

Nationalism & Racialism in German Philosophy: Fichte, Hegel, & the Romantics

[Derek Hawthorne](#)



Philipp Veit, “Germania,” 1848

4,354 words

Portuguese translation [here](#)

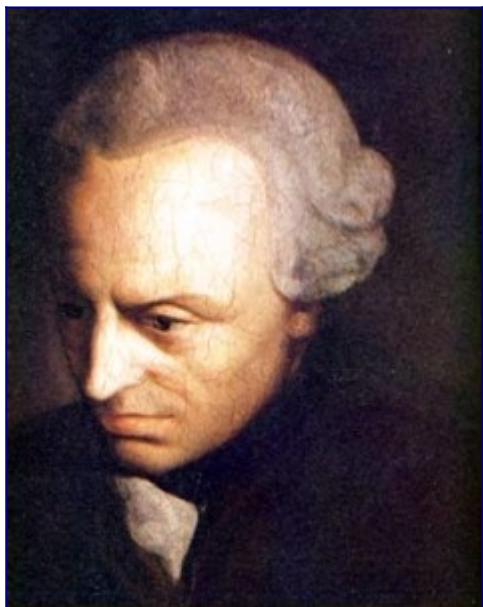
1. Fichte and the Destiny of the German Nation

J. G. Fichte (1762–1814), the first of the great post-Kantian German Idealists, is an important figure in the rise of German nationalism – and has often been accused of being one of the founding fathers of National Socialism.

Fichte came to nationalism, however, through a very unusual route.

He began his career as follower of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), but found the great philosopher’s restrictions on human knowledge to be intolerable. Famously (or, perhaps, infamously) Kant had argued that we only know things as they appear to us (*phenomena*), while *things as they are in themselves* are forever a mystery for us. Moreover, the phenomenal impressions we experience are the product of innate mental structures that “process” the data coming in from the senses, when things-in-themselves act upon us. Thus, we can say that the world as we experience it is partly a construction of our minds. Kant winds up being half idealist, half realist: there really is a world out there, but we only know how it appears to us – and that happens to be a function of how our minds are structured.

It is truly ironic that Kant inaugurated a movement – German Idealism – which built upon his philosophy, while really seeking to overturn every philosophical victory he thought he had won. Kant believed that he had conclusively shown that our knowledge is limited to appearances; that we can never know things as they *really* are. He believed he had limited knowledge so as to make room for faith, and had thereby saved morality and religion (a story too involved to tell here). Fichte and the German philosophers who came after Kant and were influenced by him demanded Absolute Knowledge: knowledge of the Absolute, of reality as it truly is. This had been the aim of philosophy since Thales, and they were not about to exchange it for Kant's scaled-back, sceptical, Pietistic humanism.



Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804

And so Fichte was determined to get rid of the concept of things-in-themselves. But to eliminate the idea that there is a pen-in-itself that corresponds to the phenomenon I'm now experiencing – the appearance of a pen in front of me – means that there is *only* the phenomenon: that the pen is, in sense, wholly and entirely in my mind. This is indeed the route that Fichte takes.

Suppose the pen exists only in my mind. Why do I experience it as real and objective? If my mind created it, I certainly have no recollection of this. Fichte argues, in fact, that the world I experience is not *my* creation. Instead, it issues from a deeper level that he calls the Absolute Ego. Essentially, this Absolute Ego – which is not at all to be identified with my personal self – *projects* a world out before me which I then experience. This way of putting things greatly simplifies – really, oversimplifies – what Fichte says. But in fact there is no general agreement as to how we should interpret Fichte's philosophy, which he put forth in several different versions.

But if Fichte is right, what's the point? Why should Absolute Ego project a world before me? Surprisingly, Fichte's answer to this is a moral one. The world exists before me in order for me to act upon and to perfect it; to change what is into what *ought* to be. The vocation of man is a moral one: we are the beings who transform nature and bring it into accord with our ideals. The world exists so that we can express those ideals and bring a moral order into being.

