

FICHTE 1810-1814. THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

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FOREWORD

Fichte died in Berlin on 29 January 1814 shortly after contracting typhoid. His death interrupted his final version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* at the fifth lecture, as well as the extraordinary “*retractatio*” of certain key points in his thought that he had recorded at the time in the pages of a diary. This diary has only recently been made public in the *Gesamtausgabe* (Complete Edition) of the *Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften*. When she learned of his death, Rahel Levinson Varnhagen is said to have expressed her deep sorrow with the words: «Germany has lost one of its eyes». For her, the other eye was Goethe.

Fichte had come to Berlin fourteen years earlier after being forced to depart from the University of Jena. In this city, still without a university, and where at first he was regarded with suspicion, Fichte succeeded in the space of a few years in becoming a prominent figure listened to at court and frequenting the most important salons. Berlin was also where Fichte's thought underwent a philosophical evolution between the years 1800 and 1805, which enabled him to renew his system and complete it with a philosophy of the Absolute that was missing from his years in Jena. It was furthermore in Berlin in 1808 that Fichte gave his *Addresses to the German Nation*, an appeal to the German people under the occupation of Napoleonic troops in which he strongly criticised the political elite and proposed that the country should progress through a massive program of state education for all its citizens. Lastly, it was in this city that Fichte at long last went back to university lecturing, at a University he had greatly supported and helped to found and where in 1811-1812 he was also vice-chancellor.

During the years of his activity at the University of Berlin, Fichte made a tremendous effort to expound that system which in the preceding ten years he had repeatedly subjected to a profound and continual revision and which is characterized by an unsurpassed attempt at philosophical speculation. Fichte's late systematic work is the topic we have chosen for this special issue of the *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, as a commemoration of the bicentenary of his death. Another principal reason is that it is only now possible to present a full exposition of Fichte's late philosophy thanks to the documents published by

Rivista di storia della filosofia, n. 4, 2014

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the editors of the *Fichte-Kommission* of the *Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften* in the last twenty years. Headed by Reinhard Lauth (1919-2007), their work ended in 2012 after forty years of almost total dedication – an undertaking that is actually more unique than rare in the world of academic publishing. The texts in question have gradually and only recently gained the attention of the international *Fichte-Forschung*, in which Italian researchers have always been at the forefront due to the presence of Claudio Cesa on the *Fichte-Kommission*, a fact that facilitated direct access to the unpublished sources in the *Nachlass*.

In his four and a half years of teaching at Berlin University, Fichte sought to recast the entire plan of his academic lectures. It included his *Introduction to Philosophy* and new presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that is to say, of his fundamental philosophy (of which he would give five accounts, with two unfortunately interrupted; one interrupted in 1813 by the outbreak of war, and another in 1814 at the fifth lecture by his sudden death); it likewise included setting out the disciplines leading to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, presented in the *Facts of Consciousness* and *Transcendental Logic*; and finally, it contained the application of the main principles to the various single disciplines, such as the *Philosophy of Right* and the *System of Ethics*. As he had previously done when he started teaching in Jena (1794-1799) and then again in Erlangen (1805), in addition to these systematic elaborations Fichte also gave a series of lectures *Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*. In the lectures of 1813, during the period of the “war of liberation” that was to lead to a “battle of the nations” at Leipzig, he added an exposition of applied philosophy that bears witness to a practical vocation for guiding one’s actions, and which, according to Fichte, the science of philosophy should have as a complement to the arts of reason and wisdom.

August Detlev Twesten, who was among the first students to hear Fichte, before he succeeded Schleiermacher in teaching theology at the University of Berlin, provides the following interesting portrait of Fichte as a lecturer: «Today I heard Fichte for the first time and was totally enthralled by his lecture. I cannot say that his delivery arouses enthusiasm. He remains still most of the time and only his eyes express vivacity, just as his face reveals his steadfastness. Moreover, his voice is nothing extraordinary and he does not use it very well. Nevertheless, for a university lecturer, and a lecturer in philosophy in particular, his manner of exposition is exemplary. He speaks clearly, simply and concisely, exactly like in the introduction to *The Vocation of Man*, and you can tell that he does not speak just to make a good impression, but because he is completely interested in the subject matter.»

