

THE ASSAULT ON THE
FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

3 *Fichte and Romantic Self-Assertion*

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text of a lecture in Isaiah Berlin's papers. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

I MUST NOW TURN to a very different figure, namely, Fichte, who was neither, like Herder, a man of very generous character, nor, like Kant, a man who was totally dedicated to the truth. Nevertheless, his influence in some respects was perhaps wider than that of either Kant or Herder.

Schiller's classification of mankind, at least of the history of mankind, into three stages is what affected the imagination of his contemporaries. First comes what he called the savage stage, when men are simply victims of impulses, and a kind of Hobbesian universe prevails in which men, acted upon by their passions, fight each other and in general try to live with each other in conditions of considerable savagery and chaos, until finally order is restored by the stronger and more unscrupulous among them. The second stage is the development of rational ideas, in which certain persons are set up in authority over others and certain intellectual ideals develop. Schiller called this stage, in which men begin believing in principles, begin behaving in accordance with strict principles, indeed to an almost idolatrous extent, not the stage of slavery, but the stage of barbarism, because any total subjection to principles without any criticism, any total submission to principles for their own sake – and I am afraid this was a kind of side-swipe at his great teacher, Kant – he regarded as a form of idolatry, and this is the kind of thing which only barbarians do.

The third stage is the stage of free men. Free men are men who live open lives and follow some kind of ideal which is subject to constant criticism, constant revision, constant change. And, of

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course, when asked how this was compatible with any kind of civil administration – for if every man followed his own free ideal, might there not be certain collisions? – Schiller escaped this criticism by saying that of course he was not talking about the empirical world: in the empirical world men were parts of this hideous causal treadmill which they could not avoid; after all, they had bodies and these bodies obeyed certain physiological and physical laws which could not be altered by any amount of pursuit of liberty. But they must rise above this, and in their minds they must live pure, dedicated and free lives. He illustrated this by saying that the salvation of men from oppression and enslavement by material factors was to be attained through what he called ‘play’. Play he identified with art. Briefly, the view is that in art alone you are completely free because there you impose laws upon yourself. We go back to Rousseau again. Schiller does not give this example, but if you are, say, a boy playing at being a red Indian, then you are a red Indian, for these purposes, and the laws you obey are the rules which you invented for the purposes of the game. Everything you do obeys your own creative fantasy and imagination, and not some rigorous yoke derived from the external world which bends you to its inexorable necessity.

Art for Schiller is a sort of free self-expression. But certainly it does not have very much to do with actual political or social life. What he thought was that in the rather gloomy world of the minor German principalities, in what was to him, in some ways, the even gloomier world of the Jacobin Terror in France, the only way for a free man to escape was to dedicate himself to purely spiritual activity and try to ignore as far as possible the grim necessities of actual life. This form of escapism did not commend itself to people who were actually faced with acute and concrete problems of life, but it had a profound effect upon artistic and aesthetic thought both in Germany and in other countries.

Let me make one more observation before I come to Fichte himself. If you ask at what stage, exactly, you get this notion of the tragic hero, that is to say, the notion of a man oppressed by the necessities of empirical existence, who escapes them by rising above them, ignoring them, or at any rate fighting against them, whichever way out he takes –whether he takes what is called the barbarian way out, which is to try to struggle against necessity unsuccessfully, and go under in some fearful, heroic duel, which is presumably what Karl Moor does in Schiller’s play *The Robbers*, or

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whether it is a question of his rising above necessity to some artistic empyrean and trying to detach himself from the world and live in the pure world of art and imagination and thought, like the Olympian gods, as Schiller says – if you ask at what particular point this notion emerged, it should be placed, it seems to me, between 1768 and 1783.¹ Let me explain why.

In 1768 a play was written by Lessing called *Minna von Barnhelm*, which those who have studied German literature will know well. In this play, which I will not describe – it is not a particularly good play – the hero is a Prussian officer who has been unjustly disgraced, for he has been accused of committing some disgraceful act of which he is perfectly innocent. He is a man of honour, he does not offer to clear himself, he is in love with a noble lady called Minna von Barnhelm, he cannot meet her because he thinks that she must think that he has committed this awful crime. And therefore he sits in an inn, refuses to see her, refuses to see anybody, gradually gets into debt, refuses the help of his servant, and in general behaves in a highly proud, unapproachable, somewhat neurotic fashion. Minna turns out to be an extremely sensible young woman, who grasps the situation and takes various steps in order to clear his name, and finally manages to produce a situation in which his name is cleared and he rejoins her, and they live happily ever after.

The point about Tellheim, the officer, is that he is not really a hero – the play is a comedy. This pride, this honour, this inability to face people, this absolutely impossible character which prevents people from trying to help him and from succeeding in helping him is regarded by Lessing with a certain amount of irony. And the sensible Minna and her sensible friends, who ultimately return him to good sense and to reason – good, sensible people who understand the true world and how it goes, and manage to wean this rather proud, impossible man back into the paths of normal existence – they are the true heroes of the play.

The same thing can be found, for example, in Molière's play *Le Misanthrope*, where the misanthrope also rejects the world because it is a corrupt and monstrous place, wishes to have nothing to do with it, complains about it all the time, and is gradually weaned back to some kind of sanity by a much more amiable, better-balanced, more sensible and altogether more intelligent friend,

¹ [The second date is left unexplained.]

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who gradually explains to him the way of the world and the fact that one must not resist it in this rather foolish and impossible fashion.

These misanthropic characters who are wounded by the world and will not have it, and try to leave it, or at any rate battle against it, become heroic in the forms of Karl Moor or Fiesco in Schiller in the 1780s. That is the moment at which this change occurs, at which the notion of harmony, good sense, science, reason is to some extent abandoned and the crown is placed upon the heads of passionate, dedicated, heroic characters who will not accept the world at its own valuation, who reject everything which is cheap and vile in it, who will not have anything to do with the dross which it contains, and assert themselves, however tragically, however unsuccessfully, usually ending in some kind of fearful disaster, against common sense or convention.

This kind of mentality began to prevail among German young men, certainly in the 1790s: this is what grew to maturity in those years. And Fichte was extremely characteristic of his time and his place. Like the other persons I have discussed – like Herder, like Kant – he was a man of humble birth, but, unlike them, he was a man of a peculiarly resentful nature who was rather like the heroes of these tragedies, in that it was almost impossible to help him. Anyone who tried to do anything for him was invariably cursed and slandered afterwards. In part, I think, his whole resistance to the French Enlightenment was stimulated by the kind of conception he had formed of France or Paris, by comparing his own humble birth, and the inferiority complex to which it led, and his provincial origins and poverty, with these rich, complacent, bewigged figures, who could talk about human happiness and human wisdom from the comfort of their wealth and their power; so that there was an element of personal resentment or personal feeling, which (I dare say) was shared by a good many provincial Germans when they contemplated this rich, but to them unapproachable, world of grandeur and fashion in the Paris of that time.