And where, we might ask, is God in all this? Fichte actually lost his professorship in Jena in 1799 after he was accused of atheism, a charge he vehemently denied. To be sure, he does not believe in a personal God. One might expect him to identify God with the Absolute Ego, but he does not. Instead he conceives God simply as the moral world order, which humanity continually strives to realize here on earth, in the flesh. In effect, Fichte is arguing that it is humanity that incarnates God. The end or goal of the universe itself is achieved through the activity of humanity's perfecting it and thereby bringing God into being.

For Fichte, however, this is a never-ending process. He conceives the Ego not as a static entity but as a pure act, ceaselessly putting forth the world. And our empirical ego – the self that we are consciously aware of – is a kind of pure striving as well, ceaselessly striving to overcome otherness by stamping the ideal upon it. In words that call to mind Goethe's *Faust*, one commentator writes that "inasmuch as the ego is infinite striving, it is unable to rest in any particular satisfaction or group of satisfactions. And we see it as reaching out towards an ideal goal through its free activity. Yet this goal always recedes." [1]



Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 1762–1814

So just what were the ideals Fichte wanted to stamp upon the other? Like other philosophers of the time (including Kant) he was enamored of the Enlightenment ideals of the French Revolution. Fichte believes in equality and the rights of man, universal brotherhood, and perpetual peace. This makes him sound very much like today's leftists. And in his own time he certainly would have been seen as a radical. However he couples these ideals with others that would horrify today's liberals: total knowledge and mastery of nature, and the dissemination of a single "Enlightened" culture to all peoples.

Fichte's philosophy took a new and unexpected turn, however, when Napoleon invaded Prussia in 1806. To put matters as succinctly as possible, Fichte realized for the first time that he was a German. Briefer still, Fichte became a nationalist. The result was his *Addresses to the German Nation* (*Reden an die deutsche Nation*), delivered in the winter of 1807–1808. Fichte did not abandon his Revolutionary ideals. Instead, he simply shifted his hopes for who might lead the way in enlightening mankind from

the French to the Germans. The Germans were the true heirs of the Greeks, Fichte argued, leading Europe in science and philosophy. And they possessed that temperament that Spengler called Faustian: solemn interiority, matched by a yen to touch the Infinite. Fichte's *Addresses* include lengthy discussions of the German national character. His sources included Tacitus's *Germania*.

In essence, Fichte now declared that the ceaselessly-striving moral ego that seeks to turn *is* into *ought* is preeminently a possession of the German people. Founding the moral world order here on earth and actualizing God now became, for Fichte, the mission of the German people. They would lead the way; they would teach the other nations the way to the Light. Fichte writes that

The German spirit . . . will open up new shafts and bring the light of day into their abysses, and hurl up rocky masses of thoughts, out of which ages to come will build their dwellings. [The] German spirit is an eagle, whose mighty body thrusts itself on high and soars on strong and well-practiced wings into the empyrean, that it might rise nearer to the sun whereon it delights to gaze.[2]

Thus, the completion of God and perfection of the cosmos now becomes the mission, preeminently, of a single nation.[3] (With Hegel, as we shall see, similar ideas are linked with *race*, with "the Germanic people" expanded to denote the European people as a whole.)

2. Romanticism and Pan-Germanism

The rise of what is often called "pan-Germanism" was not only due to the (correct) perception that Germany was now leading Europe in the sciences, arts, and in philosophy. It was also attributable to a yearning for a true national unity that would not, in fact, become a reality until 1871. The Romantic movement played a crucial role in the rise of nationalism and the sense of a "national mission."

