

## Fichte and Us

Speech given at the Fichte Celebration at the University of Berlin on 27 May 1937.

We have come together to celebrate a man who stood faithfully by his folk in the hour of danger, who was a teacher at our university such as few have been given to it, and who, as an intellectual creator, was able to elevate himself among the small group of those who have been granted the privilege of making their name a household word. The whole German folk has just remembered the German man, the nationalist and fighter Fichte, with deep gratitude. It is ours to commemorate the teacher of science and the spiritual creator Fichte, the philosopher whose name has become a symbol for the daring boldness and the world-opening power of the German spirit.

It is a different mood and a different overall intellectual and political situation from which we turn to Fichte today than was probably the case in earlier times. In the past, it was already very much the case that this man was not forgotten, that his fighting spirit was honoured and that his work was given care and admiration. People turned to Fichte when they wanted to rise above the impotence and fragmentation of the present and revive the hope for the future unity, power and greatness of the German folk. And if one was quite dissolute, then one dared to hope that it could once again become like in the days of Fichte, Schleiermacher and Hegel.

Adolf Hitler's Germany is politically a different, larger and more united one than even the most ardent nationalists of the time of the uprising dared to hope. And it is spiritually different. The folk who are building the new Reich have felt the shaking of their entire existence once again in war and revolution, they have seen their physical and moral strength challenged once again, this time to the last, and have used the last. Today, it is no longer a question of "fulfilling" hopes of the past—that is how it was seen when the second Reich was founded—it is a question of creating a new world. This is what we mean when we say that the political revolution that brought us the unity of the Reich is only the first effect of the victory of a new *worldview*.

As National Socialists, i.e. as those who give allegiance to Adolf Hitler in the re-creation of the Reich, we must see the great figures of the past in a different light than the celebratory speakers of the past. We revere strength of character and spiritual creativity wherever they confront us in the history of our folk, for our

worldview includes the valuation of *tradition*. Everything great that has been done and thought by people of German blood is ours by virtue of the loyalty to ourselves and the work we ceaselessly do on the heritage of our fathers. But our world view as a whole is more than tradition: it has proven and continues to prove that it is the *revolution*.

The National Socialist faces the figures of the past out of the feeling and awareness that he is standing in the greatest revolution that our folk has undergone for a thousand years. He bows as an individual before the great individual and his work; but he does not look up to the works of the past in order to get there the standard for the creations of the future. He takes this standard from his own breast.

Fichte's philosophical work, which has just been made even more fully accessible to us through a supplementary edition of his posthumous works, is, from a human point of view, a moving testimony to a strict will to know. On no side does this work deny that it was only made possible by the work of the giant mind of Kant. It is therefore impossible to speak of the philosopher Fichte without going back to the basic idea of the great philosophical movement that was initiated by Kant.

German philosophical idealism is the continuation of the Reformation within the framework of the conditions created by the Enlightenment, i.e. the continuation of a religious movement by secular means. Theology is replaced by philosophy, the professor becomes the preacher's successor. Unlike Kant or Hegel, Fichte also personally represents the type of the philosophical preacher. He stands before our mind's eye as the preacher of the German nation.

Those who fail to recognise the inner connection between idealism and the Reformation tear apart the unity of German intellectual history. On the other hand, anyone who places the Reformation and idealism too close to each other underestimates the significance of the fact that theology was displaced by philosophy.

I cannot think of a German philosophy of the future that denies the connection with German idealism and therefore with the Reformation. The catholicising Max Scheler and some who followed him have tried to design philosophical systems independently of the Luther-Kant line. Their failure is obvious. The spell of barrenness that lies over the efforts of Ludwig Klages has its ultimate cause in the fact that this strong philosophical temperament was pushed away all too early from the Reformation-idealist line of German tradition. When Klages and his students today take up the right with Kant and Fichte, it is not a forward-looking confrontation within German philosophical thought, but a sectarian uprising of

aloof enthusiasts against the mighty achievement of those who completed the work of liberation begun by Luther. The contradiction of the philosophy of life is only justified in relation to the Enlightenment elements of German idealism—which contradiction, of course, has long since been raised by genuine romanticism. It cannot be our duty, as beneficiaries of Romanticism, to convict Kant and Fichte of Enlightenment tendencies; rather, as heirs of Romanticism *and* Idealism—and thus at the same time as heirs of Luther—we have the same task as they had at another point in German history, and therefore the work of philosophical Idealism represents for us par excellence the obligatory starting point. To detach oneself from this obligation—as has just been shown again in an essay directed against Fichte by the “biocentrist” Hans Kern—means to withdraw from the historical line of battle.