Fichte became a pupil of Kant's. That is to say, he went to his lectures in Königsberg, and improved upon his philosophy, or improved on it in his own mind – Kant himself did not think it an improvement, as I will explain. What really fascinated Fichte, and fascinated his contemporaries, was Kant's central notion, namely, that the world as understood by men was as it was because of the

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forms imposed upon it by the human mind. These forms were not so much discovered as imposed upon it, for man found in the world that which he had imposed upon it, not consciously, not deliberately, but in some unconscious state, in some pre-imaginative state which Kant does not really describe very clearly, where man categorises the world, arranges it according to certain categories, which afterwards are rigid and unaltering simply because man's mind has already imposed them and the world is already cut into segments by them before he ever comes to consciousness of it.

Fichte, however, went a little further in this direction. Kant's self performed its work in darkness. We have to deduce that this must have happened. Nobody is aware of this action – it is not that you stand over the world and do something consciously to it. The spectacles through which you see the world are born with you; they are not placed upon your nose by yourself at some conscious moment of your existence. Fichte pushed this forward by two powerful arguments, which in their way deserve respect. The first is this. He says – and his views emerge from his theory of knowledge – that philosophers, and men in general, assert that various things are true. And when you ask why a particular statement is true, whatever it might be – whether it is scientific or commonsensical – the normal thing is to ask for the ground of such a statement, and you try to give what ground you can in order to show that what you are saying is valid or true. But this ground is subject to further criticism of the same sort, and you say: What is the ground for the ground? And what is the ground of the ground of the ground? And this can go on indefinitely.

How is this to be solved? Why is there not an infinite regress here? Why should not people constantly ask for the because of the because, or the why of the why of the why? Fichte says that what actually happens is not this at all – this is a false view of human knowledge. This is a view inherited from Locke, according to which we are a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which the external world makes certain impressions, which we afterwards discover in ourselves. But this is not what happens. We are born with certain questing desires, we are born with certain purposes – this is what men as men are, that is how they differ, Fichte thinks, from both plants and beasts, who really are objects upon which nature makes certain impressions, who simply behave or respond in some mechanical fashion. Men seek for something; even the

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human child seeks for something; and the world presents itself to this child in terms of the question which it asks of it. A table is not an object which I simply describe as a four-legged or three-legged thing standing in front of me; a table is something which I use for the purpose of putting books on it or putting food on it. It is I who make the table a table. Grass is green because I am at that moment engaged in discriminating colours. In other words, Fichte is one of the earliest authors of the whole theory of intentionality, as it is now called, according to which, fundamentally, the world is an answer to certain unspoken questions on the part of its investigators.

This is the kind of thing which today in aesthetics, for example, Ernst Gombrich has made popular, and which various philosophers of science have discussed, that is to say, the fact that men do not simply describe what they see before them in some impartial, objective fashion, but already have a certain framework or attitude towards it, or, if you like, have a certain theory about it – though this is too grand a word, perhaps, for the undeveloped human being – but at any rate they have certain hypotheses about it, they ask something of it. Every object which a man describes is something which, to use pragmatic language, he wants to use for something, or is afraid of, or is attracted to, or which is either an obstacle in his life or something he wants to use – a tree, something which may yield fruit; a tree, something which he may knock against. In other words, every object has to be defined in terms of the purposive behaviour of human beings, which can be translated as answers to unformulated questions.

If this is so, says Fichte – and he believes this, and it is an insight of some brilliance – then what really happens is that we cut this chain of the why of the why of the why, the ground of the ground of the ground, by an act of will. The world is that which we will it to be. My world is that which, whether I know it or not, corresponds to what I want it to be; or it may not correspond to it, but at any rate it answers, badly or well, to something which I want of it or ask of it or demand of it. And this demand, this asking, this thrusting forward activity, is what he calls the will.

This Fichte derived from Kant, only he rather altered it, he perverted it, he made of it a very deliberate affair, even in matters of knowledge, where Kant did not use this concept of will at all. This distressed Kant very much, particularly when Fichte's first publication on the subject, since it was published anonymously,

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was assumed by people to be a new, brilliant work by Kant. Kant was extremely distressed and did everything possible to disown this appalling thing, which appeared to him to remove the basis from his own work and to be a piece of absurd and fantastic imaginative exaggeration and distortion of his own much more orthodox views.

At any rate, this was Fichte's beginning. Its second aspect, and it is indeed a kind of aspect, goes beyond the notion of an act of will – that the world is what we will it to be. (And Fichte says quite explicitly that the world of one kind of creature is different from the world of another kind of creature. This is rather like Wittgenstein's famous remark that the world of the happy is different from the world of the unhappy. Fichte says, in effect, that the world of poets is different from the world of, say, bankers. There are certain things which are common to them, of course, but what they want of their worlds is so different that things must appear to them in different relationships. Colours, tastes, objects appear in different relationships in accordance with the temperamental demands which men half-consciously make upon it when they first enter it, even in their childhood.) The second aspect of this very thing is Fichte's concept of *Anstoss*, or impact. He says that, if you read Kant, you might think that man begins, anyhow, by being a purely cognitive animal: all you do is contemplate. You contemplate the world and then you do your best – you describe it, you find various things in it, you ask about various relationships in it: Descartes asserts them, Hume denies them, Kant tries to patch the thing up, and so on. Fichte says that if we were pure contemplators, particularly if we were successful contemplators, we would not be aware of ourselves at all. If you are totally and successfully absorbed in contemplation of anything – in listening to music or watching the sea – you do not see yourself at all. All that exists before you is the datum, in which you are completely sunk and absorbed. What makes you feel yourself as yourself, what first gives you your notion of a self at all, is resistance on the part of some external object – frustration, not substance but obstinacy, so to speak, although Fichte did not use this particular term. It is when you want something and cannot get it, it is when you want this particular pear that is too high up, above your grasp, it is if some animal comes and does you harm that you become aware of the difference between yourself and it, yourself and a tree, your desire and its frustration. And therefore it

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is the collision of a subject with something outside which makes the subject first aware of itself as something seeking, something questing, something which is to be distinguished from the not-self – the not-self being simply the theatre of its volitional activities, of its thrusting forward, and of the fearful frustrations and bruises which it occasionally suffers in the course of this.

This is Fichte's notion of the self. The self becomes aware of itself in action, and in the beginning is action, not contemplation. This is the absolute foundation of Fichte's thought, and a great deal emerged from it. In the beginning was the act: '[I],' as Goethe put in his *Faust*, which is a direct Fichtean sentiment. In the beginning was not knowledge, not *logos*, not understanding, but a thrusting forward, a demand, an attempt to squeeze the universe, to adapt it to your needs, whatever they might be. And Kant was aghast at this: it was not at all his kind of notion.

