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## **Fichte's concept of the educated man and the idea of education**

### **Introduction**

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 – 1814) conceived his philosophy as a system enabling to reveal the capacity of an independent creative individual and the autonomy of one's mind. According to him, the core philosophical discipline was ethics grounded on categorical imperative, since our action must be in harmony with our conscience. Our conduct must be moral on the strength of our conviction because coerced or mandated actions, i.e. those not performed by free choice, are morally worthless. On the contrary, the acts of strong moral personalities in history, carried out in unison with the absolute I, set a good example to humankind. The educated man, in Fichte's concept, ranks among such autonomous individuals. Therefore the following text focuses on the issues of education and instruction underlying his philosophy.

### **The philosophy of active principle**

Essentially, none of Kant's early followers grasped the system ideas included in his critical philosophy, nor developed them to the full with creative imagination. The only exception indicating at least inclination to do so, was Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1727–1823),<sup>1/</sup> who as a man of thought does not attract such scholarly attention, but whose ideas are instrumental in the explication of both Kant's and Fichte's philosophies. He specifies the original antithesis of subject and object which directly prompts Fichte's notion of I and non-I.<sup>2/</sup> So Johann Gottlieb Fichte is closely connected with Reinhold in formulating his basic philosophical concepts. Like Reinhold, Fichte, too, builds

his speculations on the ethically religious principles of Kant's philosophy, but his attention is more intently focused on Kant's philosophy as a whole.<sup>3/</sup>

Similarly to Kant, Fichte advances the proposition that in the relationship between theoretical reason and practical reason, the latter assumes superiority. Derived from the premise that the principles of morals must be based on a solid theory supporting a rigid scientific system, Fichte's practical philosophy is presented as a theory of science, or *Wissenschaftslehre*, whose main task as a theoretical "doctrine of science" is to explain the principle of universal knowledge. This quest constitutes the supreme, absolute foundation of all sciences and must represent activeness. Fichte's mind and philosophy confirm his active humanness as a true philosopher of active principle.<sup>4/</sup>

Furthermore, Fichte's thought is a philosophy of an enthusiastic supporter of freedom whose idea of freedom evolved under the immediate impression of the French Revolution and French victories over Prussia. Theoretically, its concept had been prepared by Kant's ethics and Rousseau's social ideas.<sup>5/</sup> The main problem of ethics, in Fichte's view, is the contradiction between necessity and freedom. Influenced by Spinoza, he acknowledges the fact that man's will as well as any of his mental activities are determined in the same way as his physical nature. Man obeys the law of causal determinism not only as part of Nature but also as a subject of human history. Fichte believes that the universal character of necessity, however, does not rule out the eventuality of freedom which does not consist in eliminating the natural and historical necessity, but is implied in the individual's voluntary compliance with the laws and aims of human advancement. Such submission results from realising the very necessity. Seeing freedom as a historical issue, Fichte assumes that there are different degrees of freedom determined by different historical periods.

In Fichte's ethics, good is represented by the activity itself, the origin of evil being indolence, which leads Jiřina Popelová to opine that Fichte's ethics is as individualistic as Kant's. Its rebellion is still only a revolt of individuals or small groups, in no way a mass resurrection. Consequently, the ethic principle formulated by Fichte is similar to Kant's.<sup>6/</sup>

It was Fichte's deep conviction that his *Wissenschaftslehre* was nothing more than a guide to Kant's philosophy and that his own philosophy was a logical sequel to Kant's critical thinking. In Fichte's frame of reference, Kant may have created the critique of reason – both theoretical and practical – yet he did not build a system of reason. Kant's philosophy inspired Fichte to recognise understanding as a starting point of philosophical thought, but he rejected to consider Kant's "thing-in-itself" as an object of philosophical

cognition. Discerning the understanding alone as the only and intermediate object of philosophy, Fichte's concept is based on the intuition of an active subject, or I, which embraces all that can be ideated. Hence apart from I, there must be a non-I, that is to say, apart from understanding, there must be "Nature", beside "subject", there must be "object". Fichte admits that this non-I, this "Nature", this "subject" must be apprehended as a force not only existing but also affecting the I and in a certain sense determining its activity. It is necessary for the I to be somehow stimulated by the opposite non-I.

In the introduction to his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte outlines three celebrated principles that comprise universal knowledge and from which, on that account, all other principles of understanding and science must be derived. The three cardinal principles are interrelated, such as thesis, antithesis and synthesis, or the self-positing of I, the positing of non-I against I, and dismissing the antithesis through limiting and determining the I and the non-I.<sup>7/</sup> Fichte thus develops a dialectical understanding of the active process, though he does not describe his method as dialectical but antithetical. What makes it different from Hegel's dialectics is the fact that Fichte does not deduce antithesis from thesis, but juxtaposes it as its opposite. He believes that the active I is always set to motion and stimulated to action by some opposite. The absolute activeness of I is a process of incessantly reproduced conflicts between action and its target. Once an obstacle is overcome and removed, another one comes across – the process of removing and expelling can actually have no end. Fichte defines man as a rational as well sensual being, since the human individual gains his intellectual faculty through sensuality.

