law demands that we attain absolute independence, a condition where we are completely self-determining, so that we are subject to no laws but those of our reason.⁶⁶ This means that we ought to strive to bring the desires and emotions of our sensibility under control, for these often tempt us to act contrary to our reason. But the condition under which this is possible, Fichte argues, is that we have control over nature, which acts upon and influences our sensibility.⁶⁷ Hence Fichte regards control over nature not simply as a means of attaining knowledge, but as the means of achieving moral perfection, absolute independence.

It is now only necessary to add that Fichte regards striving as a *political* activity. The purpose of our striving is not only moral – insofar as our goal is complete independence – but also political – insofar as our end is a perfect society upon earth. In his 1794 text *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar* (*Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*) Fichte advocates that each individual strive to attain absolute independence, so that everyone working together will create 'the highest good' (GA I/3: 31–32, 40), a society in which everyone receives their happiness in direct proportion to their merits, and in which everyone gives according to

their abilities and gets according to their needs. Here he is clear that the absolute ego is achieved only when a perfect society is created, when all individuals have become entirely rational and so identical with one another.

If, then, we place Fichte's concept of striving in its moral and political context, the conclusion is inevitable: Fichte sees the solution to the problem of scepticism as political activity. Anticipating Marx, he believes that all the mysteries of transcendental philosophy will be resolved only through political practice. Empirical knowledge is not the purpose but the reward of he who strives to achieve the highest good: a society founded on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

CRITIQUE AND LIBERATION

One of the most striking analogies in Fichte's Spring 1795 letter is that between the thing-in-itself and the external chains of man. *Prima facie* this confirms the metaphorical interpretation, for it seems to involve nothing more than an analogy between metaphysical and political freedom. For what is the political significance of the critique of the thing-in-itself? We can rest assured that no sansculotte ever worried about this monster laying siege to Paris. True to the caricature of the German professor, Fichte seems to be giving too much importance to philosophy, too little importance to politics.

Was Fichte's critique of the thing-in-itself really so politically harmless? If we care to probe beneath the surface, we find that it was not just epistemology but daring – and even dangerous – political criticism. To see its political significance, it is necessary to consider two aspects of his transcendental philosophy: first, his view of the task of criticism; and, second, the meaning of the thing-in-itself.

Like Kant, Fichte held that the task of criticism is to make humanity self-conscious of its freedom. The distinguishing feature of criticism in contrast to dogmatism, he argued in the *First Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*,⁶⁸ is that criticism is a system of freedom. By making us self-conscious of our freedom, the critical philosopher helps us *to realize it*, for we can become free only if we first know that we are so.

How, though, does criticism make us self-conscious of our freedom? First and foremost, through the exposure and elimination of hypostasis, the reification or objectification of the laws of reason. This was essential to the achievement of freedom, Fichte believed, because of one paradoxical but pervasive fact: that we enslave ourselves to entities of our own creation. What we should consciously and intentionally create as autonomous beings we subconsciously and unintentionally reify and then submit to as heteronomous beings. This was the fallacy of the Spinozist, for example, who reified the principles of reason into laws of nature, which seemed to rule over him with iron necessity.⁶⁹ But the same problem was apparent in religion in general. Thus, in his first published work, the *Critique of All Revelation* (*Kritik aller Offenbarung*), Fichte contended that the idea of God is the hypostasis of the moral law within us, the alienation of our natures as rational beings. In some lines suggestive of Feuerbach or Marx, he wrote that 'The idea of God, the legislator of the moral law within us, is based upon the alienation of what is within us, upon the transference of something subjective into a being outside us; and this objectification is the characteristic principle of religion' (GA I/1: 33).⁷⁰

For the young Fichte, then, hypostasis was the key to that famous paradox stated by Rousseau in the opening lines of the *Contrat social*: that man is born free but everywhere is in chains. It was the great contribution of the critical philosophy, he believed, to show us *how* man had enslaved himself: through the objectification of the laws of his own reason. Hence the task of criticism was to liberate man from this self-imposed bondage by making him self-conscious of hypostasis.

How would criticism eradicate hypostasis? The basic techniques had already been laid down by Kant in the 'Transcendental Dialectic' of the first *Critique*.⁷¹ The critical philosopher would de-hypostasize reason by reformulating a 'constitutive principle', which seemed to describe some entity, into a 'regulative principle', which prescribed some goal or ideal of enquiry. For example, a constitutive principle states that 'if the conditioned is given, then the entire series of conditions is also given'; its regulative reformulation states that 'if the conditioned is given, then seek the entire series of conditions as a task'. Although many of

the ideas of classical metaphysics had no validity as constitutive claims, they were still useful as regulative principles, Kant argued, because they helped reason to systematize its knowledge and bring it to completion.