The way in which Fichte puts this is by saying that consciousness of the real world is derived from action, it is not the other way about. We do not act because we know; we know because we are called upon to act. We cannot help acting, and we derive knowledge from whether our act succeeds or not. Supposing you find a solipsist, he says, who pretends he is not sure whether you exist or not, someone who is not quite sure whether the world exists or not, one of these pseudo-doubters, as he thinks them, people who express doubts which no sane person could really feel – but, of course, some people really do, some are given to such states of mind, they are not quite sure that the real world exists, perhaps it is all an illusion. He says, if you meet a man like that, what you must do is quite simple. You must treat him as if he were a piece of rude matter: strike him, insult him, do something awful to him; you will find that he will be very indignant with you. He will not be indignant with his own creation, he will not be indignant with his own illusions, he will be indignant with you. He will become perfectly aware of the difference between you and him. He will no longer doubt that you are not he, and the world will contain at any rate two agents, and not just one. This is the way to reason with a doubter who is not really doubting, but is pretending to do so. Do something which he will not be able to avoid. If you succeed in irritating and annoying him, you will find that you have taught him something. This is very much how the world appears to a child – the frustrating world, the world which does not answer expectations. If you find a grown-up child

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pretending to be a solipsist, behave as cruel nature behaves to children.

The great move which Fichte made – and this is really the absolute heart of romanticism, which I should like to emphasise with all the stress that I have in my possession – the real point is that Fichte said that we are creators, we are essentially creators in Schiller's sense of the word. I do not exist for nature; she exists for me. This is a flat denial of the Enlightenment, of Locke, of Helvétius, of Holbach, of all these persons of the eighteenth century. There is not something called nature which I carefully study, which I carefully describe, which I must find out the workings of, which I must find out the structure of. Nature exists for me because I am constituted as I am, as whatever I may turn out to be. However I may be, nature exists for me and not I for her. Nature is what I take her to be – she is the field of focus of my volitional activities.

And he goes on to say: 'I am not determined by an end' – say a value, a truth, a passion for life or beauty or happiness, whatever ends people have set before themselves – 'I am not determined by an end, the end is determined by me.'² Kant never said that: he never actually said that I create ends out of nothing. There is a rational activity which tells me what the categorical imperative is, and tells not only me, but every other rational being who chooses to use rational methods for asking himself what his duty is, what are his proper ends. Fichte has overstepped this limit; he has cut man loose from the only cord which held him to the old rational world, which Kant preserved most carefully. I determine my own ends, my ends do not determine me – I invent them, I create them.

This is quite a moment in the history of thought, because until then the idea was that ends or goals, of art or of life or of morality, were discoverable. How you discover them, as I said earlier, you could argue about for a long time: whether you discover them empirically or metaphysically or theologically, by intuition, by revelation, they are there, and what you think about them makes no difference to them. The important thing is to get the answer, and that is why you admire the sages who in your opinion have got

² All references are to *Fichtes Werke*, ed. Immanuel Hermann Fichte (Berlin, 1971; a photographic reproduction of *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. J. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6), with the addition of *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's nachgelassene Werke*, ed. J. H. Fichte (Bonn, 1834–5)) (hereafter SW), by volume and page, thus: SW ii 264–5. This may be the right reference for this quotation.

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it right, and therefore live their lives successfully in the light of their discovery.

Fichte is the first thinker who explicitly says that ends are not discoverable but invented; they are not found, they are made. If ends are made, a great deal follows. If ends are made, they are no longer propositions, they are no longer answers to questions in the sense in which the discoveries of physics and of chemistry, in which Fichte took no interest whatever, could be regarded as answers to questions. If ends are actually created or invented or made, then the question of whether all true answers are compatible with each other does not arise, because these things are not answers but forms of action. I determine myself in a certain direction, I simply set the end before myself: I will paint this picture, I will create this piece of music. You cannot say: Is this piece of music compatible with that particular painting? It does not make sense: pieces of music are not propositions, they are not true or false, they are creations. If I create things, the whole problem of truth and falsehood drops away. The model is, in fact, aesthetic. This is the crucial centre, if you like, of the whole irrationalist or romantic or self-expressive movement.

Broadly speaking the history certainly of political and social thought, and I dare say of all thought of a general kind, is a succession of illuminating models. For Plato, perhaps, the chief model was geometry or something of that kind – at any rate, it was mathematical – and he thought that if you could understand the world, if you attained to the idea of the good and saw from that great height what the necessary connections are which hold the world together as a harmonious whole, you would then know and understand yourself in it. For Aristotle the model was more biological than it was mathematical. Many models followed. *The Social Contract* was a legal model, which illuminated, for the people of the time at which it was conceived, some kinds of relationships in society which are not illuminated by conceiving of society as a geometrical construction. There were organic models – people thought that the world was in some way an organic whole. And there were mechanical models – people thought of it, as Diderot once said, as a kind of factory, or at any rate as a machine.

Each of these models always proved illuminating, told people something which perhaps they had not thought of before, put the world in a different light, illuminated it suddenly, so that they felt that, now that they used this model, they understood something

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which had previously been obscure. But of course, in liberating them in that way, the new model also obscured what the earlier model had revealed; and in the end, as always happens with models, each model proves constricting, proves inadequate, proves a kind of straitjacket, and a new model arises.

The eighteenth-century model was certainly a mechanistic model of sorts. Sometimes it was biological, sometimes more obviously mechanistic, but that was the analogy in terms of which people tried to explain to themselves the structure of society, the structure of human relationships, the relation of body to mind, and the rest of it. The model which is now used by Fichte is an aesthetic model, that is to say, a model which is taken from creation. The world is what we invent; life is something which, if we are conscious and if we are fully developed, we create out of nothing, we invent ourselves. We proceed, we move forward, and we make our lives as we choose, within the limits of empirical possibility – and he does not mind about empirical possibility, for although he thinks that empirical possibility confines us, he is prepared to ignore that. Within these limits it is possible to construct spiritual entities, which is all that means anything to him – art, religion, philosophy, moral attitudes, social attitudes, political attitudes.

The Russian revolutionary Herzen, writing in the nineteenth century, put this with extreme vividness when he said: Where is the song before it is sung? Where is the dance before it is danced? And the answer to this was: Nowhere – obviously. But this was not so for the eighteenth century. As I said earlier, Sir Joshua Reynolds believed that there was a Platonic model there, to which the painter was trying to penetrate through the veil and mist of empirical experience. For earlier thinkers there really were ideals, ideals of beauty, ideals of moral rightness or goodness, ideals of how life should be lived, which clever, gifted or perhaps God-instructed, intuitive persons could discover. And the discovery was a real discovery: you discovered the truth. Not so if you produce the new analogy with a new kind of Herderian art, which is simply creation, simply invention. Where is the folk-song before the anonymous creators of the folk-song invented it? It is not anywhere, it does not lie there in the heavens waiting to be fetched down, waiting to be discovered, waiting simply to be written down on music-paper. It is invented out of nothing – and creation out of

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nothing becomes the great obsessive concept of the time with which I am concerned.