In Fichte, the term *Wissenschaftslehre* denoted the doctrine of knowledge, precisely what had, by then, been designated as philosophy. Its task was to substantiate the principles of all sciences: that is to say, to establish all of them and at the same time substantiate itself as a science of knowledge about the first principle of all sciences, which itself did not require any further substantiation.<sup>8/</sup> *Wissenschaftslehre* can be understood as a philosophy of education if it shows the way to thinking and understanding, and the treatise *Wissenschaftslehre*, written in 1794, is based on the ideal of life's wholeness and unity enabling the individual to achieve complete harmony between reality and oneself.

Mere knowledge of man's gifts and needs without knowing how to cultivate and satisfy them would be not only immensely sad and bleak, but, over and above, it would be unfruitful and entirely useless. The knowledge of needs must be linked with the knowledge of means for satisfying the needs. And such knowledge rightly appertains to the same condition, since

none of them can achieve perfection without the other, the less can it be alive and active. The knowledge of the first kind, based on purely intellectual principles is philosophical, the second type of knowledge, partially grounded in experience, is philosophical then. In order to be beneficial to society, knowledge has to take one step further. Consequently, the last type of knowledge necessary to society is solely historical. If these three kinds of knowledge are connected, they constitute what is referred to as erudition and the individual who spends his life gaining new knowledge is called an erudite person.<sup>9/</sup>

The treatise of 1794 already reveals the obvious and permanent theme of Fichte's concept of education: education is not a state but a process, an uncompleted fundamental course of events that posits the individual in his personal life. As an unfinished flow, it is outlined by the horizon of history and society and a single individual's education proceeds solely within this "outline". The substantial relationship implied therein separates Fichte's concept of education from individualism as the educational process is not an isolated advancement of individual human existence, rather the acquired knowledge is to be employed by the individual for the benefit of society, for its cultivation. Man is disposed to live in society and supposed to do so. Hardly a perfect being, man is his worst enemy if living in isolation.<sup>10/</sup> An erudite person is deemed such only if compared with other people who are not erudite. The notion of erudite individual only results from comparison and relation to society. Society does not denote only a nation, rather it implies any community of intelligent people living together in one area and establishing mutual relationships.<sup>11/</sup>

Fichte's I is not a given fact but an act, an act of self-formation, self-improvement. Fichte's I is not a mere reality, but an effective action.<sup>12/</sup> We are what we make of ourselves. Skipping over the biographical notes<sup>13/</sup> now, our second chapter will explore Fichte's idea of education and his concept of university study.

### **Fichte's idea of education**

In 1807, Johann Gottlieb Fichte authored a fundamental project which appeared under the title *Deduzierter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt, die in gehöriger Verbindung mit einer Akademie der Wissenschaften stehe*, describing Fichte's notion of university whose inner and outer image is derived from what learning aims to be in general. When the University of Berlin was established during the period of Prussian reforms, Fichte became its first rector (1811), but early on, he resigned his academic

tenure and intensely carried on his lecturing activities instead. In his inaugural speech as a rector, delivered on 19th October, 1811, he explained and introduced his concept of university. He held that a continuous refinement of the intellectual capability was a unique device enabling the human race to achieve its destination. Universities, established expressly to guarantee the unceasing continuity of this achievement, were the most important institutions where the highest intellectual learning of the time was handed over to the future with discretion and according to the rules. The property of humankind he regarded as sacred. With the divinity evolving to a new and vigorous life, university healed the division between the universal and suprauniversal.<sup>14/</sup>

What frequently poses a question is why Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of the University of Berlin, adhered to the principles contained in Johan Gotlieb Fichte's *Deduktiver Plan* instead of implementing the counter-project conceived by Friedrich Deniel Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834).<sup>15/</sup> Especially surprising is the fact that the real practice of the university was strikingly different from the ideals Fichte proclaimed in his rector's speech. The university's formal arrangement was comparable with military academies for future officers (cadets). The students and professors were obliged to wear uniform, sharing meals and lodging. Hermetically sealed from the outside world, all of them were given the same pocket money. The students had to follow a rigid course of study, their main duty being continuous learning. Not to mention the inner life which was exactly defined according to precise regulations; strictly speaking, university had to be "a carefully cultivated garden".