The history of German philosophical thought cannot be separated from the history of German faith. Fichte is and remains ours because, like Kant and Hegel, he comes from the great awakening of the Reformation.

To keep any misunderstanding at bay: I am talking about the Reformation as a unique event in German history; I am not talking about the relationship of idealism per se to Christianity per se, but about the real connection between the Reformation and the idealist movement within the real unity of German history. Reformation, idealism, National Socialism—these are not abstract systems, but decisive events in the German soul. The relationship between idealism and *Christianity* has been the subject of much discussion in our country. They have spoken of theonomy and autonomy, transcendence and immanence, dualism and monism, and they have not gone beyond these correct but general and essentially meaningless distinctions. The reason why the discussion, which began so lively, has not got off the ground is that the debate lacked a real point of reference. There has been talk here and there of the unity of German intellectual history, but no one has thought of the fact that this unity is the only meaningful prerequisite and the only possible point of reference for all arguments on this subject. If I take away the real point of reference, i.e. the point of view of the unity of German history, then nothing is left but the comparison of some human possibilities, an opposition of theonomy and autonomy, a playing off of some “isms” against each other. There can be no decision; the two systems remain, closer or further away, opposite each other.

Instead of a hopeless dialectic between the theonomic system on the one hand and the autonomous system on the other, we see a meaningful connection between decisive moments in German religious and intellectual history. The Reformation, Idealism and National Socialism follow one another as three high

points. No one is any longer able to break the fateful link. Luther said *faith* and taught the independence of the believing soul from any priestly work, from the opus operatum. The idealist said *freedom* and meant the independence of the ego from every natural and spiritual compulsion. The National Socialist, however, says *personality* and today raises the banner of free personality against the resistance of a world. Freedom in the sense of idealism is something different from justification by faith, and personality in the sense of National Socialism is something different from the absolute ego of the idealist. But as different as these outbreaks of Germanic substance in the German soul may be from one another—they are united by a common trait. The events have, as it were, a family resemblance to each other. It is the same soul which, still under the spell of the idea of salvation, feels justified “by faith alone”, which then, steeply summing the idea of inner independence, thinks through the bold, almost fantastic concept of an “I” facing the world in absolute self-empowerment to its last consequences, and which finally, drawing from tremendous experience and deepest knowledge at the same time, has placed the *unity of race and personality* at the centre of German thought and action.

If we are looking for a historical name for the pervasive trait of the German spirit, then we must take it up where this trait first becomes visible in great form. Where else would this be the case than in the great German imperial politics, which came to its glorious tragic end with the epoch of the Hohenstaufen? In the struggle between the kings of the north and the priestly throne in the south, the Germanic soul struggles not for the possession of individual goods but for the whole: for its inner independence. It is no coincidence that at the end of this epoch the first German philosopher, Meister Eckhart, raised his lonely voice, translating, as it were, the mighty events of the centuries-long struggle into the language of inwardness. In the South, the imperial party was called the Ghibelline party. Therefore, we are permitted to call the basic trait of the German soul, after its first monumental manifestation, *Ghibelline*. We thus detach this word from its unique historical place and make it the basic concept of German history. As long as there are priestly or other powers that respect the freedom of personality for nothing, the German folk will also be Ghibelline.

There is nothing arbitrary or unfair in emphasising this one feature. Rather, it is precisely a significant peculiarity of our history that it is possible to characterise its decisive moments and high points with an apparently isolated concept from a particular epoch. This is where its unity appears.