The application to social and political life of the model of the artist creating a work of art, which is made in accordance with his own unfettered will, is a very big, revolutionary and in some ways highly destructive step, first taken by Fichte, basing himself on Kant, but exaggerating and distorting him to a very high degree. One can quite see why Kant, who believed in the truth, who believed in reason, in spite of his passion for and defence of the freedom of the self, would have been outraged and horrified by this. 'I do not accept what nature offers,' said Fichte, 'because I am not like Locke. I do not accept what nature offers because I must; I believe it because I will.'³ And he goes on to say, 'Man shall be and do something'⁴ – that is, man's fate is to realise himself in some way, to objectify himself in some way.

The young Fichte still talks in fairly harmless language. 'The proper task of man is to subject all irrational nature to himself, to rule over nature without restraint, and according to man's own laws.'⁵ Very well, that is simply the old Kantian principle by which we must organise nature and not submit to her. 'Civilisation means using all our powers for the purpose of complete freedom, complete independence of everything which is not ourselves, our pure ego',⁶ whatever that might be. 'So act that you can look on the dictate of your will as a law for you.'⁷ 'To be subject to law means to be a subject to our own insight – it means the right of a man to follow only his own insight, and this is violated by coercion.'⁸ 'Man shall determine himself and never allow anything foreign to determine him. He should be what he is because he wills it; then alone will he be free.'⁹ 'I have chosen the system I have

³ SW ii 256. The precise wording of the quotation is: 'I am wholly my own creation ... I did not want to be part of nature, but entirely my own creation; and this I have become solely because I willed it ... I do not accept or suppose anything because I must, I believe it because I will.'

⁴ SW vi 383.

⁵ [?]

⁶ SW vi 86–7.

⁷ [?]

⁸ [?]

⁹ [?]

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adopted not because I must, I believe it because I will.¹⁰ Again, 'I am not determined by the end, I determine it.'¹¹

A law is not drawn from the realm of fact; it is drawn from our own self. That is the big step forward. I do not discover, I make. He becomes more and more extravagant at this point. He now says: 'The world is a poem dreamt out in my inner life.'¹² This is a very extravagant way of putting it – perhaps he does not literally mean it. It is a very extravagant way of saying that the world is what I make of it, the world is as it appears to me, the world is what I choose to make it, particularly my moral world, my artistic world, my spiritual world, so that our worlds, as I say, are literally different if we are different morally – and that is why he says that different philosophers believe different things because they have different characters. First find the character of the philosopher, and then you will know how the world appears to him and what he believes. There is no common criterion for people who are differently formed, with different ambitions and different characters. And finally he suddenly says, 'I am totally my own creation.'¹³ This is the kind of thing that Bertrand Russell afterwards, not without reason, objected to: he did not think that, on the whole, he was his own creation. But this is merely Fichte's highly exaggerated way of saying that the world in which I live is shaped by my own deliberate and creative efforts.

However, when it was pointed out to him that, after all, the empirical world was not created by him, that he did not invent gravitation, he did not invent matter, he did not invent the laws of chemistry and physics, he said: Very well, 'I am a member of two worlds'¹⁴ – there is, of course, the empirical world, which I do not speak about, and there is a spiritual world where I really am free; and this is the only world which is worth discussing.

When this is applied to politics, he says: 'When a man allows laws to be made for him by the will of others, he thereby makes himself into a beast, that is, he injures his inborn human dignity. Man can be neither inherited nor sold nor given away. He cannot

¹⁰ SW ii 256: cf. above.

¹¹ Cf. above.

¹² [?]

¹³ SW ii 256.

¹⁴ Probably from 'Ich bin Glied zweier Ordnungen; einer rein geistigen, in der ich durch den blossen reinen Willen herrsche, und einer sinnlichen, in der ich durch meine That wirke.' SW ii 288.

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be the property of anyone, because he is and must remain his own property.¹⁵ And he goes on from there to say: 'Man may not make any other man either virtuous or wise or happy against his will.' This, evidently, is a doctrine of extreme individualism. The end of man is self-development. As Herder spoke of groups or nations or communities or societies, so Fichte now, deriving his view directly from Herder and to some extent from Schiller's heroes, says that a man must realise himself; and if anyone leads him by the nose, if anyone directs him, if anyone manipulates him, then he is a slave. This is extreme individualism, and that is why Fichte in his youth welcomed, as they all did, the French Revolution, because it appeared to him to break the chains of the awful French oligarchy, of the Church, of the aristocracy, and to allow each free French human being to vote and act in his own free way. When the Terror arose, Fichte duly recoiled; but that is still some time in the future.

At this stage this course of thought is clearly going to lead him to some kind of idealistic anarchism. The ultimate aim of all government is to make all government superfluous, because government directs you, but you are not free unless you direct yourself. The State, like all human institutions, aims at its own destruction; all human institutions are only temporary makeshift affairs enabling immature people who have not yet understood what their aims are not to injure each other. That is all institutions are: they are merely temporary devices, mere dodges, they have no Burkean sacredness in themselves, they are not institutions which naturally flow from human nature, as, say, Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas thought – they are mere weapons, tools, utilitarian devices to keep people in some kind of leading-strings before they are completely mature. Once man is mature, institutions will drop off him. This is a straight doctrine of self-directed, self-expressive anarchism, in which every man is his own master, every man realises himself as best he can.

Naturally the question must have arisen: What happens if I realise myself in manner X, and you realise yourself in manner Y, and we come into hideous collision with each other? If you have a community of people realising themselves in all kinds of haphazard fashions and banging into each other, which is bound to happen, surely this cannot be quite right? And Fichte said, well, yes, in these circumstances something has to be done, because that

¹⁵ SW vi 82 [all from here?].

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shows that people are not completely mature. If men really understood themselves as they should understand themselves they would realise that harmony and peace are the natural condition of the race, egoism would wither away – and egoism is only a relic of some kind of ancient enslavement. People would become altruistic, love would develop among them, and they would live happily ever after. This is a doctrine of somewhat simplistic Rousseauian anarchism, which says that institutions corrupt men. Remove institutions, and men will rise to their full size; by nature no man wants to do damage to any other man, and if he knows enough about what he is and where he is he will in fact not do it. The only thing which causes men to be as destructive and as unhappy as they are, are these dreadful institutions which enslave them against their own wills. This is how Fichte begins, at any rate, in the late 1780s and early 1790s.

