

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte

The Life of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1772-1829) was born in upper Lusatia as the son of a ribbon weaver. He was from a peasant family long settled in the district, and for the first years of his life he was educated by his father. However the young man showed exceptional tenacity, and was noticed: a baron, from the neighborhood, was struck by the youngster's extraordinary preaching ability, and offered to pay for his school tuition. The young man was put under the charge of one Pastor Knebel in Meissen, who saw to it that Johann was sent to the local gymnasium and given the most thorough possible classical education.

Fichte's education. In 1774 Johann matriculated at the distinguished Schulpforta school—at which both of the Schlegel brothers and Nietzsche would be students. In 1780 he enrolled as a Theology student at the University of Jena, which was by this time the central educational nucleus of Germany, if not Europe. All did not go smoothly, however, as Fichte had serious problems with tuition, and had to drop his University studies in order to serve as a tutor. An intense but unhappy love affair only made matters more difficult. As with so many of the brilliant and highly educated German thinkers of this time, Fichte's best hope for satisfying employment was on the university level. In December of 1793 he was made Professor of Philosophy at Jena, from which position, unfortunately, he was to be dismissed on a charge of atheism. (We might today deeply question that decision, as what in fact Fichte believed, and pronounced, was that God can be known through the will and goodness, not through a personal love—which set him at serious odds with the many Pietist forces that were dominant in the administration of the University.) In 1808 Fichte found himself distressed and discouraged by the devastation wrought by Napoleon's armies in Prussia, and delivered was to become his most widely attended to work, his *Reden an der deutschen Nation, Speeches to the German Nation*, on the urgent need for Germans to come together as a national whole, and—rather as Herder had sought—to discover their rich and nourishing cultural past with its unity in a single great language.

Fichte's work. Fichte was particularly known for his speeches to the German nation, but it was less well understood from where he was coming, in his national summons expressed in those *Reden*. The determining challenge to Fichte, in the development of his own thought, was the growing development of his thought-master and teacher, Immanuel Kant—whose *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) established a critical benchmark for the speculative thought of his own time, turn of century Germany, and for world thought on the philosophical level. In interacting with Kant's idealism—in prioritizing the dynamic of the ego, as the creator of a self-sufficient world; in arguing that consciousness is not grounded in anything; that there is no noumenal realm over against the phenomenal; in exploring domains of self awareness and self consciousness; in developing rich concepts of intersubjectivity—Fichte devoted some of his own philosophical attention to the question of the conditions and limits of thought. (It is increasingly apparent that Fichte, in his immanentist idealism, helped bridged the transition to Hegel's idealistic system of the absolute unfolding of Geist.) It is noteworthy that in Fichte's case, as in those of other German philosophers and religious thinkers, the presence of literature and philosophy within one another is inextricably close.

Reading

Primary source reading

Beck, Gunnar, *Fichte and Kant on Freedom, Rights, and Law*, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Martin, Wayne, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*, 1997.

Further reading

Zoller, Gunther, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: the Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will*, 1998.

Original language reading

Rohs, Peter, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 1991.

Suggested paper topics

In his *Speeches to the German Nation* Fichte issued an impassioned plea for national self-consciousness and unity. Read those speeches, noting what sentiments they target in Fichte's fellow Germans. Assess the effect of those speeches, and when, if ever, the issue of German nationality found a solution.

In his philosophy Fichte—following the inspiration and challenge of Kant—is centrally concerned with the nature of the self and the other it relates to. This is a central problem for philosophy, and assumes special importance for the Romantics, because they are intent on the rich self affirmations of the self-liberating individual. Can you construe this self-other issue as a central concern for the understanding of literature? Does this issue bring out a point where the concerns of literature and philosophy are identical?

Excerpt: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Johann_Gottlieb_Fichte

- The correct relationship between the higher and lower classes, the appropriate mutual interaction between the two is, as such, the true underlying support on which the improvement of the human species rests. The higher classes constitute the mind of the single large whole of humanity; the lower classes constitute its limbs; the former are the thinking and designing [Entwerfende] part, the latter the executive part.
- The new education must consist essentially in this, that it completely destroys freedom of will in the soil which it undertakes to cultivate, and produces on the contrary strict necessity in the decisions of the will, the opposite being impossible. Such a will can henceforth be relied on with confidence and certainty.
- o
- If you want to influence him at all, you must do more than merely talk to him ; you must fashion him, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than you wish him to will.
- o
- Upon the progress of knowledge the whole progress of the human race is immediately dependent: he who retards that, hinders this also. And he who hinders this, —what character does he assume towards his age and posterity? Louder than with a thousand voices, by his actions he proclaims into the deafened ear of the world present and to come —"As long as I live at least, the men around me shall not become wiser or better; — for in their progress I too, notwithstanding all my efforts to the contrary, should be dragged forward in some direction; and this I detest I will not become more enlightened, — I will not become nobler. Darkness and perversion are my elements, and I will summon all my powers together that I may not be dislodged from them."