All school activities were prescribed by a single guiding plan dependent on Fichte's philosophy as its central point – no other school of thought was tolerated. The same uniform thinking was required also within particular fields of science, where everything was regulated from one spiritual centre. The unchangeable condition for grasping the body of all learning was the knowledge of essential, explicitly specified, books. This altogether sufficiently clarifies the rigidity of Fichte's concept of university project against the principle of diverse, mutually interactive, forces presented in Humboldt's and Schleiermacher's concepts. The rigorousness of Fichte's rules and regulations reveals the antinomy of his personality.

On the one hand, Fichte emphasised that learning must complement our personality and free self-development, but on the other hand, the practical implementation of these principles resulted in the strict authoritarianism of provisions and directives. The principles of personal freedom and free learning, as well as love of free, fulfilling life must be binding

namely upon those, as Fichte underlines, engaged in teaching at such institutions (i.e. universities). Similarly antinomic is Fichte's postulation that university education should be orientated towards life, whereas his emphasis is on the knowledge not being a medium enabling the scientist to cope with the practical tasks of daily life but an end in itself. Are such mutual contradictions compatible and can they be apprehended at all? It is not only Fichte's opinions on university and its role in society that are contradictory, but the same dichotomy permeates all of his thinking. The incongruous ideas and surprising contradictions are grounded in the core of his thought, vacillating from one extreme to the other. Yet no other philosophy articulates the will to act like this man's doctrine. He does not want merely to think but, most importantly, to act. The speeches delivered to his pupils were not beautiful or noble, but each of his words was impressively solemn. This, however was just one part of his life and thinking, because if one succumbs to speculative science, it becomes his sole desire, a desire for deliberate pursuit of such learning.

Fichte's treatise *Bestimmung des Gelehrten* of 1794 includes five lectures delivered by the author, together with *Wissenschaftslehre*, at the University of Jena under the title *Moral für Gelehrte*. Paying much attention to a serious analysis of culture and erudition, he intentionally underlines the importance of humanities, which, like philosophy, crucially influence the intellectual and personal development of any individual, while creating conditions for the nascent cultured person as "the basic architectural unit of social and cultural structure."<sup>16/</sup> Fichte's concept of erudition accentuates the organic connection of character and knowledge (learning), not leaving out the moral aspects of the issue. One's learning cannot be effective if the individual's character is corrupted, just as you cannot shape your character without true knowledge.

The question regarding to the relationship between education and the cultural and moral condition of a nation is thus closely connected with the principles of classical German philosophy.<sup>17/</sup> Fichte's works suggest that education, philosophy and learning are coexistent only with culture. When he defines the notions of "education" and "learning", he points out that they involve the awareness of difference between what is and what is to be. Education and learning are part of the historical process of man's self-determination, typical of which is the discrepancy between the uniqueness of human nature and the universality of culture. The latter is defined as "fostering all forces in order to achieve complete liberty, total independence of everything what we are ourselves".<sup>18/</sup>

Like Humboldt, Fichte sees education and learning as an never-ending process, a motion of subjective potentials towards the objective structures of Nature and society. The identity of an individual is then attached to the social and natural conditions. Far from perceiving erudition as a definite state, Fichte develops theses about man's perpetual cultural enhancement. On the one hand, the erudite individual is typified by the awareness of one's commitment to tradition, while determined to creatively develop this tradition, on the other. Under changed conditions and in a new situation, he is capable of modifying the tradition. Fichte states that the ideals of the real world can only be achieved through evaluating the reality and varying it by the force of the represented ideal. The issue of special determination of an erudite individual cannot be removed from the issue of man's social determination. The concept of the learned man results from comparison and social relationship.

In 1798, on account of alleged atheism, Fichte had to leave the University of Jena, where he had held a post of professor since 1794. He fell victim of the "Atheism Dispute", which had obvious emancipative implications for the contemporary spiritual development of Germany. Highly instrumental in his dismissal was his reputation as a democrat, which he earned for his writings on the French Revolution. Among the works written after Fichte left the university, it was *Reden an die deutsche Nation* that received encouraging response from the public and which contributed to raising German national consciousness during the Napoleonic Wars.