What is the function of man? The function of man is to realise his natural vocation. I have one vocation, you have another; I am a poet, you are a cook; you must realise your vocation as a cook, I must realise my vocation as a poet. This is called *das Aufgegebene* as opposed to *das Gegebene*. *Das Gegebene* is what is given – this I reject, for this enslaves me. *Das Aufgegebene* is my vocation, that which, with the full force of my imagination and will, I conceive as being my end. And why is it something which I ought to realise? Because it is my end; not because it is good, which would make it good for everybody; not because it is right, which, for Kant at least, would make it right for everybody; not because I can interpret it as being part of a divine plan into which I must fit, so that I must first discover what the general blueprint is for the world, and then ask what place I occupy in it; not because there is an orchestra in which I have to play the flute and you have to play the violin, and if I try to play the violin there will be chaos. Not for that reason: it is not a question of distribution of parts or of trying to discover some general harmony and then asking myself what part I play in it. It is because it is something which wells up inside me and tells me what to do. There is some kind of romantic, intuitive, impulsive force within me which tells me what it is that I must do in order to realise myself most generously and most richly. This is unbridled self-assertion of a highly non-Christian and pagan kind. And this is where Fichte is to be found somewhere in the middle 1790s.

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That is why he says, "To be free is nothing. To seek freedom is the very heaven"¹⁶ – because life is activity, it is not passive. The worst of all things is passive contemplation: that is enslavement, that is sheer miserable enslavement. The important thing is to act, to search; freedom is an activity, to be free is nothing at all – in fact, it does not exist. The life of a man grown to his proper estate is constantly to seek, to realise himself, to overcome obstacles, to perfect himself, to realise all the potential which is locked up within him.

So far, so good – or so far, so bad. There is a certain perceptible shift, however, in Fichte's views at a certain point, which I shall shortly describe. The question is, why should it have arisen? There are many theories about the interplay of facts and ideas: we cannot quite tell with any certainty why anybody thought anything at the time when he did; we have no power of entering his mind at that moment, in spite of what some philosophers might think. But in the case of Fichte it is possible to make a suggestion. I think that in about 1801 or 1802 a shift in his doctrines begins, a shift of a rather significant and, in the end, a rather sinister kind. This is partly due, probably, to the failure of the French Revolution, a failure which impressed even those who believed in the Revolution: failure in the sense that it led to the Jacobin Terror and not to the apparent liberation of those who took part in it, a great many of whom, particularly the philosophers and the thinkers, in fact found themselves hunted and persecuted – and some were beheaded or died in jail, like Condorcet. Therefore the French Revolution could not be acclaimed as the great liberating force in which each man was able to assert his full human nature instead of being humiliated and degraded by some hideous feudal oppression of the rich or the priests or the politicians; in reality there were mobs, the guillotine, Robespierre, the Terror, tyranny. And this sobered the minds of a great many Germans, who then decided that the French Revolution was either premature or altogether a mistake.

Partly, therefore, this directed people's thoughts in other directions: perhaps individual self-assertion of the kind which they believed the French Revolution to stand for was not the right path. Perhaps something could be said for Burke's opposite point of view, whereby a social association of a certain sort must not be

¹⁶ [?]

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broken too dramatically, whereby people belong to each other in a somewhat different fashion from that envisaged by the rigid individualist libertarianism which was preached by the early makers of the French Revolution. In part this shift is also due, probably, to the attacks upon Germany made by the French revolutionary armies, then succeeded by the attacks made upon her very successfully by Napoleon, which produced a great patriotic reaction, as we all know, a tremendous nationalist resistance to the foreign invader which united the Germans as they had not been united before, and produced a great sense of national solidarity against the common enemy.

At any rate, at some point in the early nineteenth century Fichte begins saying: What actually is this self? What is this self which has to be liberated? What is this Schillerian hero who has to rise above circumstances and assert his will? Who is this man? What is he like? What is human nature, in fact? What is this nature which needs to assert itself? And he says that a man becomes a man only among other men. This sounds harmless enough. But he goes on. Man is destined to live in society – he must do so – for he is not a complete human being, and contradicts his nature, if he lives in isolation. He had not always said that. There was a moment at which he thought that lonely thinkers were the only people worth thinking about, because these people rose above their environments, towered over them, refused to accept the conventions of society, and looked with contempt and derision upon the mass of philistines and bourgeois by whom they were surrounded.

This, however, as I say, is altered slightly. Most probably, historically speaking, this was due to the wave of common feeling which united him to his nation. The individual, he says, must endeavour to repay his debt to society. After all, the individual is made what he is by other men. He is not a man on an island, as in the song. He is born into a society – Herder again – he is born into a stream of already existing social memories, social images, social feelings; he is not born naked, and does not receive impressions from some outside source; nor does he invent them for himself. He is born into a flux, into a stream of national consciousness, in which he is educated, which shapes him, and which creates indissoluble links between him and the other members of the society. Indeed, that is what being a man is. Being a man is having communication with others. Those who cannot communicate

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cannot speak; those who cannot speak cannot think; those who cannot think are not men in the ordinary sense of the word.

Therefore the individual must endeavour to live in society, but not only to repay his debt to society, which has made him. He must take his place among men. He will strive to advance in some respect the perfection of the race which has done so much for him. That is now his new *Beruf*, that is his function, that is his vocation: he must do something for the society, not only for himself. He is part of the society, he must not think of himself as an isolated atom. True, once upon a time there were savage societies, said Fichte, in which everybody simply bowed beneath the yoke of material necessity, and people lived, as people do in savage societies, in terrible want and need, pressed together in a kind of half-conscious and savage state. But this oppressed man to such a degree that there was a revolt against it in the direction of individualism, of self-assertion. This, though, will not do: it atomises society, it drives people away from each other and impoverishes them in some way.

Very well. A man must therefore render back to society what it has done for him, because he is what he is, because of what he has received, and if he does not do that, he cheats society. No man on earth has the right to leave his powers unused and live on those of others – you must not be a parasite. This is a straight Herderian sentiment. You must not be a parasite and you must not be inactive. You must add your drop to the social treasure of society. This is an old populist cry, which derives directly from Herder, by whom Fichte was very evidently deeply influenced.

But he does not stop there. He goes on to say, in about 1803: 'Nature is constituted by the organic union of all her forces, humanity by the organic unity of all individual wills.'¹⁷ This is a rather mysterious statement. In what literal sense can you say that there is an organic unity of all individual wills? He does not explain, but it is quite obvious that he thinks that men cannot function without reciprocal activity, without supplying each other's needs or living in some kind of relationship with each other in society. This seems a platitudinous enough idea, but it strikes Fichte with great force. And he then says: How can men develop their innate capacities, their potential, to their richest and fullest extent? They cannot do it if they are too poor. They cannot do it if

¹⁷ [?]

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they are too weak. Who will guarantee them a standard of living? Who will give them protection, so that their most indefensible rights will not be trampled upon by stronger men? Why (he suddenly arrived at this surprising conclusion), the State must do that. How can the State do it? It can do it only if it really possesses the power to do it and is not itself subject to the buffeting of other States.