This dedication to thought gave birth to a radical, complex and highly differentiated philosophical conception. Reinhard Lauth has pointed out that in it the fundamental concerns and concepts of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* are taken up again, reformulated and developed further in the light of the theories and results of speculation that first emerged in the Berlin phase starting in 1800. This interpretation has repercussions for the overall view of Fichte’s

philosophy. The picture of a break in his philosophical itinerary, namely the idea that there exists a “first” and a “second” Fichte – one who is “idealistic”, “critical” and “Jacobin” contrasted with a second who is “realist”, “metaphysical” and “mystical” – is thus definitively shattered. Instead, three basic phases in Fichte’s thought may be distinguished: the first between Zurich and Jena (1793-1799); the second between Berlin, Erlangen and Königsberg (1800-1807); and the third again in Berlin (1809-1814). They are interconnected by intermediary steps, differentiated in turn, and with an internal fluidity. Therefore, in Fichte’s case we should also talk of a “philosophy of becoming” – to echo the title of Xavier Tilliette’s important monograph on Schelling – constructed in different circumstances and in dialogue with distinct interlocutors, but all unified by the programme to develop philosophy as a theory of knowledge, i.e. as a *Wissenschaftslehre*. A knowledge which Fichte was able to grasp in its essence and actuality, designating it by various names, but always with the aim of setting out its essential structure without rendering it rigid, to present its process of becoming without relativizing it, and its meta-subjective nature without making it objectivistic and dogmatic.

Even though this may still appear to most readers to be a singular and unexpected outcome, the contributions presented here show that Fichte’s philosophy cannot any longer be interpreted merely as a theory of subjectivity in opposition to a previous traditional metaphysics of objectivity. In the light of the course of his entire philosophy, Fichte’s system emerges more as a theory, or better still, as a practice of reflection, hinging on the constituent acts of the subject-object relation, which he calls knowledge (*Wissen*). In this sense it always remained a transcendental philosophy and not a doctrine of being; nor is it mere epistemology, but an exercise to attain a unified and differentiated understanding of consciousness – both pure and concrete – as a relation to being. In his Berlin period Fichte gave this relation the name: “image” (*Bild*).

An example in this regard can be found in the opening words of the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1813 (*Halle-Nachschrift*), where it is defined as genetic knowledge that «exists in order to see the one and universal knowledge in its origin, to see that it arises from that which is not knowledge, which is beginning and not begun.» The *Wissenschaftslehre* is therefore genetic knowledge and goes back to the genesis of the fact of representation. Accordingly, it does not coincide with the description of the facts of consciousness, which for Fichte has an introductory function; nor is it what in this context he himself calls a “doctrine of being”.

Being, as that which is known, is only one side of the transcendental unity, whose other side is thought. Their unity, a priori in nature and actively configuring (*bildend*), is knowledge in its identity as becoming, as a multiple flowing unity. It is precisely *this* kind of knowledge that becomes the topic and problem of the practice of reflection which Fichte calls the *Wissenschaftslehre*. There are thinkers in the history of philosophy who have, and even now still put forward, a doctrine of being instead of a doctrine of knowledge (a *Wissenschaftslehre*). Here Fichte seems to have in mind both the ontology of

Spinoza, for whom he nonetheless had a high regard, and those “post-Kantian” fundamental ontologies, constructed without any deliberate critical-cognitive or epistemological mediation. These thinkers fail to reflect on the image of being that *they themselves have*, or on their own thinking about being and reality. If they did, they might realize that being, or reality, is only ever given through (*durch*) their knowledge, that is, within the horizon of transcendental unity. This is an act, not a fact, and as such it is the opening up of a transcendental field of predictability and signification of the “thing” in the infinite plurality of its versions. In short, there is no hypostatization of a “subject” creator of the “object” or an “I” creator of the “real”, but neither is there the assumption of a presumed “reality” of which “consciousness”, or the “I”, is simply a reflection or, even worse, a product. Rather, what is posited here is the *sense* of the subject-object relation, and the form of its manifestation within the “phenomenon” that is at once affective and intellectual, practical and theoretical, appetitive and epistemic.

