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# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by E. C. HEGELER.



CHRIST THE PHYSICIAN.

After a rare wood cut of 1510. (See page 589.)

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FICHTE IN LATER YEARS.

From a drawing by Bury.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## FICHTE'S LIFE AND CHARACTER.\*

BY DR. JOHANNES VOGEL.

FICHTE was born in Rammenau, May 19, 1762. His remarkable intellectual endowment made the lad notable in his native village. His acute power of apprehension, enabling him to reproduce the sermons of the local divine, was the cause of a definite change in his life, for he was soon taken from the family circle to the school at Pforta. In 1780 Fichte began the study of theology at Jena, which he later continued at Leipsic. His leaning towards determinism, however, soon led him to philosophy. His interest in Spinoza's theories, in particular, estranged him from the ruling theological dogmas.

The interest with which Fichte applied himself to the occupation of private tutor is attested by his journal in which he entered the more noticeable mistakes in education that he observed during two years. He concerned himself not merely with the intellectual development of his charges but also took especial interest in their moral progress. In the years 1788-1790, while in a similar position in Zurich, he entered into friendly relations with Pestalozzi. Returning to Leipsic in 1790, he found opportunity to devote himself to the study of Kant's philosophy, fascinated especially by the theory of transcendental freedom. He was inspired to become personally acquainted with the great thinker of Königsberg, and in accordance with this purpose betook himself to that city in 1792. There he wrote his *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* ("Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation"). In this work Fichte made revelation a postulate of practical reason, regarding it as God's reestablishment in a material way of the moral law from which mankind had been

\* Translated from the German by Carl H. Haessler.

alienated, but limiting its content to God, freedom, and immortality. The author, of whom Kant made mention in a public comment, at once became famous. It was to this that Fichte owed his call to



JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE.

(1762-1814.)

Jena as professor in ordinary (1793). Here he laid the foundation for his new system of idealism, an extension and further develop-



ment of the Kantian criticism, in a series of important works: *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie*, 1794 ("On the Concept of the Theory of Science, or of Philosophy so-called"), and *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* ("Foundation of the Complete Theory of Science"). In order to influence the moral culture of the students he published his *Ueber die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* ("On the Vocation of the Scholar"), also in 1794.

Impelled by the same ethical purpose, Fichte delivered Sunday lectures on morality in Jena. Without any cooperation from other academic sources he remained loyal to his pedagogic ideal and bravely fought against the excesses of student life. For him the youth, especially the academic youth, were holy seed from which should spring a better development of the race. Throughout his lectures Fichte remained conscious of the fact that he was standing before young men "destined in their turn mightily to influence mankind; to spread some day in larger or smaller circles, through precept or practice or both, the culture they themselves have received; and on every side to raise our common brotherhood to a higher plane of culture—men through whom in all probability I am cultivating unborn millions of mankind."

Such activity in ethical reform was unfortunately misunderstood. It was imagined that Fichte worked not for the sake of the good cause itself but to curry favor at court. Twice at night in his own house he was grossly insulted from outside by members of fraternal societies, consequently the philosopher, with the duke's permission, forsook Jena and spent the summer of 1795 in Ossmannstedt to allow the excited young bloods to quiet down. Fichte utilized this period of involuntary leisure to complete his theory of science. On his return to Jena appeared *Die Grundlage des Naturrechts* ("The Foundation of Natural Law") and *Der geschlossene Handelsstaat*<sup>1</sup> ("Commercial Protection for the State"), as well as the *System der Sittenlehre* ("System of Ethics"), 1798, which may be regarded as a companion work to "Natural Law."

An episode now occurred which was to have far-reaching results, namely, the controversy over atheism, which for the time being tore Fichte completely away from his fruitful field of labor. Since 1795 he had been literary associate on the *Philosophisches Journal*, that had been founded by Niethainer. Among other articles was to

<sup>1</sup>The original is almost untranslatable. *Geschlossen* here means "consolidated by a tariff line." It denotes a "closed door" policy in opposition to free trade.—Tr.

appear a treatise by Rector Forberg of Paalfeld entitled *Entwicklung des Begriffs der Religion* ("Development of the Concept of Religion"). Inasmuch as the author had expressly forbidden editorial notes in refutation, Fichte wrote an article *Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung* ("On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Government of the World"), intended as a precursor to correct the other article and give his own views. Forberg was an atheist; Fichte a pantheist to whom the godhead was not a personal world-ruler but a moral world-order and belief therein ideal and practical, not dogmatic. Nevertheless, the religious viewpoints of the two were considered as identical in an anonymous essay that appeared soon after, entitled *Schreiben eines Vaters an seinen studierenden Sohn über den Fichteschen und Forbergschen Atheismus* ("A Father's Letter to His Son at College on the Atheism of Fichte and Forberg"). As a result both the electorate and the government at Weimar held Fichte responsible. Schiller wrote to Fichte on January 26, 1799: "The duke declared that no prejudice to your *liberty* would or could result even though it were desirable that certain things remain unsaid in the lecture room." In spite of this Fichte, believing that his academic liberty had been restricted and his honor as a university lecturer injured, threatened the government with his resignation. In Goethe's opinion a government might not brook a threat, and so the worthy philosopher suffered a rebuke and received his discharge.