Novalis wrote in 1799: "In its slow but sure way Germany advances before the other European countries. While the other countries are preoccupied with war, speculation, and partisanship, the German diligently educates himself to be the witness of a higher epoch of culture; and such progress must give him a great superiority over other countries in the course of time." [4] Toward the end of his life Friedrich Schiller wrote: "Sundered from politics, the German has founded . . . an ethical greatness . . . independent of any political destiny. . . . Each people has its day in history, but the day of the German is the harvest of time as a whole." [5]

Indeed, Romanticism was itself a quintessentially German movement and so it was no surprise that figures like the brothers Schlegel and Grimm, and Tieck, Novalis, and Herder should have concerned themselves so closely with German history, myth and folklore, and what they revealed about the national character. One author writes of the movement:

Romanticism is Germanic and reached its purest expression in those territories which are freest from Roman colonization. Everything that is regarded as an essential aspect of the Romantic spirit, irrationalism, the mystic welding together of subject and object, the tendency to intermingle the arts, the longing for the far-away and the strange, the feeling for the infinite and the continuity of historical development – all these are characteristic of German Romanticism and so much that their union remains unintelligible to the Latins. What is known as Romanticism in France has *only its name in common* with German Romanticism.[6]

Most of the Romantics were, in one way or another, critics of Enlightenment. In this, Herder was one of the true pioneers, expressing *völkisch*, anti-Enlightenment views that paved the way for the movement known today as Radical Traditionalism. One recent author summarizes Herder's critique of the Enlightenment in the following striking terms:

Not only have [the *Aufklärer*] failed to educate the public: they have also suppressed the few seeds of culture that lie within them. They have criticized folk poetry, myth, and music as so much superstition and vulgarity, and they have elevated the artificial dramas of the French court into absolute norms. Even worse, by preaching their new gospel of the cosmopolitan individual, they have made people ashamed of their national identity. People no longer feel that they belong anywhere, because they are told they should belong everywhere. The result: the people are alienated from the living sources of their own culture, their national traditions, language, and history. Now, thanks to the Age of Enlightenment, people will become perfectly alike, the pale ethereal embodiments of a single universal nature. The *Aufklärer* preach tolerance only because they believe everyone shares in this abstract humanity. Never do they value cultural differences for their own sake.[7]

Such views no doubt scandalized Fichte, who associated himself with the Romantic circle while in Jena but had little sympathy for their ideas. Hegel had his own critique of the Enlightenment, but spurned Romanticism as well. In general, there were two strains of nationalistic German thought: the Romantic, characterized by irrationalism and *völkischness*, and the philosophical, characterized by rationalism (of a sort), and a kind of universalism — but with Germany leading the charge. These two strains cross-pollinated each other and to a limited extent the distinction between them is overcome in Hegel. National Socialism in the twentieth century can be seen as an attempt to meld the two.



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770–1831

3. Hegel and the Germanic Completion of History

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) was heavily influenced by his younger schoolmate F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854). Indeed, in many ways Hegel's philosophy can be seen simply as a systematic re-working

of Schelling's (though there are some substantive differences between the two). Schelling began as a follower of Fichte but rebelled against the master's treatment of nature simply as raw material for human moral overcoming. He sought in nature some intrinsic value, and found it by essentially re-discovering and re-invigorating the Aristotelian "scale of nature" (or "great chain of being"). He saw all of nature as approximating to humanity, or to the consciousness of humanity, which is characterized uniquely by the capacity for *self-consciousness*. But this self-consciousness consists, in part, in coming to see how we ourselves are reflected in nature (or how nature anticipates us).

Schelling had spoken of an "Absolute" beyond the distinction between subject and object. Hegel conceives instead of an Absolute which he refers to as *the whole* – and which he identifies with God.[8] Hegel essentially takes over Schelling's understanding of nature, which he argues is one aspect or moment of the whole. Hegel points out that since we ourselves are creatures of nature, when we achieve self-consciousness in knowing nature this really amounts to nature achieving consciousness of itself.[9] Hegel regards nature as the concrete embodiment of God (or the whole), without which he is merely an inchoate idea. And the goal or *telos* of this embodiment is its achievement of self-relation. When human beings spring from nature and turn back and reflect upon it, this then constitutes the completion or consummation of God. Our cosmic role is to "complete" God or the whole.