But, for all his services to criticism, Fichte believed that Kant had still not gone far enough. Although he had ruthlessly exposed the hypostases of traditional rationalist metaphysics – the ideas of the soul, of substance and of the unconditioned – Kant had indulged in some hypostases of his own. This inconsistency was plain from the problem of the thing-in-itself, the unknowable cause of our experience. Kant had insisted that the categories of cause and existence are applicable only within experience; yet he postulated the existence of a thing-in-itself beyond experience to serve as the cause of all its sensations. The need to remove this inconsistency became an imperative for the Kantians in the 1790s.

Fichte's mission as a transcendental philosopher was therefore clear: to remove the last vestiges of hypostasis from the critical philosophy itself. Only then could it claim to be the system of freedom. Hence one of Fichte's first tasks was to remove the spectre of the thing-in-itself. Somehow, he would have to explain the origin of experience without any inference to a transcendent entity. But it is important to see that, for Fichte, this was only one aspect of a wider problem. He was convinced that hypostasis was endemic throughout the critical philosophy. The thing-in-itself had a very broad meaning for him: it was not only the cause of experience, but any hypostasis or objectification of reason. Another striking hypostasis, for example, was Kant's idea of a noumenal self, which exists as a thing-in-itself prior to our self-consciousness. It was one of the central tasks of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to develop a theory of self-consciousness which would avoid any such reification.⁷²

Yet the most striking and important hypostasis of them all came with the idea of 'the highest good', Kant's concept of a moral world order where good is rewarded and evil punished so that virtue and happiness are in perfect proportion. For Fichte, this idea epitomized all the fundamental concepts of classical metaphysics, since it presupposes the ideas of God, providence and immortality.⁷³ As a concession to traditional and orthodox religious belief, Kant argued in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that we have a right, indeed a duty,

to believe in *the existence* of the highest good, and so the *reality* of God, providence and immortality.⁷⁴ Even though we cannot prove the existence of the highest good according to our *theoretical* reason, we still have a right, indeed a duty, to believe in it according to *practical* reason, because only such a belief gives us the incentive to act according to the moral law. As weak and sensible beings, who are often tempted to act contrary to the rigorous demands of morality, we need to believe that there is a God in heaven who will reward our better efforts with eternal happiness.

But the inconsistency here is palpable, as many critics quickly saw. In postulating the existence of the highest good, Kant had granted it a constitutive status. According to the first *Critique*, however, we should see all the ideas of pure reason not as *objects of belief* but as *goals of enquiry*. If, then, Fichte were to de-hypostasize the critical philosophy, he would have to transform the idea of the highest good from a constitutive into a regulative principle. Rather than being an object of belief, it would have to be a goal for action. This transformation is already complete in the text *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*, where the highest good becomes the ideal of moral and political perfection.⁷⁵

We are now in a position to see why the criticism of the thing-in-itself was filled with such political significance for Fichte. The thing-in-itself was not merely the unknowable cause of experience, but much more fundamentally the hypostasis of the highest good. In attempting to de-hypostasize this concept, Fichte was saying that there is no kingdom of God, no providence, no divine justice, except that which we create here on earth. Read as a regulative principle, then, the highest good prescribes the task of establishing a just society. In his *Foundation of Natural Right* Fichte sketches in detail just what such a society would be like. It will be one where only he who works will eat, one where people receive according to their needs and give according to their ability, one where the rich do not prosper and the poor suffer, and one where everyone will be rewarded according to their efforts and merits.⁷⁶ Such a society, if it can only be created, will be the realization of the dreams of the old Christian prophets: the kingdom of God on earth.

Fichte's critique of the thing-in-itself – if it were fully understood – could be viewed only with alarm by the defenders of the *ancien régime*. There was much at stake, for Fichte was attacking one of the fundamental props of their ideology. The traditional idea of the highest good was the belief in providence, the moral world-order created by God and existing now within all of nature and society. Of course, this belief provided supernatural sanctions for civil laws, since good is rewarded and evil punished in heaven; but, more importantly, it served as a rationalization for the static social and political hierarchy of late eighteenth-century society. All the differences of wealth, power and prestige within society, it seemed, were the product of providence, decreed eternally by God in his heaven. If it seemed unjust that the wicked and lazy aristocracy prospered and the virtuous and hardworking people suffered, then it was only necessary to be reminded that the ways of God are a mystery, which we should not attempt to fathom and to which we should humbly submit. In general, the *ancien régime* never regarded social structure as the product of human activity but simply as part of the eternal ordinance of God himself.

