The Philosophical Roots of Waldorf Education[1]

Part Two: Fichte's Primordial Intuition

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Toppling the Ancien Régime of Rationalism

Another of the deep roots of anthroposophy, and hence of Waldorf education, is Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophy of the self. Fichte's dates are 1762–1814, which makes him younger than Goethe, roughly the same age as Schiller, and just a bit older than Hegel. The great temptation to avoid in discussing Fichte is retelling his biography, which is much stranger and more wonderful than any fiction. It is hard to imagine a biography more transparently karmic than Fichte's. But we will just have to resist that temptation.

Fichte is perhaps the least understood and the most undervalued philosopher of all time. There are many reasons for that: Fichte is extremely difficult in multiple ways. His philosophy is dense, original, highly unconventional, and—unfortunately—opaque in its terminology and language generally. Capturing the spirit of his work succinctly is an even greater challenge than it was in the case of Goethe and Hegel, but let's just see what we can do in a short space.

In the first installment of this article, I argued that Kant had inaugurated a great revolution in philosophy, but then found himself trapped in a fundamental dualism because he felt he had to set limits to human knowledge. Goethe, Hegel, Fichte, and Schiller were all swept up in that great revolution, each in his own way, and their attempts to overcome Kant's dualism together amounted to a kind of inner revolution within the greater Kantian revolution. Each sought in his own way to save the spirit of Kant by overcoming the letter of Kant. (Even Kant himself saw that need and said at the end of his life that, had he not been so old, he would have started all over again! We will have more to say about this in the next installment—on Schiller.)

Fichte was a key player—arguably *the* key player—in that second revolution. We have seen how Goethe sought to transcend Kant but save the spirit of his philosophy by turning one of Kant's limits into a threshold, and then crossing it. Let's call that the "outer" threshold, the seeming limit one reaches within sensory perception. Fichte also sought to turn one of Kant's limits into a threshold and then cross it, but he was working at a place one might call the "inner" threshold. In the process, what Fichte accomplishes is a complete transformation not of the old empiricism, as Goethe had done, but rather of the old rationalist project. Fichte transforms and thereby overthrows that ancien régime of rationality. He transforms it in the most radical way possible and thereby creates something entirely new within philosophy, something of which even Kant had only the vaguest premonitions. That is my contention.

What Fichte accomplishes is a complete transformation of the old rationalist project.

The younger generation all became Fichteans in some sense. And that's what makes Fichte the Romantic philosopher par excellence. Without Fichte, no Schelling, arguably no Hegel. Schiller's most important philosophical treatise (which influenced Steiner profoundly) turns on a concept taken from Fichte. Without Schelling and Fichte, no Friedrich Schlegel, no Novalis. No philosophical Romanticism in the form that we know it. Coleridge went off to Göttingen and studied Schelling, who had

studied and promoted Fichte, so both British Romanticism on the philosophical side and its echoes in American Transcendentalism can be traced back to Fichte. Hegel said he wanted to be buried next to Fichte, and he was. So Fichte is all-important. But who reads Fichte today? Almost nobody! And, of the few who read him, who understands Fichte? Almost nobody! He's very hard, but we must try to understand him as best we can, because he was such a great philosopher and one of the most important stepping-stones to anthroposophy.

Thinking about Thinking

Fichte read Kant and caught fire. The spirit of Kant's great revolution burned inside him. But he was also deeply troubled by its shortcomings. What excited Fichte above all about Kant was the possibility of radical autonomy, radical freedom within thinking. But what bothered him about it was that the foundations, the pillars on which Kant's philosophy ultimately rested, were things-in-themselves. They were unknowable because they resided on the other side of a limit Kant had set to human knowledge.

Now in particular, Fichte grapples with the problem of Kant's synthesizing agent within cognition. You will recall that Kant doesn't even try to say what it is. He merely describes the results of its activity in words, calling it "the transcendental unity of apperception." Our inner experience is not atomistic: we don't live in a kaleidoscopic array of disparate impressions, but rather in a world that is unified in various spatial and temporal ways. Sense-data arrive helter-skelter, but that is not our experience of the world. Something must synthesize our experience, but we can't see that agent. There must be some faculty at work, some unknowable faculty.

In his book *On the Metamorphosis of Plants*, Goethe is working at the empirical pole. Fichte sets to work at the other pole, the pole of thinking, and there are some good reasons for that. Fichte is a more systematic thinker than Goethe. And even more so than Goethe, he's committed to the Kantian project; Fichte calls himself a Kantian outright in a way Goethe didn't, but says of Kant that he just wasn't Kantian enough. It's very important to understand that. And Fichte understands, rightly I think, that the problems in Kant's philosophy can be solved only at the pole of the thinking subject, because that was Kant's fundamental epistemological gesture: he tried to account for the possibility of human knowledge from the inside out.