Hegel believes that human self-consciousness has developed through history – i.e., the completion of God or the whole takes time. Further, Hegel holds that certain races or peoples have developed farther than others, and the one that has developed the greatest capacity for self-consciousness (and all that this implies: science, philosophy, art, religion) is what he calls "the Germanic peoples." He gives every indication that he believes that this is due to *innate* differences between human groups.

Speaking of the course of history in *The Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel declares:

The spirit now grasps the *infinite positivity* of its own inwardness, the principle of the unity of divine and human nature and the reconciliation of the objective truth and freedom which have appeared within self-consciousness and subjectivity. The task of accomplishing this reconciliation is assigned to the Nordic principle of the *Germanic peoples*.[10]

The editor of a recent edition of *The Philosophy of Right* informs us, correctly, that

Hegel's use of "Germanic" (*germanisch*) is very broad in its reference: it includes "Germany proper" (*das eigentliche Deutschland*) – which Hegel understands to include the Franks, the Normans, and the peoples of England and Scandinavia. . . . But it also encompasses the "Romanic" peoples of France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal (in which he includes not only the Lombards and the Burgundians, but also the Visigoths and Ostrogoths). . . . The Germanic world even includes the Magyars and the Slavs of Eastern Europe. . . . But the prominence he gives to Tacitus' image of the Teutonic character and to the Lutheran Reformation indicates that Hegel gives a prominent role in the development of the modern spirit to German culture in a narrower sense.[11]

In short, by "Germanic peoples" Hegel essentially means "Europeans – especially the Germans." Further, his conception of "Europeanness" is not merely cultural or linguistic; it is explicitly racial. Hegel endorses the Enlightenment idea of according equal rights and equal treatment to the members of the different races, but insists on natural differences between them: "The difference between the races

of mankind is still a natural difference, that is, a difference which, in the first instance, concerns the natural soul.”[12] The “natural soul” according to Hegel is the level of human identity that is largely fixed by heredity and environmental factors. In the same text, he writes that “national differences are just as fixed as the racial diversity of mankind; that the Arabs, for example, still everywhere exhibit the same characteristics as are related of them in the remotest times.”[13]

In his *Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel includes an extensive discussion of the character of the different races, including physical features such as the shape of the skull. Of the Negroid race he writes: “Negroes are to be regarded as a race of children who remain immersed in their state of uninterested *naïveté*. They are sold, and let themselves be sold, without any reflection on the rights or wrongs of the matter.” [14] Elsewhere he is less kind. In *The Philosophy of History* Hegel writes that “Among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent.”[15]

Academic Hegel scholars will often halfheartedly defend him by claiming that his position is that eventually all other peoples will ascend to the same heights as the Germans. But there is really nothing in Hegel’s writings or lectures that clearly suggests he took this position. Indeed, quite the opposite. He writes of the Negroid race that “their mentality is quite dormant, remaining sunk within itself and making no progress, and thus corresponding to the compact, undifferentiated mass of the African continent.”[16] And elsewhere he asserts that their condition “is capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been.”[17]

What Hegel has to say about the Chinese — one of several Asian groups he discusses — echoes the writings of the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary Father Ricci (who may indeed have been one of his sources). Hegel writes that “The Chinese are far behind in mathematics, physics, and astronomy, notwithstanding their quondam reputation in regard to them. They knew many things at a time when Europeans had not discovered them, but they have not understood how to apply their knowledge: as *e.g.* the magnet, and the art of printing.” Again echoing Ricci he states that the Chinese are “too proud to learn anything from Europeans, although they must often recognize their [the Europeans’] superiority. A merchant in Canton had a European ship built, but at the command of the governor it was immediately destroyed.”[18] However, he rates the intellect of the Mongoloid races far above that of the Negroid.[19]