But Fichte's message was understood all too well. His political enemies jumped upon his 1798 essay 'On the Grounds of Our Belief in a Moral World Order' (*Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*), where Fichte stated that the true belief in God is that of the moral world order, and that we create this order through our actions.⁷⁷ They argued that such a belief is tantamount to atheism. But this charge was, for most, simply an excuse. What disturbed them was not so much Fichte's religious belief but the politics that lay behind it. In their suspicious eyes, Fichte's moral religion was simply another instance of his 'Jacobinism and democratism'. Fichte himself saw their attack upon him in just these terms: 'I am for them a Jacobin, a democrat; this is it' (GA I/6: 72).

So was the critique of the thing-in-itself simply philosophy for its own sake? The aims of Fichte's epistemology, the meaning he gives to the concept of the thing-in-itself, and his social and political context, all belie this interpretation. To understand Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, we must interpret it as Fichte would have: as a system of freedom of the greatest political significance for his age.

NOTES

- 1 The addressee of this letter is unknown; it is assumed that it was Fichte's friend Jens Baggesen.
- 2 In his introduction to Fichte's *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1973), xlii–xlv, lxi, Richard Schottky argues that Fichte's Spring 1795 letter represents a 'perspectival shift' that exaggerates the relationship between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the Revolution. This is explicable from the context of the letter: Fichte was hoping for a pension from the French government. Yet Schottky's argument is a *non sequitur*: the mere fact that Fichte had grounds to stress the relationship does not mean that he distorted or even exaggerated it. Schottky's attempt to loosen the connection presupposes his own sharp *a priori* separation between systematic philosophy and politics. It is precisely this separation, however, that needs to be questioned if we are to do full justice to Fichte's letter.
- 3 This is the view of Richard Schottky. See Schottky, *ibid.*, xlii–xlv, lxi.
- 4 See, for example, Reinhard Lauth, 'Die Bedeutung der Fichteschen Philosophie für die Gegenwart', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 70 (1962–63): 252–270. Schottky has applied Lauth's views to the question of Fichte's relationship to the Revolution. Lauth's position represents a much older tradition that has concentrated upon the epistemology of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, relegating Fichte's political views to specialist scholarship. Some of the chief writers in this tradition: Fritz Medicus, *J. G. Fichte: Dreizehn Vorlesungen* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1905); Heinz Heimsoeth, *Fichte: Leben und Lehre* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1923); and Max Wundt, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1927).
- 5 Fichte's views on the relationship between philosophy and life underwent some important changes even during his Jena years. For an account of these changes, see Daniel Breazeale, 'The Standpoint of Life and the Standpoint of Philosophy in the Context of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–1801)', in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System*, ed. Albert Mues (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989), 80–104. In this essay I will concentrate upon Fichte's views in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*.
- 6 See, for example, Reinhold Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Cass, 1965), 109, 116; George Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 191–192, 205; Manfred Hinz, *Fichtes System der Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1981), 9–10; Bernard Willms, *Die totale Freiheit: Fichtes politische Philosophie* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1967), 63–64; and Manfred Buhr, *Die Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und die*

Französische Revolution in Fichte – die Französische Revolution und das Ideal vom ewigen Frieden, ed. Manfred Buhr and Domenico Losurdo (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1991), 62–70.