Now, one of the things that's hard about Fichte is that his great masterpiece, *The Science of Knowledge*,[2] was actually the first thing he wrote, but it was so dense and written so quickly, that he then had to spend the rest of his life popularizing it and rewriting it and elaborating it. So there are some other writings, published after the fact as it were, that help to clarify his arguments. For example, there's something called "The First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge," and then there's another called "The Second Introduction to the Science of Knowledge."[3] The first one is quite short and non-technical; the second is longer, and it is written for people who already have some grounding in Kantian philosophy. One can read both of these essays without too much difficulty. In those works, Fichte makes clear why he wants to solve the problem at the pole of thought: it's because there's an asymmetry between the two poles. His popular way of explaining it is to say that on the one side, on the empirical side, there's a single thread of causality; one event gives rise to another event and so on. Only on the side of thought is there a doubled, parallel structure that maps onto the structure of the problem, which is the general problem of epistemology: how are we going to account for a subject knowing the world of objects? And there's a further asymmetry in the situation in that, within this doubling, there's a potential reflexivity that isn't available on the other side. A table cannot table itself, and a rock cannot rock itself, but thinking can think

itself. It's possible to reflect upon one's own thinking. So, on the side of thinking you have the doubled structure of reflection, which maps onto the structure of the problem. And then you can also find an exceptional moment within thinking in which it's possible—or at least it seems to be possible—to make the subject the object. The subject, the thinking subject, can make its own thinking the object of its thinking. That possibility is intriguing: it suggests that there's a game to be played there, as some philosophers would say; you might get somewhere that way. But Fichte argues strongly that if you try to explain the world in terms of things, you lose the game immediately, because the structure is wrong in principle. That just can't be the right place to look for the solution. So he has very good reasons for proceeding in the way he does.

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Stepping behind Logic

In specifically Kantian terms, Fichte is trying to find his way to that inaccessible thing-in-itself that Kant had called "the transcendental unity of apperception." He's trying to get a glimpse of the secret Masonic handshakes behind the curtain, as it were. Fichte's approach is thoroughly Kantian in spirit: he starts with thinking, and then, as Kant had done in his philosophy, tries to step behind the structures and see which constitutive activities must necessarily be in place in order to account for the structures. That's what we mean when we talk about Kant's "transcendental method."[4] You take a structure, and then you look behind it and ask: what activity of mind is presupposed in that structure? That way, you can begin to talk about the constitutive activities of the mind. Fichte says, let's start with the most universal and fundamental and abstract and indubitable things we can think of, which are the fundamental axioms of logic. The first axiom of logic is the principle of identity: A = A. Fichte starts with that fundamental axiom, and then makes an unprecedented move; not even Kant had thought to try it. Fichte says boldly, now let's step behind that axiom.

We recognize that A = A is transparent; we see immediately that it is true. But then if you look hard enough at that "=" in the middle, you become puzzled, because it has not been accounted for. Minimally, that "=" is a relation, but Fichte goes further: he decides that it is really the sign for an activity. For what is it that we mean when we say "equals"? If we say "A = A," we're not saying that "some A exists"; it's not "is" in the sense of "exists as a fact in the world," but rather, it's a statement of a relation: "A stands in a transparent relation to itself." But how do we account for that? In this way Fichte steps behind that enigmatic sign, and he says, well, actually, since we're not describing a state of affairs in the world, that relation needs to be something that was actively posited, actively put in place as a judgment, by a perceiving subject. That "=" has to be the sign for an activity of *setzen* or "positing," which means etymologically in English also a "setting in place."