After 1800, his attention was devoted to the issue which had led to his dismissal from university. The issue of God already arose from his treatise *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* and became a theme of crucial importance in all of his later thought. He hoped this book would enable him to achieve inward tranquility and to clarify his mind as he attempted to destroy all knowledge, his *Wissenschaftslehre* not excluding: apparently we do not and cannot know absolutely anything, the entire reality of knowledge has disappeared, having been completely destroyed. All wisdom changes into a mere picture of pictures, a dream of dreams, lacking reality, significance and aim. Absolutely void in itself, wisdom cannot offer truth. Fichte conceives an image of living God which goes far beyond all of his previous assertions, veritably inspired by religious belief and feeling. We cannot reach God through learning, we can only approach him through belief. This stage of Fichte's thinking is marked by many unanswered questions linked with the notions of transcendency, personality and divine creation.<sup>19/</sup> Actually, Fichte does not attempt to elucidate

these theoretical issues: it is not knowledge that is on his mind but love of God. We can never understand God in knowledge because he is above all reason.<sup>20/</sup>

Hence it is logical that, along with the religious-political grounding of his thought, Fichte changes his concept of educational process. The enhancement of independent reason in history will be clarified only by continual representation of divine life in reality. Such elucidation involves the individual's struggle for the wholeness of his nature, which means that the individual process has its own new values and metaphysical dignities. As regards Fichte's concept of education, it is necessary to add that the three lectures on *Bestimmung des Gelehrten* of 1794, 1805 and 1811 belong to his "popular" texts. They share one feature, though – namely, they contain the inner development of Fichte's thought from the early Jena period to the state philosophy after 1810. Education as personal advancement of each individual now comprises implementation of the image of divine world. Through academic education, one reveals the purpose of divine individualising process, and life in ideas, typical of the learned person, is a sign of divine love and creative forces, of creative will in the intellectual capacities within a particular period. Because of its inner laws, such revelation of divine life as a whole denies rational comprehension.

By special illumination of divine life, anyone can acquire the transmuting force of divine love and truth offering to him, for the first time, the possibility of fully active life. The substantial change of an individual by force of ideas appertains to the educational process and educational events, fostering the image of divine life in everyone. To Fichte the educational process remains open, avoiding any rational or planned interference, yet present as an organising force which takes shape throughout life in the spiritual mind of every individual. The process of education leads us from the safety of natural self-preservation and requires privation. Resignation to divine will, assiduity and decency in daily endeavours are essential for surmounting egoism. After Fichte, classical German philosophy realised that the greatest inadequacy of his system was reducing Nature to a mere spur for the natural activity of I, to nothing but an obstacle used by the I to realise itself through overcoming it.<sup>21/</sup>

The lectures on *Bestimmung des Gelehrten* of 1811 represent the last stage of Fichte's thought. In form, they share problems and concepts with the lectures delivered in 1805. Reason and inner sense are defined therein as the very organs for conveying the history of transcendental world. The enhancement of the educated person's spiritual existence produces inner spiritual movement in the mind, which is a requisite for every educational process, for all educational proceedings. It is only reason that makes the learned individual really valuable for molding the world and life's distinctiveness



through education and clear spiritual understanding. It is through reason that learned individuals gain a really determining and self-constituent force. On the other hand, it is only through educational force that reason gains the inner sense of explicitness and comprehensiveness.<sup>22/</sup>

### **Conclusion**

All his life Fichte held a deep conviction about the dignity of all people and about the necessity of moral, social and political behaviour. Fichte influenced philosophy by putting emphasis on the reflection of practical relationships between the I and external reality. Transcending the confines of purely theoretical knowledge, which in Kant is limited to the reflection about moral behaviour, is in Fichte extended to the reflection on instinct and work, constituting a significant breakthrough for the recognition of the noetic significance of human practice.<sup>23/</sup> The importance of education, according to Fichte, consists in the fact that it creates the values of human individuality. His questioning the limits of freedom is as urgent as it is open. There are often debates about Fichte's influence on the philosophy of pedagogy embraced by young J. F. Herbart. Although it is obviously just an episode in the life of the future creator of the philosophical system of pedagogy, it deserves a brief mention at least. Why? We believe that the substance of Fichte's idea of education actually did take deeper root in Herbartian concept of pedagogy, in particular, in Herbart's disciples, who changed the ideal of universal personality and human harmony, the active, independent and absolute I of Fichte's, into sheer regularising as a consequence of contradictoriness and opinion incompatibility.

The freedom of life and education remains a question even today. Just a question? More than a question it is a problem and hope, and therefore a possibility as well. A possibility of quest for man and the world!

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## **Fichte's concept of the educated man and the idea of education**

The ultimate target of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophical system was revealing the capacity of an independent creative individual and the autonomy of his mind, which is connected with Fichte's concept of the educated man and the idea of education. Fichte believes that the educated person is called to be the teacher of mankind whose outlook, not limited just to the present moment, takes in the future as well and whose responsibility does not rest only with the present, but with the future motivation of human race. The worthy aim of the educated individual's social commitment being to refine the whole person, this cannot be pursued by someone who alone is not essentially good. One does not teach others through words, more effective is setting a good example for its strength rests solely on our social activities. Hence the educated person's aspirations cannot be achieved without our ability to receive and to give.