- 7 For a thorough criticism of this interpretation, see Ernst Cassirer's *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Dritter Band: Die Nachkantische Systeme* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 126–216.
- 8 Thus Hinz, *Fichtes System*, 10–11, notes the inconsistency but attributes it to Fichte. The source of the inconsistency, however, is only Hinz's metaphysical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.
- 9 I have developed some of this argument in more detail in my *Enlightenment, Revolution, & Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 57–74.
- 10 The early Fichte has sometimes been labelled 'a Jacobin'. See, for example, Reinhold Aris, *A History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Cass, 1936), 111, 123, and G. A. Walz, *Die Staatsidee des Rationalismus und der Romantik und die Staatsphilosophie Fichtes* (Berlin: Rothschild, 1928), 414. This interpretation has been criticized by Wolfgang Schweitzer, *Der entmythologisierte Staat* (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1968), 211–230. The debate has been carried on by Richard Schottky, who has sharply criticized the Marxist interpretation of Manfred Buhr. See below, notes 24 and 28. For a thorough analysis of some of the issues, see Hajo Schmidt, *Politische Theorie und Realgeschichte: Zu Johann Gottlieb Fichtes praktischer Philosophie (1793–1800)* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1983), 297–334.
- 11 Among his friends see, for example, Baggesen's diary, April 1797, and K. L. Reinhold to Niethammer, 10 September 1798, in FG, I, 420, II, 2. These views were countered by J. F. Mehlis, a colleague of Fichte's, who insisted that 'Whoever knows Fichte will not find anything Jacobin in him' (see FG, VI/2, 529).
- 12 On the varied use of the term, and the problems of defining it, see Helmut Reinalter, 'Der Jakobinismusbegriff in der neueren Forschung', in *Die Französische Revolution und Mitteleuropa* (Frankfurt, 1988), 39–57.
- 13 See J. G. Fichtes als Verfassers des ersten angeklagten Aufsatzes und Mitherausgebers des phil. Journals Verantwortungsschrift (GA I/6: 77–78).
- 14 See Fichte's reply to the charge that he was attempting to undermine public worship on Sunday, his 1797 *Des Prof. Fichte Verantwortung, welche dem Bericht des Senats Academica ad Serenissimum Reg. Beygelegt worden ist* (GA I/4: 391–405).

- 15 These charges were made on many occasions by Fichte's enemies in Jena and Weimar. The first three were made most explicitly, publicly and notoriously by an anonymous article in the reactionary journal *Eudämonia*, 'Verunglückter Versuch, im christlichen Deutschlande eine Art von öffentlicher Vernunft-Religions-Übung anzustellen', Band II (1796), 28–56. Fichte wrote a bitter riposte: *Erklärung gegen den Aufsatz: Verunglückter Versuch ...* (GA I/3: 279–288). The final charge was made by one of the student orders, *Die Unitisten*. See J. K. von der Becke to Ernst II Ludwig von Sachsen-Gotha-Altenburg (FG, VI/1, 130–131).
- 16 See Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps* (Paris: Colin, 1954), Vol. I, 318–319.
- 17 See Brechtel to Bacher, 22 June 1794 (FG, VI/1, 54). Bacher sent a copy of Fichte's *Beitrag* to Philibert Buchot, the commissar for international affairs in Paris, who wanted a report on pro-revolutionary literature in Germany. Buchot wanted to mention Fichte's book to the National Convention. See Bacher to Buchot, July 9, 1794 (FG, VI/1, 64).
- 18 See Jens Baggesen to Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg, 26/28 April 1794 (FG, I, 88).
- 19 See Marie Fichte to Fichte, 7–12 July 1794 (GA III/2: 172).
- 20 GA III/2: 300.
- 21 GA III/3: 138.
- 22 At least that was Fichte's explanation. See his reply to the *Eudämonia* review, *Erklärung gegen den Aufsatz: Verunglückter Versuch ...* (GA I/3: 279–288, especially 279).
- 23 It is indeed significant that Brechtel writes of Fichte as if he were unknown to Bacher. See FG, VI/1, 54.
- 24 See Fichte to Jung, 10 May 1799 (GA III/3: 349).
- 25 This is the thesis of Manfred Buhr in his still stimulating *Die Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und die Französische Revolution*, 14. (This book was originally published in 1965.) Buhr has restated his position in 'Die Philosophie Fichtes und die französische Revolution', *Republik der Menschheit: Französische Revolution und deutsche Philosophie*, ed. Manfred Buhr, Peter Burg and Jacques D'Hondt (Cologne: Paul Rüfenstein Verlag, 1989), 104–117.
- 26 See GA I/1: 253, 254.
- 27 See GA I/1: 269, 322, 323. Fichte developed this theory in much greater detail in his *Foundation of Natural Right* (GA I/4: 20–41).
- 28 The first half of the *Contribution* was probably written in Danzig, in the Winter of 1792–93. The second half was composed in the Summer of 1793. See the editorial note in GA I/1: 196–197.
- 29 See Schottky, 'Einleitung', viii–xi.