But why is it that any relation must necessarily be an activity rather than a thing? Perhaps the best way to illuminate this key assertion on Fichte's part is to go back to a great moment in ancient philosophy. This is not in Fichte now, but I'll give you a different way of understanding what he's getting at. I'm referring to an aporia, a philosophical difficulty or puzzle that was solved by Aristotle in a way that remains profound and incisive and relevant to this day. Say that one wants to explain the relationship between any two things. One posits some third thing that explains the relationship between them. Has one solved the problem? No! It's like the myth of the Hydra: you cut off one head and two grow back in its place, because now you have

created two gaps that need to be bridged. If in the middle is a thing, now you've got two problems to solve! Do the same thing again, and you've got four problems! This is called an "infinite regress": the more you try to solve the problem this way, the faster it runs away from you. Aristotle concluded, with characteristic profundity: the relationship between things can never be explained in terms of things; only a process can explain structure. Quoting Aristotle might seem anachronistic, but really that's the heart of philosophical Romanticism, and that takes us right back home. Philosophical Romanticism seeks to explain structure out of an underlying, living process. And that is what Fichte discovers: this most fundamental structure of self-knowledge is something that is actually an activity of pure positing. He says, "A = A" implies "I = I"; what's implied is that there's a unity within the subject, the agent, who is doing this pure positing within thinking—indeed, as the fundamental act of a sense-free thinking independent of and preceding all sensory perception.

So we see that Fichte is working with a model that's trying to solve the problems of philosophy through the structure of self-consciousness. And that might seem very attractive as a solution, very liberating. But, alas, it's not so straightforward. Here comes the wrinkle, a problem and Fichte's solution to that problem, which are both really arcane as laid out on Fichte's pages, but beautiful once you catch on. A very great scholar of German Idealism, Dieter Henrich, wrote a brilliant article about this called "Fichte's Original Insight," and now I'm just going to follow him in my discussion for a while.[5] His article is truly brilliant, and I recommend it highly to anyone who wants a good challenge.

But precisely because Fichte is trying to found philosophy upon self-consciousness, his project can easily be mistaken for the ancien régime of rationalism. As you will recall, Descartes (one of the great founders of modern rationalism) argued, "I think therefore I am"; the only indubitable thing is that I think, because you can't think that you don't think, which would be a logical self-contradiction. So the self-knowledge of the *cogito*, of the "I know," was one of the pillars for the ancien régime of modern rationalism before Kant, but that's not what Fichte's doing here. And, according to Henrich, Fichte's great insight is actually that this model doesn't work. This model of the self knowing itself doesn't work. And here's why. You can schematize the problem in a way that is very abstract but simple once you understand it. "The self"—let's call the agent of cognition "the self"—as subject goes looking for the self (as object), and finds the self (now as subject and object simultaneously). And so the circle is closed. That's the model. But step back from that and ask: does it really work? After all, either you don't have what you went looking for when you started, in which case you find something different, so you're not in the place where you started; or, you find what you had originally, but that means you didn't go looking. You can't go looking for something that you already have. This starts to be kind of Zen-like, doesn't it? It's really a puzzle. But that's one of the things that makes Fichte so admirable: he follows thinking wherever it leads, no matter how difficult it gets; he's very bold in that way. And so he says to himself, here are the two possibilities: either we go out looking for ourselves and find something different, in which case we don't find ourselves, which means that the model fails; or, paradoxically, the thing we were looking for was already there before we started looking. That's very hard to "say" in propositional form; it's like a Zen koan. From the perspective of everyday consciousness, it makes no sense. And wasn't that exactly what Wittgenstein had asserted so surprisingly at the end of his own treatise on logic?[6] If you understand me rightly, you realize everything that I've said makes no sense. It makes no sense, but Fichte tells himself: that has to be the answer, because the other possibility fails. I go looking for the self

and I don't find the self—at least not as a thing to be discovered.

Intellectual Intuition

So where is the self right before it's spoken? —and I mean "spoken" in the Wittgensteinian sense, right before it's put in place as a structure. It's actually impossible to capture the pure experience in a fixed conceptual structure, because the moment the self is "spoken" as a structure, as a thing even within consciousness, it immediately calls forth its opposite. To conceive and say "self" immediately defines a "not-self." And then we're already inside the problem we were trying to solve. The moment you say "I," you're inside the problem, because it has already become an object among other objects. We know that the "I" must be there before we go looking for it; the "I" must be there before we say it. So where is it? We're at the top rung of Wittgenstein's ladder, and there's nothing that can be "said" anymore. But Fichte looks beyond, across the threshold, and sees something that he then describes, in a kind of inner, introspective empiricism. Here you have to imagine looking at me rather than reading and thinking my words because I can't say it; I am acting it out for you, and you are watching me act it out.[7] Where is the "I" before it's "said"? [strong gesture of "positing," of setting something in place, followed by the spoken word: "I."] It's a deed. It's an act of will. It's pure "positing," meaning "placing," "setting in place." Because he's in this new space, because there's no language in which you can say this, you can only "show" it in Wittgenstein's sense, Fichte has to come up with new terms. So he comes up with two new terms to describe this inward experience. Remember, it's impossible in principle to understand relations by mapping a structure, for then the problem simply runs away from you. So it's not a state of affairs, it's not an existing structure, which could be captured in propositional language; it cannot be said, but rather, it's an action that's complete at the moment that it's begun. So Fichte makes up a rather strange new German word, by analogy to the German word for "fact," or *Tatsache*. Fichte makes up a new word, *Tathandlung*, which translates roughly as "done doing." One experiences a "done doing." It's a pure activity of positing that's done the moment that you look at it. And then through introspection, through an inner empiricism of something that's beyond the threshold, you can watch the very first structure of thinking being set into place by the will.