People were broader-minded in Berlin. Frederick William III declared, "If it is true that Fichte is on terms of hostility with God, that is God's business, none of mine." Here in the Prussian capital, under the impression of his experience at Jena and in his intercourse with Schleiermacher, Schlegel and Tieck, Fichte's philosophical views became transformed. To this period belongs his work *Ueber die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 1800 ("On the Vocation of Man"). In 1805 Fichte temporarily accepted a call to Erlangen.

In the fall of the same year he returned to Berlin, coming once more into close contact with notable men. He now published the lectures he had delivered in Erlangen, *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, ("The Characteristic Features of the Present Age"), and also *Ueber das Wesen des Gelehrten* ("On the Nature of the Scholar"), both in 1806. After the stormy period following the catastrophe of 1806, Fichte was appointed professor in the newly established university at Berlin (1809). His *Plan einer in Berlin zu errichtenden Hochschule*, ("Plan for Establishing a University in Berlin") had proved unfeasible. Nevertheless his glowing en-

thusiasm in the interests of education can be observed from the fact that he conceived and sketched out this plan in the course of one week. In it he exposed the defects of current methods of teaching and erected in a practical way a great ideal structure for handsome reforms.

Fichte's last and most comprehensive educational activity was that of teacher to the entire German nation, and here he proved himself great indeed. Regardless of the French drums whose roll mingled with his words, regardless of the presence in his auditorium of hostile listeners, he delivered his Addresses (*Reden*, 1807-08) and discharged his duty as an outspoken patriot in accordance with his convictions and the dictates of his conscience. These addresses made an overwhelming impression on their hearers. Their central thought was the idea of a universal moral reform which would become practicable only under a new system of education. His earlier work, "The Characteristic Features," which defined the position of the present age in the general development of mankind, formed the basis of the addresses.

Fichte himself gave the best example of responding to the mighty appeal which he made to the nation in both of these works. It was his constant theme that the individual must be sacrificed to principle. "I know well what I am hazarding," he wrote to Herr Beyme, a friend of his, (January 2, 1808), "I know that like Palm,\* I may be hit with a bullet. But I am not afraid and would gladly die for my cause."

February 19, 1813, he turned his lecture into a strong appeal to the students who were hurrying to enlist. Once more as in 1806, in spite of his fifty-one years, he put himself at the service of the king in the capacity of chaplain in order that he might "baptize the belligerents in God" by his outspoken addresses. Since his request could not be granted he took part in the drills of the reserves at home under the motto, "A strong heart and no peace!" It was Fichte's sad fate to succumb to typhus on January 27, 1814, after hearing that Blucher had crossed the Rhine.

#### FICHTE'S CHARACTER.

From the life of this man to whom character building was in fact the chief purpose in life, we shall attempt to gain an idea of his character.

\*The bookseller Palm was a victim of Napoleonic tyranny. An anti-Napoleon pamphlet was traced to his store, and although Palm knew nothing about it he was shot by order of court martial without a fair trial and in flagrant violation of all rules of justice.

The fundamental feature of Fichte's nature was an imperious will of a moral tendency and inseparably bound up with bold thinking that delighted in speculation. His keenwitted thinking led him to study the essence of things and of men—above all the depths of his own heart, persisting until he had found the source of the entire stream of life. This source in his opinion was conscience in which, arising from hidden depths, appeared pure reason, the absolute, God himself. This Fichte regarded as truth, and his unshaken conviction that he possessed this truth constituted the strong backbone of his personality. It made him free; it gave him the imposing power of independence and invested him with a singular impulse toward spontaneity and expansion that did not even pale at martyrdom.

So Fichte was not a man of alternatives; he despised those who neither love nor hate anything, who do not take sides and refuse to make a decision *pro* or *con*. To him an armistice was cowardice; war to the death was his battle cry. It follows that from his love of the truth which was sacred to him, such a character might easily appear one-sided, hard and inconsiderate, involving the philosopher in frictions of which the controversy over atheism is a sad example.

Fichte was neither able nor willing to keep the truth selfishly to himself for contemplative enjoyment. In common with Pestalozzi, he felt within him the "missionary temperament" to which he thus gives expression: "I have but one passion, one want to satisfy, one complete happiness for myself, namely to exert an effective influence on those around me..."

This educational activity receives its explanation in the struggle to combine theoretical and practical reason, the most singular and therefore most interesting aspect of Fichte's character. Again and again he speaks of his "distinct preference for a speculative life." He says: "To live truly means to think truly"; "Where would life and its happiness find their element if not in thinking?" He loved unshackled thinkers like Leibnitz, Lessing and Kant who enter their characteristic paths without inquiring how they are to profit from their speculation, perhaps in the end gaining nothing further than the exercise of their powers. He found it very difficult to lecture about anything on which he had not continually reapplied the active power of his thought and inventive genius. It was his experience that "when the love of science and especially of speculative science has once seized a man, it fascinates him so that he will have no other desire than for leisure to occupy himself with it": "If I wished

to govern, my inclination would prompt me to do it in the kingdom of concepts."