- 30 This was Buhr's original argument. See *Revolution*, 38, 50. Schottky's argument holds only for the earlier work, so his critique of Buhr misses its target.
- 31 See *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (GA I/3: 458–459).
- 32 In his first political publication, his 1793 *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe*, Fichte warned against revolutions as a means of social and political change. See GA I/1: 169, 189–192. The preface to the *Contribution* only reaffirms this moderate standpoint. Fichte advises his readers not to apply the principles of right to the present states in Germany. Although most German states are unjust, nothing should be done against them by means of force. All that we can do is to spread knowledge of the principles of justice among our own circle and within our own community. If worthiness for freedom must come from below, liberation can come only from above. See GA I/1: 207–208.
- 33 See Fichte's *Foundation of Natural Right*, GA I/3: 438–440. In his later *Verantwortungsschrift* (GA I/6: 73), Fichte appealed to these passages from the *Foundation* to defend himself against the charge of being a democrat. It is important to note, however, that in the *Foundation* Fichte does not disapprove of democracy as such, only of a direct one. He approves of democracy provided that it has a representative government. See GA I/3: 441–442.
- 34 See the manuscript of Marie Johanne Fichte (FG, II, 200). Her testimony is corroborated by Fichte's 10 May 1799 letter to Franz Wilhelm Jung, where Fichte complains about the revolutionary practices of the French. See GA III/3: 348.
- 35 It is customary to stress the early Fichte's dependence upon Kant. It is important to note, however, that, although Fichte's argument borrows much from Kant, it does not merely apply a fully developed Kantian position. When Fichte wrote the *Contribution* Kant still had not fully formulated his own political philosophy. The famous theory–practice essay, 'On the Common Saying: That Is Right in Theory but Useless in Practice', did not appear until September 1793; and *Towards Eternal Peace* was not published until late 1795. Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, his most systematic work on political philosophy, appeared only in 1797. In his introduction to his *Foundation of Natural Right* Fichte drew attention to the similarities and differences between his view and Kant's. See GA I/3: 323–328. On the context behind the development of Fichte's natural law doctrine, see Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. I, 472–89.
- 36 See A. W. Rehberg, *Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution* (Hannover and Osnabrück: Ritscher, 1793). On Rehberg, see Ursula

- Vogel, *Konservative Kritik an der bürgerlichen Revolution* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1972); Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 1966), 547–594; and my *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, 302–309.
- 37 GA I/I: 211–221.
- 38 See Rehberg's article 'Über das Verhältnis der Theorie zur Praxis', in *Über Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Dieter Henrich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 116. This article was originally published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 23 (1794), 114–143. See Rehberg's review of the *Critique of Practical Reason* in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* 188 (6 August 1788): 345–352.
- 39 See Rehberg, *Untersuchungen*, 15–17.
- 40 This becomes clearer only later in the course of Fichte's polemic in the *Contribution*. See I/I: 238.
- 41 GA I/I: 236.
- 42 GA I/I: 238.
- 43 GA I/I: 264, 290, 300.
- 44 GA I/I: 254–255, 301.
- 45 GA I/I: 370–404, especially 393–403.
- 46 GA I/I: 393–394.
- 47 The premise behind Fichte's argument here is made more explicit in the *Foundation of Natural Right* (GA I/3: 392).
- 48 This review was first published in *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten* II (1795), 47–88. It has been reprinted in *Johann Benjamin Erhard: Über das Recht des Volks zu einer Revolution und andere Schriften*, ed. H. Haasis (Munich: Hanser, 1970), 135–164. See especially 136–137.
- 49 See Baggesen's *Tagebuch*, May/June 1794 in FG, I, 93. See Friedrich Gentz's review in *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, 153–154 (7 May 1794), 345–360. This review has been reprinted in Schottky, 323–343. See note 2.
- 50 This point was made most vigorously and clearly by Gentz, 351–352. See Reinhold to Baggesen, 31 January 1794, in FG, I, 83; and Baggesen, *Tagebuch*, May/June 1794, in FG, I, 94. The same point was made by Friedrich Schleiermacher, FG, VI/I, 18.
- 51 This is most clear from Fichte's later theory of revolution, which is much more specific about who has the right to make a revolution and when. See his *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, Drittes Capitel (GA I/3: 432–460).
- 52 See Schottky, xliv–xlv.
- 53 On 20 February 1793, Fichte wrote to his friend Franz Reinhard that he had come to have grave doubts about the foundation of the critical