Hence Fichte in the second phase of his Berlin period emphasizes that philosophy is not concerned with “things” but with the images of things, in other words, with *knowledge*. “Things” are the intentional correlate of images within a transcendental unity. The philosopher, therefore, has to distinguish between knowledge that is immediately present and non-immediate knowledge, from which, however, the basis for determining the former is known. In other words, a distinction has to be made between knowledge as “only being” and knowledge “in its origin”. The first kind of knowledge is the immediate appearance of the image, something that reveals itself, the phenomenon in its basic occurrence.

The second kind of knowledge arises from the conditions of its own possibility. This is reflected in an innovation in his terminology; now Fichte calls the first kind of knowledge *intuition*, the second kind *intellect*. Intuition is the factual knowledge of something; it initially yields the appearance of the image as an image. The intellect is genetic knowledge; it is an understanding of the fact, or of the appearance of what appears, starting from the law of its coming-into-being. Thus, the intellect has to deal with the law or the foundation of appearance. In this sense, philosophy is knowledge of all knowledge; it mediates the image in the intellect. That is to say, it is knowledge of the transcendental genesis of the image, namely the origin of the phenomenon, which Fichte calls the essence, the existential act of living life.

In this sense philosophy is essentially a liberating science: it liberates one from the “fetters of the thing in itself”, from the view that the “I”, consciousness, is a mere product of immanent processes and natural laws, as naturalism claims. But it also frees one from the fascination of the image; that is, it prevents the appearance from turning itself into an Absolute, from hypostasizing itself as though it were identical with the essence. Philosophy demonstrates that the image appears as the image of something in accordance with a law of thought, at once practical and theoretical, which is not created by the image but through which it is internally regulated. Finally, genetic knowledge is not

simply abandoning oneself to the law through which the image is given, as happens in natural knowledge, but the intelligence becomes aware of both the law and the image. This kind of knowledge is free, and at the same time it is a liberating act in the living practice of free thought. Fichte's late Berlin lectures and personal meditations in his diaries provide a vivid and eloquent testimony to this.

We propose Fichtean *theoretical philosophy* as the unifying theme of the following essays, which are all devoted to the second phase of Fichte's Berlin period. Each of the authors has freely interpreted this theme in their own manner, clearly making the effort to return to the genetic nucleus or foundation of this philosophy, which Twesten termed the actual "thing" that Fichte was really interested in. In this sense the expression 'theoretical philosophy' should not be understood in opposition to practical philosophy, as if it were a question of a genetic understanding of representation that is distinct from an understanding of the effort, an approach that Fichte had adopted, for example, in the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794-95. The term theoretical philosophy is to be understood here in a much broader and more general sense, one that is familiar in the Italian philosophical tradition; namely, in the sense of *fundamental philosophy*, where thought is concerned with the underlying structure of reality and life, with its "elements" and constituent principles.

The essays below begin with a biographical, political and philosophical description of Fichte in Berlin (Fuchs); then analyze a set of personal reflections on Fichte's part that mediate between the first and the second Berlin phase (Zöller); and consider the phenomenology of the facts of consciousness which, as stated above, function as an introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* (Ferraguto). Those that follow examine the fundamental principles and theories of the late *Wissenschaftslehre*, such as the relationship between being and the life of consciousness (Klotz); understanding becoming in a transcendental sense (Furlani); the nature and structure of the image, considered within the entirety of the Berlin philosophy (Ivaldo); the *Transcendental Logic* of 1812 (Bertinetto); and finally, the *Diary* of October 1813 (Carvalho). This special issue concludes with an investigation into Fichtean transcendental logic as a logic of sense (Rametta), a reading of his late philosophy as an opening-up of a semantic space (d'Alfonso) and, lastly, a study of the relationship between Fichte's system and pragmatism, including his late thought (Kloc-Konkołowicz). All of the essays attempt to provide a thoughtful reconstruction of the fundamental concepts and theories in the theoretical philosophy of the late Fichte. In addition, they take this thought as a productive point of reference and a significant stimulus to reflect together with diverse thinkers on what constitutes the nature of reality; in other words, to *philosophize*. Two hundred years later, we believe that this is a possible and appropriate response to the invitation to engage in philosophy that Fichte himself made in his numerous meditations on the role of the scholar and on the purpose of philosophy itself.