And so there is born in Fichte a kind of proto-socialist idea that the State has become autarkic. A minimum guaranteed standard of living must be granted to all the citizens. Certain rights which the citizens agree about, by means of an elaborate series of contracts, must be established. How can the State be guaranteed to perform its functions? By being protected against the buffetings of other States, by being protected against the vagaries of the stock market, by being protected against any kind of blows, any kind of changes, which might come upon it from outside. Therefore it must become autarkic. It must protect itself against other States; it must cease to trade with other States; it must cease to have financial exchanges with other States; it must have its own money and never allow its own money to be exported. It must be totally self-sufficient. Only if you have a self-sufficient State – and Fichte was a very extreme thinker – can the State guarantee the standard of living called socialism in one country. This is the famous *Rechtstaat* of Fichte; this is the famous idea that only in a State which is protected against buffeting from outside can the citizens actually perform their full functions, enjoy their rights, achieve their full stature. Otherwise the State may be too weak to protect them or, alternatively, the citizens may be ruined by unfortunate speculation abroad in foreign securities.

This is the source of Fichte's notion of a kind of socialism in one country, a completely self-protected, autarkic, protectionist State. And it is this which gives him a title to be considered one of the fathers of collectivism, of socialism, or anyhow of the welfare state, of organisation of the lives of citizens.

We have travelled some distance, clearly, from the notion of the free citizen subject to nobody else's will, the free citizen no longer interfered with by anyone, exfoliating by himself like a plant in the sun without any other influence being brought to bear upon him. This is simply the result of trying to establish what the actual conditions are in which men can do this. And he then observes

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that the State cannot be artificially constructed out of any kind of material – the State is organic, the State is like a tree.

At a certain point he becomes frightened that perhaps, if this is done, the individual will be sacrificed for the State, as used to happen. Perhaps the State will become tyrannical or despotic in the way the French State under Louis XIV quite plainly was – worse than that, in which the State under Frederick the Great in Prussia was. He may have made the citizens rich and he may have developed their intellectual capacities, founded academies, done a great deal for them; but there was always the corporal stick, there was always a policeman at the back, the power of the king was absolute and he was able to do what he liked with his citizens. This surely must be avoided at all costs. Even though you may not speak of a king, you may think of a State. And so, he says, in no circumstances should the individual, considered strictly as an individual, be sacrificed for the whole, however unimportant the individual, however great the interests of the whole that are at stake. So far so good. This is an impeccable liberal sentiment.

But then he goes on. Part of the whole must often be placed in peril on account of the whole. The victims are selected from among the individuals not by the ruler but by the peril itself – whatever that might mean. That is to say, the ruler can sacrifice me provided that he acts in the name of the peril. If there is a peril to the State, some people must be sacrificed to the whole, not because the ruler wants it but because the peril demands it. But then the question arises: Who shall say there is a peril and who shall choose the victims? About that Fichte is silent. Gradually it emerges that he thinks that a certain group of persons are charged with this particular duty.

He then harks back to his aesthetic ideal. Now he is in love with the State, now he is considering how human beings should live in society, and he says: ‘The absolute State is in its form an artistic institution, intended to direct all individual power towards the life of the race.’¹⁸ This is some distance away from the original individualism. If the State is a work of art, then there must be an artist. Well, perhaps the artist is an unconscious artist, perhaps he is Herder’s artist, perhaps he is society itself, the people as a whole acting in a kind of half-conscious capacity and creating the State even as they create epics or dances – there is perhaps no individual

¹⁸ [?]

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founder, no particular Lycurgus, no particular person who makes the State. And so the State is an artistic entity; and if it is an artistic entity, all the parts of it must observe the general artistic plan. But if all its parts must observe the artistic plan then I, as an individual, become somewhat subjugated to the plan as a whole, and my liberty, which was what Fichte originally spoke of, becomes, to say the least, somewhat compromised.

Fichte goes on to say: 'Every nation wants to extend its own peculiar good as far as it possibly can, to incorporate, so far as in it lies, the whole of mankind within itself, thereby following an urge planted in men by God.'¹⁹ This is going rather further. If I know myself to be a good society, then so long as there are other societies outside me which are regarded as less good, it becomes my duty before God to absorb these other societies, because only by absorbing them can I guarantee that they will not enslave me. If I am a good society, and there are some less good societies by the side of me, I am in some danger of being corrupted by them. The only way in which I can avoid this danger is by eating them, by swallowing them – by swallowing them I make them impotent to injure me and indeed raise them to my own status. Apparently I am doing them good; but if you are a citizen of these other societies, this act of absorption might appear in a somewhat different light. This Fichte does not examine at all.

We have now arrived at the point at which he really abandons Kant, and to some extent abandons Schiller and returns to some kind of Herderian ideal of unity. He is the earliest German thinker who is not, in fact, what might be called a Catholic reactionary; he is the first Protestant progressive (as he certainly thought of himself and was thought of by others) to praise the Middle Ages because of the magnificent unity of medieval society, in which men acted as a great harmonious whole – they trusted in each other, they loved each other, they believed in each other, and they acted as a loving society, thrusting themselves forward towards a single ideal instead of being a ghastly, atomised, competitive society of self-seeking egotists. This, however, is, as I say, going in a somewhat different, rather Burkean direction, and away from the original passionate, self-expressive ideal of the pure artist making his own life in whichever way he chooses.

¹⁹ [?]

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The big break occurs somewhere around 1803. There is a quotation which shows that we have arrived at a rather critical point in Fichte's thought. He suddenly announces: 'The life of reason consists in this, that the individual forget himself in the species, that he must risk his life for the life of all and sacrifice his entire life to theirs.'²⁰ And then he goes on one step further: 'The individual does not exist; he ... must vanish ... The group alone exists – only the group is real.'²¹ This is the exact opposite of where we began; it is a complete reversal of one hundred and eighty degrees.

What is the individual which is expressing itself? Originally it was some kind of recognisable human being, a man of flesh and blood seeking to make his life. But this will not do. In Fichte's thought there is always the idea that behind the empirical man lies a transcendent self, something like the divine spirit which blows through the universe, something like God, something like a great universal principle with which all individuals seek to unite themselves, as a flame seeks to unite itself with the great central flame of the great sun which illuminates the world. This emerges from time to time, and you suddenly realise that the self he is talking about, or the true ego, is some kind of great metaphysically theological self, which is really not individual human beings at all, but something like the universe as a kind of animate entity, of which we are merely aspects, or in which we are merely fragments. But for the first time he announces that the real individual, the ego, that which has to express itself, that which shapes the world according to its will, is not the individual man but the group, and the individual man is a mere fragment of the group. That is the beginning of the great myth of the superpersonal society in which persons are, if not cogs or wheels, at least elements of some kind.

This flatly contradicts his original view whereby he says, for example, that liberty – always on his lips and always on the end of his pen – is something which men must preserve, liberty is activity, liberty is spontaneity, liberty is hearing the divine voice which tells me how to realise myself, liberty is what makes me free of the ghastly empirical world, which is a mere treadmill, and so forth. Happiness cannot be the human goal, because if happiness is the

²⁰ SW vii 35.