Of the Jews, Hegel writes

It is true that subjective feeling is manifest [among them] – the pure heart, repentance, devotion; but the particular concrete individuality has not become objective to itself in the Absolute. It therefore remains closely bound to the observance of ceremonies and of the Law, the basis for which is pure freedom in its abstract form. The Jews possess that which makes them what they are through the One: consequently the individual has no freedom for itself. . . . On the whole the Jewish history exhibits grand features of character; but it is disfigured by an exclusive bearing (sanctioned in its religion), towards the genius of other nations (the destruction of the inhabitants of Canaan even being commanded) – by want of culture generally, and by the superstition arising from the idea of the high value of their peculiar nationality.[20]

It is not clear from Hegel’s writings how (or whether) he categorized the Jews racially. It should be noted that, notwithstanding the above critical remarks, Hegel hardly qualifies as an anti-Semite: he was

a supporter of Jewish emancipation (see *Philosophy of Right* § 270, Hegel's addition). Some of Hegel's comments on the different races or ethnicities seem to be exclusively cultural criticism. It is quite clear, however, that he saw cultural differences as flowing, in part, from a basis in natural differences.

Somewhat problematically, Hegel divides the Caucasian race into the "Western Asiatics" and "the Europeans," remarking that "this distinction now coincides with that of the Mohammedans and the Christians." [21] Hegel's remarkable description of the European soul is well-worth quoting at length:

The principle of the European mind is . . . self-conscious Reason, which is confident that for it there can be no insuperable barrier and which therefore takes an interest in everything in order to become present to itself therein. The European mind opposes the world to itself, makes itself free of it, but in turn annuls this opposition, takes its other, the manifold, back into itself, into its unitary nature. In Europe, therefore, there prevails this infinite thirst for knowledge which is alien to other races. The European is interested in the world, he wants to know it, to make this other confronting him his own, to bring to view the genus, law, universal, thought, the inner rationality, in the particular forms of the world. As in the theoretical, so too in the practical sphere, the European mind strives to make manifest the unity between itself and the outer world. It subdues the outer world to its ends with an energy which has ensured for it the mastery of the world. [22]

Hegel tells us here that the European mind takes an interest "in everything," so as to "become present to itself therein." In other words, the European mind strives to know the whole – and in doing so knows itself. The European mind "makes itself free" of the world (or nature) – meaning that it rises above the level of the animal and sees nature as *other*. But it finds itself in this other and "annuls this opposition." In short, the European mind achieves consciousness of itself in its study of nature, of the whole. But through that study, it is the whole (God) that simultaneously achieves knowledge of itself and completes itself. For Hegel it is not "mankind" that does this, but European man specifically – all other peoples can only approximate to what European man accomplishes.

Much has been written arguing that Fichte, Hegel, and the Romantics (to say nothing of Nietzsche, who was actually not a nationalist) paved the way for National Socialist ideas. This is, of course, obviously true – and I have only told a very small part of the story here. (Readers interested in this topic should peruse Fichte's *The Closed Commercial State*, and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.) The efforts of embarrassed scholars to obscure this fact have been, for the most part, transparently disingenuous and unconvincing.

The idea that the German nation has a special destiny to fulfill remained a fixture in German intellectual circles up until the fall of Hitler (though it was not always conjoined, as it is in Hegel, with racialism). For example, in Heidegger (who, of course, was a member of the NSDAP), we find the idea that the Germans are "the metaphysical people." I will close with these words of Heidegger, written in 1936:

We [the Germans] are sure of this vocation; but this people will gain a fate from its vocation only when it creates *in itself* a resonance, a possibility of resonance for this vocation, and grasps its tradition creatively. All this implies that this people, as a historical people, must transpose itself – and with it the history of the West – from the center of their future happening into the ordinary realm of the powers of Being. Precisely if the great decision regarding Europe is not to go down the path of annihilation –

precisely then can this decision come about only through the development of new, historically *spiritual* forces from the center.[23]