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That is Fichte's "original insight"—original in both senses, "novel" and "foundational." And that insight gives birth to the first sentence of Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*: "The I posits itself absolutely." Very cryptic! What does that word "absolutely" mean? It means not contingent, not dependent on anything outside of itself. It's a pure activity—raw, radical, self-creative autonomy: in every act of knowledge, we call not just the world of our knowing into being; we call ourselves as knowers into being. Every time we know something, even the most fundamental things we can know, we first call ourselves into being, and then immediately we call the thing that is known into being simultaneously with it. And so we're on the top rung of a ladder looking across a threshold into a realm that's beyond the distinction between subject and object. It's a realm out of which the very distinction between subject and object is precipitated. You stand on the top rung of the ladder, kick it away, stop looking at the structure of thought, and look

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at the process underlying the structure. You're having an intuition, you're seeing something (from the Latin verb *intueri*, "to see"), but it's not a sensory seeing. It's an intellectual seeing. Fichte calls this "intellectual intuition." Kant had used this word "intuition" for the construction of sensory experience, but now Fichte uses the term to refer to an intellectual—i.e., a purely spiritual—experience.

Look what has happened! That ancien régime of rationality has been utterly transformed. We have stepped behind logic, as it were. The thought structure that was meant to capture the shape of the world—its supposedly pre-existing qualities and attributes that we would just mirror or map—has been transformed, and we become the geniuses; we become the creators who call our knowledge freely into being in an act of pure freedom, at every moment. It is a sublime and profoundly liberating vision. Enough to set your hair on fire all over again.

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And so we arrive at something that is the source of all knowing, in the way that I described. But because it is an utterly free causality, it is also potentially the source of ethics, which is about free action in the world. Kant had wanted to preserve freedom by putting the ethical self on the other side of the boundary of knowledge. If you could know the ethical self, it would become determinate; to know something is to "say," in Wittgenstein's sense, its structure, to determine it, and then it's no longer free. If it has a determinate structure, it's not free, and so Kant protected it by saying: you can't know it. Then you can't touch it with knowledge, and it remains indeterminate. But Fichte finds a way to know this ethical self while preserving its freedom. One knows it intuitively as a freely creative activity, as the primordial subject of its own emergence, something that perpetually calls itself into being. And so this Kantian dualism is overcome again, now at that inner pole. The dualistic picture we received from Kant resolves itself into an organic unity, an integral kind of thinking. Kant's "dual citizenship," as he called it, has been overcome.

The dualistic picture we received from Kant resolves itself into an organic unity.

A Tragic Fate

All of philosophical Romanticism is implicit in Fichte's "original insight" and flows from it directly. Again, Hegel got it: he saw the importance of Fichte's discovery, and that's why he wanted to be buried next to Fichte. But as you can imagine, it's very easy to misunderstand what Fichte was up to. It's so easy to look at his treatise—which is using logic as a ladder, then kicking the ladder away—and think: this is the strangest, most incompetent logic I've ever seen. But logic is the last thing Fichte is doing: it's much closer to the antithesis of logic. Fichte is using the structures of logic like the rungs of a ladder to climb up to a threshold, where he invites us to have a fundamentally different kind of experience that cannot be captured in a logical framework. Here insight cannot be expressed in propositional form, because it's a pure, creative activity rather than a thing or a state of affairs. But someone with conventional training, someone schooled in the ancien régime of rationalism, will look at Fichte's treatise and be tempted to say: this is the worst logic textbook I've ever encountered in my life. And that's what happened basically in the 19th century reception of Fichte: most people didn't understand at all what he had done. His fate was genuinely tragic.