On the other hand Fichte could well see that one must finally tire of barren speculation, that it is after all not the natural atmosphere for a man, that it is not an end in itself but only a means to be cast aside when the real end, the full development of the soul, the perfect inner harmony, has been attained.

Higher than thinking he valued activity and the power to influence with energetic and persevering strength of purpose all who were morally in need of it. Such moral activity in the interests of education was loyally practised by Fichte in the largest as well as the smallest circles, as teacher of the nation and in the university no less than as father and head of his household. As author too he manifests a pedagogic tendency, for all his works aim at human culture, human ennoblement and human welfare.

Accordingly Fichte's character appears as an ellipse with two foci: thinking and willing, the joy of speculation and the impulse to action. The two centers, however, are not in hostile opposition but in harmonious accord. Through the insight, clarity and order that thought affords, it supports the will; and the will protects thought, that is to say, the will alone consecrates it and makes it valid. "The whole ordering and shaping of actual life must spring from the higher regulative concept"; "Independent unselfish love for the theoretical truth is the most fruitful preparation for ethical purity of character." However, "All science is a preparation for action; an empty science, having no application to practise, does not exist"; and Fichte bitterly reproaches scholars and authors for having advanced heedlessly in the domain of pure thought without troubling about the actual world. His will wears an intellectual garment, his thinking a volitional one; between the two centers may be formed the equation:

Thinking: Willing = Subjectivity: Objectivity.

"My free activity, as such, is will when objective, thought when subjective." Fichte did not speculate for the sake of becoming a philosopher and scholar, but that he might become a teacher and educator.

Herein lies the key to the understanding of Fichte's personality, life and teachings. It was his unceasing endeavor in the field of self-discipline to determine more certainly the periphery around the centers mentioned above; to bring head and heart, knowledge and faith into accord; to establish "harmony with himself" as long as possible in order to become to a larger extent a self-sufficient clari-

fied personality. This individual ethical endeavor of his furnishes the *a priori* of his pedagogic effort to build the whole man out of one piece, inasmuch as "the final determination of every finite rational being is absolute unity, fixed identity, complete harmony with itself."

Fichte was of a deeply religious as well as a truly philosophical nature. His religiousness had of course a positive no less than a negative side; but his opponents, seeing only the negative, grieved Fichte sorely with the charge of atheism. The fact is he had turned to philosophy only in order to supply himself with a tenable dogmatic theology, in order to clear up the higher questions of theology for himself by this round about way. It is characteristic of Fichte that in his later years he prized highly the Gospel According to John and strongly recommended it to the attention of his contemporaries.

Notwithstanding their different conceptions of God, Fichte and the writer of the Fourth Gospel stand in close spiritual relationship. In each an open religious nature has a pronounced leaning toward metaphysical speculation; both are theologians in philosophers' dress. Both are of choleric temperament. John, the "son of thunder," is more crushing when he frigidly ignores the Jews, the enemies of Jesus, than Paul with his most burning scorn in the Epistle to the Galatians. Fichte not only threatened the government but would even be brusque and domineering toward his friends in moments of forgetfulness. Both are cyclopædists; both have always solemnly before their eyes an absolute precious, final and supreme end.

In conclusion a little may be said of Fichte's sunny joyous optimism which would find a bright side even in the small annoyances of life. He wrote to Reinhold: "When my friends abroad feel sorry for me because of all the annoyance, all the bitter hours I must live through, I am much obliged to them for their good will, but it is misdirected. . . . During my lectures I lay aside the ponderous attacks against me, and when I get time during vacation to take them to heart I laugh enough while at this task to keep me in good health for the whole succeeding semester. It is possible to give me uncomfortable minutes, but I have yet to see the man who could keep it up for a quarter of an hour"; "I really don't know what hate is, for I have never hated anybody."

In Fichte appears a strong and purposeful manliness, true, clear, pure, high-souled in thinking, strong-willed in acting, humble in sight of the goal. His deeds were like his words, his words like his heart. He could offer himself to the nation as its reformer, because he had permanently reformed himself. His heart could go out

toward the youth, the future of the race, in educational endeavor because it was based on a straight and stern conscience. Fichte's nature is ethical and deductive throughout; barren erudition and inductive empirical research he valued little. Nature and natural science roused but small interest in him. His conviction of truth, his faith, assumed pedagogic form in the impulse to self-education, just as his thorough belief in the loftiness of the ethical will was the impulse to his self-activity and fulfilment of duty. His clearness qualified him for pedagogic diagnosis, for keen observation, for disclosing the sources of all diseases and administering safe remedies. No other German philosopher had Fichte's devoted enthusiasm for the national greatness and rebirth of the German people. His optimism would not permit him to doubt the possibility of a national advance through the medium of education. From poor family tutor to celebrated university teacher, nay to *praeceptor totius Germaniae* in the hardest period, he proved himself abundantly capable.