²¹ The full wording is: 'The individual does not exist, he should not count for anything, but must vanish completely; the group alone exists.' SW vii 37–8. ['only the group is real' seems not to be in Fichte as such]

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human goal, liberty would be a nuisance. It would be a nuisance because liberty allows me the possibility of choosing wrongly as well as choosing rightly. If happiness were the goal, would it not be far better if I was attached like a wheel to some well-oiled machine and therefore never had any alternatives at all? To be conditioned, to be brainwashed, to be attached to some huge, organic entity as an element, not able to liberate myself from it, might actually make me satisfied and happy; but what you would take away from me, of course, is my individual liberty, my self-assertiveness, that which makes me a man – in short, my will.

This is Kantian language; but it now evaporates completely. Here is another passage, written about 1804:

To men as they are from birth and as they are in their ordinary life, in their ordinary education, our philosophical theory is absolutely incomprehensible, for the object whereof it speaks does not exist for them. They do not possess the faculty by which one can apprehend this object. It is as if one were talking to men blind from birth, men who know things and their relations only by touch and do not understand what colours are or their relations.²²

This means there are various kinds of men: there are men who are blind and there are men who can see; there are philosophers who truly understand what man is and what liberty is. The philosophers are the only people who truly hear the voice of the superself, of the rather mystical element which drives us forward, and they alone understand what it is that it says. Anybody who dares to question it is subversive in principle. Fichte says: 'To question the authority of the great imperative, which only the philosophers can hear, is immoral in itself – it shows that you have no moral sense.' To compel men to adopt the rightful form of government, to impose right upon them by force, is not only the right but the sacred duty of every man who has both the insight and the power to do it. There may even be circumstances in which a single man has this right, against the whole of mankind; for as against him and what he knows to be right there is no man who has either rights or liberty. This man may compel them towards the right, that being an absolutely definite conception valid for all

²² [?]

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men alike, a conception which they all ought to have and which they all will have as soon as they raise themselves to his level of intelligence, which in the meanwhile, thanks to the grace of God working within him, he alone holds in the name of all men as their representative. The truth of this conception he must take on his own conscience. He is in fact a compulsive power ordained of God.

We have now travelled some way. The philosopher is now seen as Prospero, and the ordinary man as Caliban. The philosopher has a right to compel men to do that which, were they philosophers, they would compel themselves to do. This is the old doctrine by which we say: You do not know what is good for you; I do. If you had my intelligence you would do it freely; if you do not do it freely, it is because you do not understand. Either you understand what I understand, in which case I do not have to compel you, or you resist, which is evidence of the fact that you do not understand, and I have to compel you. In other words, to make a man free in this sense means to give him that liberty which, were he different from what he is, he would want. And if he is not different from what he is, so much the worse for him, and he is made different by me, because I know what he really wants, I know his secret self, of which he is not aware himself, and it is in the name of this self that I compel his unfortunate empirical self to obey my orders. This is a programme which every despot in history has, in one form or another, proclaimed, and it now emerges from the mouth of Fichte.

The people have a metaphysical right to realise their destiny by every weapon of cunning or force, he says in an essay on Machiavelli. This is straight statism of the most compulsive, the most tyrannical kind. He has the grace at this point to say that freedom is a two-edged weapon, that in fact it is not nature but freedom which causes conflict. Savages freely choose to devour their enemies. Later nations, with the powers of laws and unity and culture, do so too. Culture is not a deterrent to violence; culture can be a tool of violence. This is quite an interesting point, because in the eighteenth century the assumption was that the more cultivated you were, the more peaceful you were; the more cultivated you were, the more harmonious you were. It was not possible to know and be cultivated and yet to be brutal and violent. Fichte sees that liberty cuts both ways. You are free to do good, you are free to do harm. Culture simply increases your

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weapons; your weapons of destruction are more effective if you are civilised, less effective if you are savage. But liberty by itself does not stop you from inflicting harm; in fact it may cause you to inflict more harm.

Somehow, therefore, this has to be prevented. It must be prevented by making men less egoistic. When men shall no longer be divided by selfish purposes and their powers no longer be exhausted by struggles with one another, nothing will remain for them but to direct their united strength against the one common enemy who still remains unsubdued – resistant, uncultivated nature. This is a very worthy sentiment, in agreement with which both Hegel and Marx both spoke, particularly Marx.

Fichte says that we have not arrived at this moment yet. What must we do in the meantime? In the meanwhile we have to compel, we have to coerce. There are too many barbarians about and too few philosophers. It is the philosophers who must set themselves up as a guild of rulers, and it is no good their trying to infuse their knowledge into the masses, because the masses are brutish and live by faith. And so you gradually get the emergence of a doctrine of double-think, a doctrine according to which there are higher persons and lower persons. The higher persons must rule the lower persons, no doubt for their benefit, but not in such a way that the lower persons themselves can understand why this is done. You hope that by this means you will gradually raise these people to a level of intelligence at which they will themselves become liberated and free and equal to you, and it will not be necessary to coerce them. But meanwhile centuries will pass. This is a return to someone like Grimm, or even Voltaire, who thinks that the only way to cultivate people is by coercing the unruly mob at the moment, in the hope that perhaps in a hundred or two hundred or five hundred years' time this will no longer be necessary. This is a dictatorship of the wise, who have to use every kind of power in order to mould the mob, no doubt for its own benefit, but certainly against its wishes.

Let me quote the famous passage from the speeches to the German nation, one of which he delivered in Berlin, when Napoleon was there, to a rather small audience which took no notice of it – but after the rest were published it became a tremendous success, and they have been read and reread in Germany from that day to this. He says:

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It is time to reveal to the light of day the essence of the German character. Here is the criterion of discrimination: either you believe in an original principle in man – freedom, perfectibility, the infinite progress of our species – or you believe in none of this, you may even have an intuition of the opposite. All those who have within them a creative quickening of life, or else, assuming that such a gift has been withdrawn from them, at least ... await the moment when they are caught up in the torrent of original life, or ... have some confused presentiment of this kind of freedom, and have towards it not hatred nor fear but a feeling of love – these are part of primal humanity and, considered as a people, constitute [what he calls] the *Urvolk*, the primal people, in short, *the* people.

And then he adds, 'I mean, the German people.' By Germans, of course, he meant what Hegel meant – all Germans, all Frenchmen, all Englishmen, all Scandinavians, everybody whom he respected in northern Europe.

All those, on the other hand, who have resigned themselves to represent only a derivative second-hand product, men who think of themselves in this way, these will become such an effect and shall pay the price of their belief. They are only an annex to life. Not for them those pure springs which flowed before them and which still flow around them. They are but the echo coming from the rock of a voice which is silent. Considered as a people, they are excluded from the *Urvolk*, they are strangers, they are outsiders. The nation which has the name of German to this day is the nation which is creative and original.²³

Then he goes on to say that the principle of exclusion is this: all those who believe in spiritual reality and in the freedom of the life of the spirit, all those who believe in the eternal progress of the spirit through the instrumentality of freedom, whatever their native land and whatever the language they speak, they are of our race, they are part of our people, and they will join it late or soon. All those who believe in arrested being, in retrogression, in eternal cycles, or else those who put an inanimate nature at the helm of

²³ SW vii 374–5.