On the basis created by the Enlightenment, under conditions that were common to the entire Occident, Kant thought in a genuinely German manner in the greatest

style of Ghibelline thinking when he secured the primacy of “practical reason”, i.e. the *will*, over theoretical reason. The idealistic doctrine of freedom is inseparably linked with the doctrine of the primacy of the will over knowledge, i.e. with *voluntarism*. We are not there to worship a mysteriously revealed “word”, but to engage ourselves actively in the world. The deed stands at the beginning, not the word. By faith, Luther means a joyful, daring grasping of God’s grace, a behaviour that does not end in meditation and liturgy, but leads on to work within the orders of this world. And the idealist means the same thing, now already detached from the dogmatic ideas in whose bonds the deep medieval mind of the reformer still lay, when he elevates *action* and *freedom* to the central problem of philosophy. The deepest meaning of this phrase is that man is not able to place himself in a real relationship with the Eternal through anything other than his actions. “Everything that man thinks he can do apart from a good life in order to please God is mere religious delusion and God’s after-service. The primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason means at the same time the independence of man from God. The doctrine of virtue exists by itself - “even without the concept of God”.

The ultimate meaning of the idealistic concept of freedom is that in the order of ends man is an end in himself, i.e. can never be used merely as a means by anyone - “not even by God”.

The emperors of the Middle Ages still fought for the independence of the secular sword as prayers and penitents; Luther already fundamentally attacks the priesthood’s claim to establish a *direct* connection between man and God. *Kant* not only opposes, in Luther’s sense, those “inactive atonements” that are supposed to replace the lack of good actions, but he sees the human being who acts under the moral law as independent even of God.

In the doctrine that it depends on action and not on prayer, there is a world-historical decision; without a clear statement of this decision, any alleged criticism of voluntarism is without meaning. *Fichte*’s position in the history of German philosophy, as well as our relationship to him, is determined by the fact that he gave expression to *Ghibelline voluntarism* in the most unconditional and consistent way. He himself was completely clear about his place within the development. The religious, mystics and saints, he says in 1801, did not understand themselves. Only a theory like his told them that they were not yet completely *free*, “for even the eternal, the divinity, need not hold freedom captive”.

What we have just come to know as Ghibelline voluntarism, we now call *heroism*. The idealistic pathos of freedom springs from a heroic attitude of mind. Life under

the moral law is a heroic existence. All the “rationalism” of Kant and Fichte cannot conceal the heroic mood of their philosophy. This emerges most beautifully from Fichte’s depiction of the *hero* in one of his most rationalistic works, the “Grundzügen des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters”. The hero, say his opponents, acts in order to gain fame in the eyes of the world and posterity. Without a doubt, Fichte adds, without first having asked the world and posterity whether they would like to praise a life in this way. The hero cannot recover in any way in the experience of the council, “because his way of acting, however certainly it goes along with an idea, is a new and hitherto unheard-of way of acting, and therefore one that has never been held to human judgement. But in this way of doing business he counts so surely on fame, it is said, that he stakes his life on the correctness of this calculation. How then does he know that he is not miscalculating? As he goes about his business, and has already completed the sacrifice of his life for ever in his mind, he alone, and no one else but himself, has judged his way of acting and approved of it; how does he know then that fellow-worlds and posterity will approve of it and endow it with immortal fame...? “and so this single remark proves that he is by no means moved by the hope of their praise to do as he does, but rather, by his deed bursting forth purely from the fountainhead of honour before himself, lays before *them* what they must approve and honour, if he should care at all for their judgement; despising to destruction themselves and their judgement, if it is not the reflection of his own judgement passed for all eternity. And so it is not ambition that produces great deeds, but great deeds first produce in the mind faith in a world by which one may be honoured.