To this day, surprisingly few people understand Fichte at all. If you want to see a particularly amusing—though from another perspective, sad—example, open the

pages of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*,[8] where Fichte rates merely a couple of paragraphs, nothing is said about his philosophical masterpiece, and Russell wonders aloud whether Fichte might have been insane. Russell had no clue. But again, I submit to you that Rudolf Steiner understood Fichte deeply, especially in his later writings. Later in life, Steiner said of Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*, "Das ist ein Einweihungsbuch!"—"That's an initiation-book!" Steiner understood that Fichte had delivered a powerful meditation that was meant to lead us to a direct experience of freedom. Freedom in this philosophical sense is sheer self-creativity; it's not something that can be "said" in Wittgenstein's sense; it's not something that you can do for someone else; it's not something that you can capture for them. All you can do is show them the way, and then they have to get there themselves. Fichte was exasperated that his philosophy met with so little understanding, and he went to extraordinary lengths to explain and recast and convey somehow to a broader public an insight that was so completely revolutionary, so resistant to the structures of ordinary language, and so counterintuitive relative to established philosophical traditions. It didn't help that Fichte was an extreme choleric, but he just couldn't understand why people would work so hard at thinking about themselves as passive objects rather than as free, creative subjects, and their self-imposed limitation totally exasperated him.

So at the pole of thinking, we find pure perception; and at the pole of perceiving, we find pure thinking.

The Balanced Equation

So, where have we arrived? We have climbed up to two different thresholds: the threshold of rationality or the self on the one side, and the threshold of sense or empiricism on the other. Goethe's book *On the Metamorphosis of Plants* is working at the latter threshold, at the threshold of sense and empiricism, and in finding a way to cross that threshold he discovers, paradoxically, pure thinking. Fichte, working at the threshold of pure thought, finds a way to get across that threshold and, paradoxically, finds pure perception. So at the pole of thinking, we find pure perception; and at the pole of perceiving, we find pure thinking. Each of these thinkers has solved the problem of dualism at either pole. Goethe penetrates the threshold of sense and finds intuitive, pure, synthetic, formative activity. Fichte penetrates the threshold of rationality, of logic, and finds intuitive, pure, synthetic, formative activity. It's like a math equation that balances. The problem of epistemology is solved.

Taken together, Goethe and Fichte managed to overcome Kant's dualism. Many of their contemporaries felt one needed both approaches simultaneously. Goethe and Fichte were each one-sided in themselves, but together they saved the philosophical revolution by rewriting the letter of Kant in the spirit of Kant. Some of their contemporaries tried to put Goethe and Fichte together intellectually, but the most successful synthesis by far was accomplished a century later, in the 1880s and 1890s, by Rudolf Steiner. In his early commentaries on Goethe's scientific writings, and especially his book Goethe's *Theory of Knowledge*,[9] Steiner was the first to appreciate and elaborate fully the most important philosophical implications latent in Goethe's scientific work. Steiner then went on to make Fichte's epistemology the centerpiece of his own doctoral dissertation, *Truth and Knowledge*,[10] and then he folded Fichte's fundamental insight about transformed, sense-free thinking

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as pure process into the first half of his own philosophical masterpiece, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit.*[11] It was Rudolf Steiner who finally put these two thinkers together in a way that reconciles and secures and cements the tremendously revolutionary aspects of their philosophy that had been so badly misunderstood over the intervening decades. Hence one might say, paraphrasing Owen Barfield, that German Idealism comes of age in anthroposophy.[12]

to be continued…

Endnotes

1. The first two articles in this four-part series are based on lectures originally presented at Esalen and the California Institute of Integral Studies. In many places, the original, oral style has been retained.
2. J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge: With the First and Second Introductions*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
3. Both are included in the Cambridge UP edition of *The Science of Knowledge.*
4. Unfortunately, the American "transcendentalists" changed the meaning of this term fundamentally. Indeed, one can argue that "transcendental" means for Emerson and Thoreau and company precisely the opposite of what Kant meant by the term. But that is too long a story to tell here.
5. Dieter Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight," in *Contemporary German Philosophy: Volume 1*: University Park: Pennsylvania States UP, 1982, pp. 15–54.
6. See the beginning of the previous installment.
7. Needless to say, this is exactly what I did when presenting this material originally as lectures.
8. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.
9. Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of the Epistemology of His Worldview*, vol. 2 of his *Collected Works*, Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2008.
10. Rudolf Steiner, *Truth and Knowledge: Introduction of Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2007.
11. Variously translated as *The Philosophy of Freedom, The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, and most recently, as *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995). Steiner's own philosophy will be discussed in part four of this series.
12. I am referring of course to Owen Barfield's collection of essays entitled *Anthroposophy Comes of Age*, Oxford: Barfield Press UK, 2012.

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