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the world, like the French Encyclopaedists, whatever be their native country, whatever be their language, they are strangers to us, they are not Germans and one should hope that they will be wholly cut off from our people.

This looks like a chauvinistic German passage, but it is not that. To do Fichte justice, the criterion of being creative is being creative. He would like to think of the Germans as that, but he is prepared to accept into this particular group anybody who, as he says, is full of artistic feeling, full of creation, spontaneity, with a sense of these voices which speak to you from within, some kind of sacred principle which animates you – he becomes very mystical at this stage. And there are these others who are mere grovelling philistines, who lead their lives in some kind of bourgeois fashion, and who will never be able to hear this voice, and will therefore have to be led by the others.

And so you get a complete theory of two divisions of mankind – the rulers and the ruled, the superior and the inferior, the creative and the uncreative. And then the final cry is: ‘Hither, *Zwingherr zur Deutschheit!*’ – ‘Hither a man who will compel us to Germanism!’²⁴ whoever it might be. We hope that the king will perform this service; if not, then perhaps a senate. The prince is raised above the laws of individual ethics to a far higher level.

This is a complete circle: you cannot start from one point and get to the other. Fichte begins with a paean to individual liberty of a rather Schiller-like kind and ends with a tremendous hymn to the State and, above all, to a group of Platonic guardians who conduct the State and subjugate everyone to their will, because they alone hear the secret voice, they alone are imaginative, they alone are creative, they alone are the artists.

This is the way in which some romantics certainly saw Napoleon. Fichte did not, because Napoleon was an enemy of Germany and therefore he did not like him. But there were those who rose above this nationalist feeling and saw in Napoleon some great artist who was moulding mankind in new shapes – a great artist in politics. These people really spoke in this horrifying kind of language, and said: Either you are a creator or you are not. If you are a creator then you can lift people to a very high level by your own marvellous and inspired efforts. And if you are not creative then the best thing which can happen to you is to be lifted

²⁴ [?]

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by others. The fact that you may suffer agonies, you may even be killed in battle, in the course of this lifting is unfortunate; but surely you will never have attained such a height before, and you ought to bless the hour in which these agonies and these tortures have lifted you to a height of intense experience to which never, never in your dreary bourgeois life could you have risen otherwise.

This is the true romantic note, which is to be heard afterwards in all kinds of heroic statements from then onwards, in Germany and elsewhere: in statements by the Italian Fascists, by the German Nazis, by a great many other persons of this kind. It derives its force from this division drawn by Fichte between the real man, who is imaginative, forceful, an artist, and the unreal man, who is mere human fodder, mere material out of which the artist moulds society. It is to be found in its fullest degree in someone deeply influenced by Fichte, such as Carlyle. Carlyle is a strange figure who has no true ancestors in the English political tradition, and no progeny either, who derives directly from German romanticism and reinfects German romanticism himself. Carlyle also believed in something of this kind. He believed that obedience was the greatest of the virtues, that the best thing which a nation can do is to submit itself to some violent man of genius who will lift it to some tremendous height, away from the ludicrous, utilitarian, dreary ideals of mere everyday life with its small satisfactions and small pains and small pleasures. This is the violent, romantic, semi-Fascist ideal, for which Fichte is responsible.

There are, then, three Fichtes, each of whom has had his followers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is Fichte number one, who praises the independent artist, the self-expression of the individual, and he is the father of Byron and of all those artists in the nineteenth century who say: If the call of art is the highest call, then in order to paint divine pictures you can abandon your wife, you can destroy your children, you can do whatever you wish, because creativity has certain rights, because the artist is a sacred vessel to whom everyone must yield, and he has special rights in society not like those of other people. This is the notion of the artist as the creator who dominates his environment – and not just politically – who has special claims upon society and can do things which might otherwise be regarded as misdeeds or crimes, because he produces immortal works of genius which enrich mankind. That is the early Fichte, who has no political or social implications. This is Schiller's tragic hero: he may

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cause terrible damage, but he is a bigger figure than the others, and therefore has larger claims upon mankind.

The middle Fichte is the man who says we must organise society as best we can – we hope that one day men will all be rational, they will all be good. This is the *Rechtstaat* Fichte. We must create a body of disinterested bureaucrats of a highly educated kind – exactly what was recommended by Funkstein[?] and by Hegel afterwards – disinterested, highly educated managerial persons who will sacrifice themselves upon the altar of the public good, who will have no private interest to pull at them, who will manage to conduct society in the direction of higher enlightenment and education, that is, in a direction in which society cannot conduct itself. Democracy always leads ultimately to bloodshed, tyranny, mobs and ignorance. The only way in which mankind can advance is under the tutelage of devoted and disinterested educators – for these purposes to be called soldiers, ministers and other Platonic guardians. That is the second Fichte, and this is, roughly speaking, the Prussian State. This is the idea of the *Rechtstaat*, the idea of an oligarchical State in which we have no democracy but the ideal of disinterested service on the part of special individuals, self-chosen to some extent, people who really know the inner light, in Fichte's sense.

The third Fichte is a tremendous mystical, romantic paean to some kind of violent ideal of the master-race – or not necessarily race, but master-religion, master *Volk*, master-culture, master-history, master-class, anything you please – whom history has advanced into the front ranks, and who because of this have a right to dominate the others because they are nearer to God; they are an inspired group who have a right to assert themselves, no matter what happens to those below them. And those below them must bless them because they alone are able to confer one hour of intense life upon them, which is surely worth a cycle of [].²⁵

Those are the three Fichtes. Fichte is the figure who betrayed the rationalist and ultimately libertarian and even democratic ideals of Kant, and the harmless, benevolent, decent, populist ideals of Herder, who thought that there were many flowers in the garden and that they need not struggle with each other at all. The person who foresaw where this was going to lead was the poet Heinrich Heine, who in a very famous passage said, warning the French, I

²⁵ [Transcript reads '?casay?']

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think after 1830, not to down their weapons, not to disarm, because of the fearful danger from their neighbours: 'Kantians will appear who will ... ruthlessly with sword and axe hack through the foundations of our European life ... Armed Fichteans will come, whose fanatical wills neither fear nor interest can touch.'²⁶ And who shall say that he was altogether mistaken?

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²⁶ *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, book 3: pp. 305–6 in Heinrich Heine, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Hans Kaufmann, vol. 5 (Berlin and Weimar, 1980: Aufbau); p. 228, lines 16–24, in *Heines Werke*, Säkularausgabe, vol. 8, ed. Renate Francke (Berlin/Paris, 1972); = pp. 124–5 in Henri Heine, *De l'Allemagne* (Paris, 1910), part 1.