Fichte’s philosophy is heroic—not only because it contains passages that paint the picture of the heroic human being, but because it designs the picture of the world from the attitude of the heroic human being. His doctrine of the ego is the great attempt to define the concept of man independently of all dogmatics of being. Not the world and its logos is the first; rather, the first is the creative will. This is the world. Truth does not exist in the knowledge of what is, but only in the knowledge of what is to become eternal through us and our freedom. Therein consists all dogmatism, and philosophical dogmatism in particular, that completed being is given precedence over daring, creative action. Through Fichte’s voluntarism, Kant’s supremacy of practical reason over theoretical reason is made manifest with tremendous force. It is absolutely correct when a priest of the Catholic Church states: “The will, together with its corresponding order of values of the morally good, has priority over knowledge and its corresponding order of values: ethos has been given primacy over logos.”

But what does this mean: the primacy of ethos over logos? Logos and ethos cannot be arbitrarily shifted back and forth. Only one of the two statements can correspond to the real situation of the human being, and every statement here becomes a confession.

Logos before ethos means: being before action, order before freedom, law before personality. It means: freedom may be lost, the order once established may not be lost. It means: a truth that is misunderstood but followed is in every case more than an error held with the greatest inner effort of a pure will. And it means, finally: man can exist as man only if he, weakened by a fabulous fall, submits to a system of sacred consecration within which he does what is prescribed under the supervision and with the help of officials likewise of a sacred character. in an emergency, at the complete sacrifice of all freedom. He can perish as a human being—if only the system, the order is preserved and recognised by him to the last breath.

The path taken by the German spirit, on the other hand, presents itself to the priest's eye in a gendered way:

“As the centre of gravity of life passed from knowledge to will, from logos to ethos, life became more and more unsustainable.... Nothing remains, nothing is fixed, everything changes, and life is a constant striving, searching and wandering. Catholic Christianity opposes this way of thinking with all its might. Everything is more easily forgiven by the Church than an attack against the truth.” It is a final word when Romano Guardini continues: “Not what is done is the last thing, but what is. And not the moral, but the metaphysical worldview, not the value judgement, but the being judgement. not the effort, but the adoration is the final thing.”

If one designs a world view in which law and freedom are in such tension with each other that only the formula: Then one thing is no longer possible: to insert the heroic character into this world view at the end. Within a closed world caught up in the dogmatics of being, there can certainly be courses of life which, guided from above, supposedly reach their goal within predefined paths, just as the world created for a specific purpose is supposed to do. But such a picture of the world is in open contradiction to a heroic course of life. Only because the world is incomplete and is not grasped by any dogma of being, only because truth is not revealed to man in any way unless he attains it for himself, is a heroic existence in the world possible. This is what *Fichte* taught us: a heroic existence and a voluntaristic conception of man and the world belong together. The German thinker cannot speak of law and order without speaking of the free personality. For him, the word order loses all meaning as soon as the possibility is admitted

that there is an order in itself—which ultimately means the primacy of logos over ethos—that freedom and personality can therefore also be abstracted from in an emergency. Law only exists in relation to freedom and freedom only in relation to law: that is *our* final formula. If a truth is not understood, if it has no relation to the real man, then it is not a human truth. A pure will, on the other hand, may well fall into error; in the long run, however, the effort of a *pure will* will always remain superior—even in the realm of truth. But where effort is lost in worship, there is darkness!

The anti-Ghibelline doctrine of the hierarchy of being and values, of the eternal order itself, under the spell of which one is prepared to forgive the individual everything if necessary, if only he recognises this order, leads to the destruction of all humanity. In view of what we are experiencing today, we read and understand better than before what a German convert wrote out of a fine understanding of the doctrine of the primacy of logos over ethos: “A person who does not live what he teaches or what he is taught can still consider this to be the obligatory truth, regardless of whether he thinks he can fill the gap of his own will and effort, or whether he has the truer belief that only grace can help him to do so. The order and hierarchy of being and values remain intact. He who betrays the orders as orders and their hierarchy is the more dangerous enemy than he who, within an order which he recognises, disturbs the order immanent in it.”

We “betray” these orders as orders apart from man, and we know why. When we celebrate Johann Gottlieb Fichte today, we do so because he lived what he taught, because as a true Ghibelline he was far removed from the dark error that anything in the world could be a blessing to man that was not rooted in his own breast, in his own nature and character.