- philosophy. See GA III/1: 373–374. Fichte says in the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* that he explained his idea of basing philosophy upon the pure ego to J. F. Schultz, who lived in Königsberg. See GA I/4: 225. This conversation must have taken place in early 1793 when Fichte was still in that city.
- 54 GA I/1: 182–183.
- 55 See Fichte's conversation with Baggesen, 7 December 1793, in FG, I, 68. Here Fichte discovers the first principle of philosophy, the existence of the self or 'I am', through abstraction and reflection. It is necessary to place this discovery in the context of Fichte's earlier development: he had already had the idea of basing philosophy upon the pure ego in the Spring of 1793. See note 43 above. The 'discovery' consisted more in Fichte becoming certain of a principle whose possibility had dawned upon him much earlier.
- 56 See, for example, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 275–276) and the introduction to Fichte's *System der Sittenlehre* (GA I/5: 21). The importance of this paradigm of knowledge is made clear by the young Schelling in his *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre, Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. F. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart, 1856–61), I/1, 366.
- 57 This argument is most apparent in Fichte's early review of G. E. Schulze's *Aenesidemus* (GA I/2: 41–67, especially 49–60). On the significance of this review for the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Daniel Breazeale, 'Fichte's *Aenesidemus* Review and the Transformation of German Idealism', *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981), 544–568. In his *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling attacked the dualisms of the Kantian philosophy. See *Werke*, I/1. 345–362. Fichte endorsed Schelling's critique in the second introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 234–242).
- 58 Kant, CPR, Bxviii.
- 59 See CPR, Axx, Bxii, xviii.
- 60 This was indeed just the argument of Solomon Maimon, one of Kant's most powerful critics, and an important influence on Fichte. See Maimon, *Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie, Gesammelte Werke*, ed. V. Verra (Hildesheim, 1965), II, 62–65, 182–183, 362–364. On Maimon's influence on Fichte, see Fichte's March–April 1795 letter to Reinhold (GA III/2: 282). See also the fragmente 'Wer Hume, Aenesidemus wo er Recht hat u. Maimon noch nicht verstanden ...' (GA II/3: 389–390).
- 61 The *locus classicus* for Kant's views on the divine understanding is in the *Critique of Judgment*, §§ 76–77 (AA 5: 401–410; CJ, 271–279).
- 62 See, for example, the *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 186–187). Fichte rejected an idealism that could not explain the facts of

- experience as a 'transcendent' or 'dogmatic' idealism. See GA I/4: 200, 243. See *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 411–412).
- 63 See *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 385–486).
- 64 See especially GA I/2: 401–404.
- 65 GA I/2: 402–403.
- 66 See *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (GA I/3: 29–30) and *System der Sittenlehre* (GA I/5: 69–70).
- 67 See *Einige Vorlesungen* (GA I/3: 29).
- 68 See *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 191–195).
- 69 GA I/2: 263 and GA I/4: 194–195.
- 70 Admittedly, Fichte does not develop the full implications of this idea in the *Kritik*. Rather, he continues to affirm some central tenets of the Kantian doctrine of moral faith. In his *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought*, however, Fichte notes the political use of religious doctrine in the *ancien régime*: that the idea of heaven is a compensation for social and political ills on earth. See GA I/1: 187.
- 71 CPR, B536–543, 642–648.
- 72 This is especially apparent in Fichte's *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*. See GA I/4: 277. The 'most famous philosopher of our century' here is certainly Kant. See Fichte's unpublished 1798 *Wissenschaftslehre*, where he mentions Kant by name and openly attacks his theory of self-knowledge. See Fichte, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. Hans Schulz (Berlin: Jünker und Dunnhaupt, 1937), 356, 377.
- 73 Hence in his *Critique of All Revelation* Fichte used it as a basis for the deduction of God, providence and immortality, which were legitimate only as necessary conditions for the highest good. See GA I/1: 19–22.
- 74 AA 5: 125; CPR, 240–241.
- 75 GA I/3: 31–32.
- 76 See *Foundation*, §18 (GA I/4: 20–58).
- 77 See GA I/5: 354. The question of Fichte's atheism cannot, of course, be explored here. According to the regulative reading of the ideas of God and the highest good, however, Fichte was indeed an atheist if 'atheism' means belief in the *existence* of God and the highest good. This was the implication of Fichte's doctrine, which he never developed for political reasons. Fichte's later philosophy, after the atheism controversy, involves reading his originally regulative principles in constitutive terms.